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Project-based Learning in Business English Classroom

Dr. Fauzia Janjua

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Abstract

Project Based Learning (PbL) is an instructional approach built upon the engagement, interest and motivation of the learner which allows them to reflect upon their own choices and opinions to make decisions that affect the outcomes of the project under study. PbL is an effective pedagogy for teaching business students. Engaging the learners in business projects is a practical way to enhance their learning.

A class of 40 MBA students was experimented using a two group pre-test post-test design. The class was divided into two groups; the experimental and the control, by conducting a “communication skill test” both for oral and written skills which was considered as pre-test. PbL is generally done by groups of students working together towards a common goal but the performance is assessed on an individual basis by the evaluation of the contributions made to the process of project realization. The same was taken into account and the students of the

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experimental group were divided into five groups of four each but the control group remained undivided. Treatment period was one semester and the subject was “Business Communication”.

Project-based learning takes a variety of forms in the classroom; two popular forms are WebQuests and research investigations. The later was chosen for this study. Four mini and one major term projects were assigned to the students of the experimental group and the control group was taught theoretically with two written assignments and one oral presentation at the end of the semester. Both the groups were tested for communication skills by conducting a post-test. The results of the pre and post tests were compared statistically using t-test and it was found out that the communication skills of the experimental group improved significantly.

Introduction

English Language has been taught and learnt in a structured, linear fashion, accustomed with the teaching of loads of grammar which is based on unrealistic examples. The behaviorists attempt to teach language through decontextualized practices. Learners end up knowing about the language but not knowing how to use it (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). Littlewood (1984) criticizing the approach says that there are no mental or cognitive implications of behaviourism in language teaching but only a mechanism of habit formation through imitation and repetition. According to constructivists, knowledge is constructed not transferred. The basic principle of constructivism is that learning takes place when there is construction of knowledge; it is not only concerned with the end product, the process of constructing that knowledge is considered rather more important.

PbL situates language learning in the real world by using real-life problems as the starting point and focus of learning (Barrows, 1985; Dunlap, 2005). It is based on the principle of learning in the arena of social interaction (Mardziah, 1998) where the social participants decide the content and amount of learning (Cole and Engestrom, 1993; Salomon, 1993).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the use of PbL for the development of oral and written communication skills of the Business learners. The study also attempts to quantify the effect of PbL on the development of communication skills of Business learners.

PbL and Language Learning

Originally, PbL, known as a curricular method, emerged from the field of medical sciences over three decade ago (Barrows, 2000). The use of PbL in different disciplines of science has been effective in the production of learners who are capable of meeting their needs by gearing out the relevant generic skills of life outside the classroom (Wood, 2003; Oliver and McLaughlin, 2001). Dewey introduced PbL into the field of ESL nearly two decades ago as a student-centered teaching (Hedge, 1993). Since then, PbL has also become a popular pedagogy at various levels and in various contexts (see Beckett, 1999; Fried-Booth, 2002; Levis & Levis, 2003; Kobayashi, 2003; Luongo- Orlando, 2001; Mohan & Beckett, 2003; Weinstein, 2004).

PbL is an instructional approach based upon activity learning techniques that engage the interest of the learner and enhances the level of motivation for learning. These activities are designed to connect classroom with the outer world in order to make learning realistic. PbL has now been successfully used as an effective teaching method in EFL and ESL classrooms. Mardziah (1998) emphasizing the use of PbL in language classes points out PbL can provide real-world for language learners by the use of problem-solving activities.

Well-designed, authentic and reliable projects are have been used into language classrooms at all levels with a variety of objectives. PbL is provocative and make learners proceed with their own effort and struggle to gain understanding. It helps developing the language skills as well as assists teaching the content. ELT has much to benefit from the use of PbL in the classroom.

Important Characteristics of PbL

According to Tan (2003), the major characteristics of PbL are:

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- Problems are the thrust of the curriculum – they do not test language skills, rather, they assist in the development of the skills themselves.
- The Problems are poorly-structured – there is more than one solution to a Problem, as new information is gathered, the perception changes and so does the solution.
- Learners are given only guidelines to approach the Problem.
- Authentic performance-based assessment
- Learners share information but they construct their own knowledge.
- Interdisciplinary and integrative

The Benefits of PbL

PbL has an integration of benefits. It:

- Motivates the learners by providing the opportunities and freedom of exploration of knowledge.
- Encourages learners to think creatively and helps them developing their rational thought patterns to find solutions to the problems.
- Builds confidence and inculcates a habit of self directed learning.
- Promotes the habit of working in groups and teams. Teaches the collection of information, sorting it out into relevant to develop solutions.
- Develops acquaintance with the Computers, the Internet, and programs like Microsoft Office Word and Microsoft Office PowerPoint.

Learning Frameworks for PbL

PbL has been practiced in a variety of forms in the classroom. Teachers chose the format that suits their teaching style. Two popular kinds are WebQuests and research investigations.

- **WebQuests:** On WebQuests, the Internet is used to search the required information to complete the task.

- **Research investigations:** Research investigations make use of real-world problem-solving and emphasize critical thinking towards learning. During research investigations, learners collect information; make choices of their own by using higher level thinking to create solutions.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to determine the effect of Pbl in a Business English classroom on the learners' oral and written communication skills.

Hypothesis of the Research

The use of PbL is beneficial for the enhancing the English language communication skills in a Business classroom.

Methodology

This study took a quantitative approach that attempted to investigate the effect of PbL on the learners' English language in a business classroom in the area of communication skills. The nature of inquiry for the present study was experimental which was quantified by the used of statistical procedures.

Population of the Study

All Students registered in MBA and BBA programmes in the public sector universities of the federal capital territory of Islamabad, Pakistan provided the population of the study.

Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to the International Islamic University Islamabad only. The selection was made on the basis of convenience sampling technique.

Cohort of the Study

40 MBA students having CGPA ranging between 2.5 and 3.5 formed the cohort for the present research.

Experimental Design

Two group pre-test post-test design was used for the present study.

Instrumentation

Tests for the evaluation of oral and written communication skill used as pre and post tests were the instruments of the study. Oral communication skill was evaluated during presentations of the assigned projects and the written skill was evaluated on the basis of written test.

Experimentation Procedure

The class was divided into two groups of twenty students each; the experimental and the control respectively. A “communication skill test” for oral and written skills was conducted to equate the groups and was considered as pre-test as well. Pbl is generally done by groups of students working together towards a common goal but the performance is assessed on an individual basis by the evaluation of the contributions made to the process of project realization. The same was taken into account and the students of the experimental group were divided into five groups of four each but the control group remained undivided. Treatment period was one semester and the subject was “Business Communication”. Project-based learning takes a variety of forms in the classroom; two popular forms are WebQuests and research investigations. The later was chosen for this study. Four mini and one major term projects (see appendices) were

assigned to the students of the experimental group. The control group was taught traditionally with two written assignments and one oral presentation at the end of the semester. Both the groups were tested for communication skills by conducting a post-test. The results of the pre and post tests were compared statistically using t-test.

Data Analysis

The data for the present study was analyzed using statistical procedures. The results of the evaluation of pre and post tests were analyzed using t-test. The t-test assesses the difference of mean scores of the two groups from each other. This analysis is appropriate whenever comparison of the two groups is required. There are different types of t-tests as per data. For the present study “independent samples t-test” was used and the results were analyzed at .05 level of significance.

Written Communication Skills Analysis

Variable	No. of Cases	Mean Value	Difference of Means	Standard Deviation	t-value	df
Control group	20	39.69	23.09	15.45	3.78	62
Experimental group	20	62.78		31.08		

The result shows that t-value is significant at .05 level which means that the performance of the experimental group is better than that of the control group thus accepting the hypothesis of the study, we can say that the effect of PbL is positive towards the development of written communication skills of Business English learners.

Oral Communication Skills Analysis

Variable	No. of Cases	Mean Value	Difference of Means	Standard Deviation	t-value	df
Control group	20	29.42	13.33	9.96	3.77	62
Experimental group	20	42.75		17.43		

The result shows that t-value is significant at .05 level which means that the performance of the experimental group is better than that of the control group, therefore the hypothesis of the study is accepted again and PbL proves to an effective pedagogy for the development of oral communication skills of Business English learners.

Conclusion

As per results of the present study, PbL is an effective approach to prompt speaking, to improve listening, to provoke reading and to develop writing. However, the focus of the present study was on speaking and writing but the integrated nature of language has shown the effects of PbL on the other two skills as well. “Considerations for teachers,” as suggested by Mathews-Aydinli (2007) provided useful framework for the assessment of the learners. It was also observed that the confidence level of the learners boosted up and the generic skills were enhanced as well. The experimental group was more participative in class room discussions and their argumentation seemed to be more logical which was reflective of the development of creative thinking among the learners. It is recommended that PbL may be tested for all those variables which were not a part of this study to substantiate the findings of the present study and for further research to guide teachers and learners both.

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