

The Uses of Project-Based Learning for Language Acquisition in EFL Context

Hoang Huong Ly

Ph.D, Thai Nguyen University of Technology

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Abstract- The old-fashioned, teacher-centered language classrooms have long been dominated in most EFL teaching contexts. Materials are based on imaginary characters, reading and listening texts revolve around pre-selected topics which may have little interest or even demotivate learners. It is time for us to choose an appropriate approach through which we can motivate, inspire learners by letting them do whatever they want to do instead of what they are told to do. Project-based learning might be the solution. The introduction of projects into the curriculum is not a new or revolutionary idea in education. During the past decade, however, the practice has evolved into a more formally defined teaching strategy. Project-based learning has gained a greater foothold in the classroom as researchers have documented what teachers have long understood: Students become more engaged in learning when they have a chance to dig into complex, challenging, and sometimes even messy problems that closely resemble real life. Project-based learning goes beyond generating student interest. Brain research underscores the value of these learning activities. Students' abilities to acquire new understanding are enhanced when they are connected to meaningful problem-solving activities, and when students are helped to understand why, when, and how those facts and skills are relevant they can personalize their learning and become more self-motivated.

Index Terms- Project-based learning, personalization, language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

T1.1. The need for personalization

The teaching and learning of foreign languages in general and English language in particular attract more attention today. However, it is a fact that students of English sometimes get fatigue and even stress coping with textbooks, boring delivery, teacher-center methods of teaching. As language teachers, we are well aware that learners need to be motivated in order to be successful. Personal involvement is a very effective way of enhancing motivation. By this we mean making language learning content becomes personally meaningful. If learners feel that what they are asked to do is relevant to their own lives, and that their feelings, thoughts, opinions and knowledge are valued, and crucial to the success of the activities, then they will be fully engaged in the tasks and more likely to be motivated to learning the target language. In order to avoid disengagement when learning English language, learners should be given tasks that they are really

interested in the topics reflects their real-life experiences. Laur (2013, p5) states "students in today's classroom must be presented with complex problems and challenges to solve. These challenges are action oriented in nature and leave the philosophical questions to be contextualized within the process of the challenging investigation". The contextualization, motivation, or personalization of the learning process can be done through what we call project-based learning because of the flexibility, authenticity, and practicality that project-based learning (PBL) might bring.

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. The development of project-based learning

First reference to project-based learning (PBL) was mentioned in the work of Kilpatrick (1918), who believed that using literacy in meaningful contexts provided a means for building background knowledge and for achieving personal growth. He suggested that projects be interdisciplinary math, science, and social studies to provide learners with a rich array of concepts and ideas. He intended that topics come from students' interests, maintaining that group projects, proposed, planned, executed, and evaluated by students, would help learners develop an understanding of their lives while preparing to work within a democracy.

Project-based learning also reflects a Vygotskian perspective. Vygotsky theorizes that learning occurs through social interaction that encourages individuals to deal with the kind cognitive challenges that are just slightly above their current levels of ability. He posits that concepts develop and understanding happens when individuals enter into discussion and meaningful interaction with more capable peers or teachers. These individuals can model problem solving, assist in finding solutions, monitor progress, and evaluate success.

The term project based-learning was then developed by John Dewey in the late nineteenth century (Dewey, 1938). He believed that students learned by doing rather than by only listening to information given by a teacher, moving the student to the center, rather than the teacher. As time goes, there have been many attempts defining what PBL is. According to the definitions found in PBL handbooks for teachers, projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; give students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999). Other

defining features found in the literature include authentic content, authentic assessment, teacher facilitation but not direction, explicit educational goals, (Moursund, 1999), cooperative learning, reflection, and incorporation of adult skills (Diehl, Grobe, Lopez, & Cabral, 1999). To these features, particular models of PBL add a number of unique features. Definitions of “project-based instruction” include features relating to the use of an authentic (“driving”) question, a community of inquiry, and the use of cognitive (technology-based) tools (Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, & Soloway, 1994; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, Blunk, Crawford, Kelly, & Meyer, 1994); and “Expeditionary Learning” adds features of comprehensive school improvement, community service, and multidisciplinary themes (Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, 1999a).

More recently, PBL has become even more refined in its characteristics by some educators. The Buck Institute for Education (BIE) is a leader in PBL and has been instrumental in defining high-quality PBL. They define project-based learning as a “teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge”. Approximately three years ago, the BIE adopted what they call gold standard PBL in order to help educators realize that just because the students do a project in the classroom, it does not mean that true project-based learning is occurring. They claim that there are essential components for effective, gold-standard, project-based learning, which include the following: 1) student-oriented goals, 2) a challenging problem or question to solve, 3) sustained student inquiry, 4) authenticity, 5) student voice and choice, 6) reflection, 7) critique and revision, and 8) a public product. When a project includes those essential pieces, engaged learning becomes optimal”. Soleimani, Rahimi and Sadeghi (2015) state that PBL is a means of using language to learn, rather than learning language. However, when learners listen, speak, read, and write the target language in finding information, discussing, consulting experts or reference and presenting findings, they learn language in real-world context” (p. 3)

2.2. Characteristics of project-based learning

Project based learning is a student-centered form of instruction based on three constructivist principles: learning is context-specific, learners are involved actively in the learning process, and they achieve their goals through social interactions and the sharing of knowledge and understanding (Cocco, 2006). It is considered to be a particular type of inquiry-based learning where the context of learning is provided through authentic questions and problems within real-world practices (Al-Balushi and Al Aamri, 2014) that lead to meaningful learning experiences (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg and Bezon, 2007). The uniqueness of PBL is the construction of an end product, a ‘concrete artefact’ (Helle et al., 2006) which represents pupils’ new understandings, knowledge, and attitudes regarding the issue under investigation - often presented using videos, photographs, sketches, reports, models, and other collected artefacts (Holubova, 2008).

It is argued that the freedom and challenge that pupils experience as a result of solving the problems that arise in designing and building their projects result in high levels of student engagement (Wurdinger et al., 2007). It is also said to foster self-regulated learning and promote pupils’ conceptual

knowledge within a systematic process of documenting and reflecting on learning (Barak, 2012). Within project based learning, pupils learn to be self-reliant through goal-setting, planning, and organization; they develop collaboration skills through social learning; they also become intrinsically motivated by being encouraged to exercise an element of choice while learning at their own level (Bell, 2010).

In addition, learners typically have more autonomy over what they learn, maintaining interest and motivating learners to take more responsibility for their learning (Tassinari, 1996; Worthy, 2000). Project-based learning and the construction of artifacts enable the expression of diversity in learners, such as interests, abilities and learning styles (Grant, 2002)

The concept of project-based learning has a certain similarity with the notion of knowledge building (Bereiter, 1996). These authors define “learning” as an activity that is directed to improve mental structures, whereas “knowledge building” is directed at improving knowledge objects such as explanations and models. Project-based learning can be described as involving both vertical learning (i.e., cumulating of subject matter knowledge) and horizontal learning (i.e., generic skills such as project management).

2.3. Benefits of project-based learning

Research indicates that PBL brings advantages for both learners and teachers. For learners, it increases attendance, growth in self-reliance, and improved attitudes toward learning (Thomas, 2000). Academic gains equal to or better than those generated by other models, with students involved in projects taking greater responsibility for their own learning than during more traditional classroom activities (Boaler, 1999; SRI, 2000). Opportunities to develop complex skills, such as higher-order thinking, problem-solving, collaborating, and communicating (SRI, 2000) access to a broader range of learning opportunities in the classroom, providing a strategy for engaging culturally diverse learners (Railsback, 2002). For many students, the appeal of this approach to learning comes from the authenticity of the experience. Students take on the role and behavior of those working in a particular discipline. Whether they are making a documentary video about an environmental concern, designing a travel brochure to highlight sites of historical significance in their community, or developing a multimedia presentation about the pros and cons of building a shopping mall, students are engaged in real-world activities that have significance beyond the classroom. For teachers, additional benefits include enhanced professionalism and collaboration among colleagues, and opportunities to build relationships with students (Thomas, 2000). Additionally, many teachers are pleased to find a model that accommodates diverse learners by introducing a wider range of learning opportunities into the classroom. Teachers find that students who benefit the most from project-based learning tend to be those for whom traditional instructional methods and approaches are not effective (SRI, 2000).

II. A CHANGE FOR A BETTER APPROACH

The language teaching methodologies have seen many innovations aiming provision for the best and most effective ways for language learners. Those include psychologically, cognitively and textbooks design perspectives. The changes are not always

bring positive outcomes as expected. However, it is true that in terms of centrality, the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered motivates learners better. The learning becomes contextualized and purposeful than simulated teaching activities. Laur (2013) indicates the difference between simulation teaching and learning and authentic learning experience as followed;

SIMULATION TEACHING AND LEARNING (SLT)	AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCE (ALE)
Let's pretend	Purpose driven
Activity based	Extended learning
Content-knowledge application is limited	Promote depth of knowledge through the process
Read about experts	Experts involvement
Replication	Innovation
Classroom production	Community or global audience
Focus on teacher assessment	Focus on audience assessment
Engagement often limited to grade outcome	Increased engagement due to purpose, need, and meaning

Table 1: The difference between STL and ALE

As seen in the figure 1, the artificial teaching situations and activities more or less demotivate learners' enthusiasm and hardly ever help to transform what they learn to what they actually use. By comparing simulation teaching and learning (STL) and authentic learning experience (ALE) to Bloom's taxonomy, it is assumed that STL can reach the basic level, while ALE helps learners build critical thinking and reflex ability in language learning

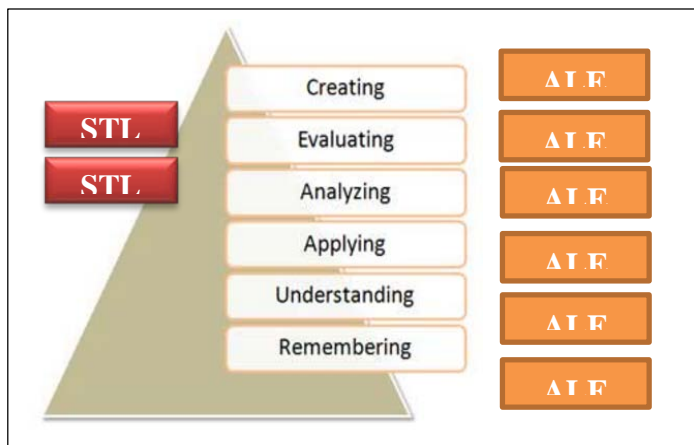


Figure 1: A comparison between STL and ALE to Bloom's taxonomy

III. CHALLENGES OF PROJECT BASED LEARNING

4.1. Administration aspects

Like two sides of a coin, each approach has its drawbacks. It is easy to see the challenges when conducting project-based learning in an English language teaching context. In second

language pedagogy, Stoller (2006) specifies the conditions for PBL to be effective in her attempt to “build a defensible theoretical framework for project work” (p. 20). She noted that PjBL should: (a) have a process and product orientation; (b) be defined, at least in part, by students, to encourage student ownership in the project; (c) extend over a period of time (rather than a single class session); (d) encourage the natural integration of skills; (e) make a dual commitment to language and content learning; (f) oblige students to work in groups and on their own; (g) require students to take some responsibility for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources; (h) require teachers and students to assume new roles and responsibilities (i) result in a tangible final product; and (j) conclude with student reflections on both the process and the product.

4.2. Assessment aspects

When conducting project-based learning and teaching approach, instructors are advised to take assessment into consideration. R.A.F.T is great teaching strategy that many teachers use project-based learning. In it, students are given a topic (T) and must make a few selections. They choose a role (R) that they will take on individually and as a group, such as marketer, author, blogger, campaign manager, etc. They choose an Audience (A) obviously related to the role. It could be a student, a parent, a voter, a CEO, or even a doctor. Students also choose the format (F) that they will use, such as webpage, press release, letter, museum exhibit, or podcast. Again the possibilities are endless. This strategy is a great technique to use when figure out the culminating product for PBL. You as the teacher can decide the aspects of R.A.F.T they will and also allow for student voice and choice. It helps to ensure that the product they create is real world, targeting real content and for authentic purpose and audience. This leads to student engagement.

IV. CONCLUSION

With an aim of enriching teaching and learning approach, the paper attempts to suggest some changes to help personalizing English language learning by applying the project-based learning approach. Benefits of project-based learning and challenges of the approach have been mentioned in the paper with a hope that teachers, language instructors and practitioners may find it helpful for real teaching practice.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Dr. Hoang Huong Ly is currently a lecturer of English at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. She earned her bachelor degree in English Language Teaching at Thai Nguyen University and the degree of Master of Applied Linguistics majoring in TESOL at La Trobe University, Australia. She holds the degree of Ph.D in English Language and Literature at Batangas State University, The Philippines. Her interests include English Phonetics and Phonology, Writing Skills and Teaching Methodology.