

THE IMPORTANCE OF USING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL) IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFL STUDENTS' LANGUAGE SKILLS IN ENGLISH CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on Project-Based Learning (PBL) as an instructional approach that promotes hands-on meaningful learning for EFL students and permits them to connect what they learn in the classroom to real life, along with opportunities to develop the four main language skills and subskills in an contextualized and integrated way. The purpose of this article is to understand the EFL students' perceptions regarding PBL and its contribution to their learning of English as a Foreign Language through their own experiences.

Keywords: Project based learning(PBL), language skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), adult learner, interactive activities, learning process, instructional approach, motivation.

INTRODUCTION

In today's society the importance of learning English cannot be denied and ignored since English is the greatest common language spoken universally. Learning English demands constant practice and patience. The kind of feeling that succeeds among adult learners is that it is not possible to achieve fluency or mastery over the English language.

Nowadays most of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes do still not realize what university students need. Knowles (1973) explained that adult students want the time they spend in a classroom to be as useful as possible not only for themselves as students but also as human beings. Knowles (1973) also stated that the adult learners come into an educational activity largely because they experience some inadequacy in coping with current life problems. They want to apply tomorrow what they learn today, so their time perspective is one of immediacy of application. Therefore, they enter into education with a problem-centered orientation to learning. Thus, EFL classes should provide the students with the necessary tools to allow them to connect what they learn in the classroom to their real world and make their time spent in the classroom meaningful and useful. Knowles stated Lindeman's assumptions (1970) that adult learners can make the most of their learning if they are allowed to "take charge of their learning process" (Barker, Sturdevant, & Smith, 1999, p. 21). Lindeman's assumptions as reported by Knowles (1970) are:

- a) Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore, these are the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities.
- b) Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.
- c) Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.
- d) Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it.

e) Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning.

The above assumptions support the notion that adult EFL teachers should allow the students to have a more practical learning experience. Adult EFL teachers can provide this practical learning experience by developing meaningful, engaging, and interactive activities that place the students in the center of the learning process.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an instructional approach that claims to allow ESL learners the ability to put all the above advantages into practice in a meaningful way. In a PBL environment, EFL learners work mostly in groups and participate actively in their learning process. In other words, students get out of their passive comfortable zone into active and start the process of learning by doing their projects (Dewey, 1938). Students, for example, interact with their groupmates by sharing, negotiating, discussing, debating, and organizing ideas in order to develop their projects (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajick, Guzdial, & Palinscar, 1991). In the end they create something new what they have thought and planned beforehand. So PBL develops the students creativity' while working on the their projects.

PBL can also help increase EFL students' motivation since it accommodates students' learning styles and preferences by allowing them to use the abilities and learning style that suit them best (Fleming, 2000; Jakar, 2006; McGrath, 2002; Solomon, 2003; Stoller, 2006). Equally important, in a PBL environment all four main language skills and subskills can be integrated providing a more holistically learning experience for those who study EFL.

Materials and methods

The purpose of this article is to explore the adult EFL students' perceptions regarding PBL and its contribution to their learning of English as a Foreign Language through their own experiences. Since it searched to report the experiences of students who had actually participated in PBL classes, in-depth phenomenological interviewing, a qualitative approach, was chosen as the method that would best allow me to have access to this understanding. Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches have historically been important in the TESOL. However, there has been an increase in qualitative studies since 1994 (Chapelle & Duff, 2003; Cumming, 1994 Seliger & Shohamy, 1989;). Both qualitative and quantitative research studies have characteristics that can be useful to the TESOL field. Qualitative research allows the researcher to analyze a phenomenon as a whole, whereas quantitative research studies parts (variables) of this phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Both qualitative and quantitative research can be used to describe an instructional situation (Hadfield, 2002). As the purpose of the study is to analyze the Project Based Learning (PBL) phenomenon with regard to adult ESL students as a whole as opposed to parts of it the qualitative approach was chosen.

Result and discussion

The purpose of this article is to understand the English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions in their participation in project works, as the main activity in a PBL curriculum. It presents the findings in six sections:

- 1) Participants' background;
- 2) Projects and language skills: any connections? ;
- 3) Projects in the classroom: the experience;
- 4) Projects outside the classroom: useful for what?;
- 5) Projects: I want to speak but I am afraid ;

6) Projects: do I really like it?

The first shows the participants' background. The second presents the findings on what the participants' think about projects in terms of learning English. The third exposes the project development process and the participants' interaction with their classmates when working in groups. It lays out the participants' experience with the projects they had to develop, starting when they had to decide on what to do or when their instructor presented the idea of the project they were going to work on. The fourth discusses the participants' perceptions on the usefulness of projects for their personal lives and it encompasses three theme categories: helping others, contribution to one's life, and what they learned with projects. The fifth describes the participants' fears of speaking in public. Finally, the sixth presents the participants' opinions, agreements and disagreements with projects as an instructional approach, and their suggestions for ESL instructors to make the usage of projects an enjoyable experience for students.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to explore the adult EFL students' perceptions about their experiences with Project-Based Learning. Adult EFL students from Uzbek universities that offered a project-based EFL curriculum were selected as participants in this study. My interest in this study has been due to the hands-on approach to learning that PBL provides to ESL/EFL students. As a former EFL student myself, I believe that the learning of English as a foreign or second language is better accomplished if what the students learn is useful, meaningful, and can be applied to their real lives outside the classroom. With this in mind, I decided to develop a study that could help me investigate what it was like to participate in project activities from the students' perspective. I wanted to hear from adult EFL students their impressions about PBL as an instructional approach. My need to investigate their experiences prompted me to listen to their stories through the in-depth phenomenological interviews that were conducted over the course of some weeks.

My conclusions were based on the participant's narratives about their own experiences with the phenomenon. After extensive reading of the interview results two major themes arose. The first was the students' perceptions on PBL as an instructional approach and the contributions the students perceived PBL providing to their learning of English as a Foreign Language. The second was the students' recommendations or objections to the implementation of PBL.

It was a rewarding and challenging activity and I could understand what a group of EFL students' perceptions were with regard to the implementation of PBL as an instructional approach. It was challenging because it made me think and re-think my praxis as an instructor of English as a Foreign Language. After spending some years focusing on this study, its outcomes will help me go back to a classroom with a more student-centered attitude. I believe that my students can join hands with me in the quest of finding out the best way to address their learning needs and providing instructional practices that can help them make the most out them.

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