Using Problem Based Learning Technique in Teaching English Grammar

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Abstract

Present Education system is primarily concerned with transferring substance to the learner and thus little importance is placed on the role of learning activity. Problem-based learning is considered as a strategy which gives enough opportunity for the students to learn on their own.   It is based on the assumption that learning is the process of constructing knowledge rather than merely obtaining it. It encourages independent learning and gives students practice in tackling puzzling situations and finding suitable solutions to the problem on hand. This paper presents an overview on PBL (Problem-based learning) and how this technique can be used in teaching English grammar and the criteria for assessing the performance of people involved in the process.

Key words: PBL, Learner-centered Learning, Objectives, Process, Assessment

Introduction

PBL was created by Barrows in 1986 as an alternative instructional method by letting the students to solve problems rather than having them learn mainly through lectures. The role of a teacher in PBL is very limited and the teacher is called as Facilitator as he/she facilitates the learning by providing a conducive atmosphere for learning.

PBL is an approach to structuring the curriculum which involves confronting students with problems from practice which provides a stimulus for learning [1]. PBL is an approach which focuses more on what students do than what the faculty does. "Not just a method but a way of learning" observes Charles E. Engel [2] in the book The Challenges of Problem Based Learning**.**

Internet is considered as the source of knowledge. Students resort to Internet to gain knowledge on any topic. Its role in PBL is immeasurable. During the different phases of PBL, students need to access Internet in order to collect information relevant to the problem and the facilitator will guide the students to navigate through relevant sites.

Definition

PBL consists of both a curriculum and a process. The curriculum consists of carefully selected and designed problems that demand from the learner acquisition of critical knowledge, problem solving proficiency, self-directed learning strategies, and cooperative learning skills. The process replicates the commonly used systemic approach to resolve problems or meeting challenges that are encountered in life and career [3]

PBL is an instructional method that challenges students to "learn to learn," working cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems. These problems are used to engage students' curiosity and initiate learning the subject matter. PBL prepares students to think critically and analytically, and to find and use appropriate learning resources.

Barrows defined PBL as "[…] the learning which results from the process working towards the understanding of, or resolution of, a problem.[4]

Shifting Gear to a PBL Classroom Environment

PBL Classroom environment is totally different from conventional classroom. Students who are unfamiliar to PBL environment may feel discomfort initially as they are asked to shoulder the responsibility of self-learning, working on ill-structured problems and acquiring relevant knowledge. They should have the willingness and proper mindset to accept risk and aspire to become a self-directed learner. Other notable qualities that students must possess are determination, never-say-die attitude and patience. Transitioning to a PBL classroom environment is a slow process and students must be given ample opportunities to shift from the conventional lecture style of teaching-learning process.

Establishing an Open Climate for PBL

Establishing an open climate is essential for PBL. Every student should feel free to say whatever comes to mind, any ideas or comments, no matter how unsophisticated or inappropriate they might seem, without being put down or criticized. Most students have learned in their prior educational experiences not to speak up or volunteer their thoughts unless they are absolutely sure of the answer. Further, any show of ignorance was held against them.

Students must also develop the ability to openly and constructively express their opinions about the comments or ideas of others, or about the quality of other students' performance in the group. It is the responsibility of students to offer opinions in a friendly and constructive manner. Every student must learn to both *give* and *accept* constructive criticism.

Characteristics of Problem Based Learning

The key characteristics of PBL are:

- Structure-less learning

- Students centered learning
- Faculty to act as a facilitator
- Group activity
- Co-operative learning
- Assessment at different levels to monitor the progress

Objectives of Problem Based Learning

According Engel, PBL will help the students to:

- Adapt and participate in change
- Adopt a holistic approach to problems and situations
- Enhance creative and critical thinking
- Appreciate diversified viewpoints
- Collaborate with others
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in learning
- Promote self-directed learning
- Develop Effective communication skills
- Augment knowledge
- Acquire Leadership skills
- Utilize resources optimally

Difference between Conventional Learning and Problem Based Learning

There are some basic differences between conventional and problem based learning. Some of them are:

Conventional Learning	Problem Based Learning
Teacher-centered	Student-centered
Linear & rational	Coherent & relevant
Teacher as transmitter	Teacher as Facilitator or coach
Learning as receiving	Learning as constructing
Structured environment	Flexible environment

Individual Learning	Group Process
No room for discussion among peers	Encourages interaction among peers

Desirable Competencies of participants of PBL

1. Adoptability to change
2. Problem solving skills
3. Decision making skills
4. Thinking critically and creatively
5. Formulating a holistic approach to the problem
6. Team skills
7. Practicing empathy
8. Respecting other's point of view
9. Identifying own strengths and weaknesses

The PBL Process

The PBL process is not a complex one and it can be divided into 5 phases. In each and every phase, the roles and responsibilities of Facilitator and students can be defined. The following explains the PBL process and what is expected from Facilitator and students.

Phase 1 : **Introducing the concept**

Facilitator's Role : To enlighten the students with the basic concepts of Problem Based Learning

To enable the students to appreciate the advantages of using PBL Technique.

Students' Role : To overcome the barriers of switching over from conventional learning to Problem Based Learning

To understand the concept thoroughly by having free interaction with tutor and peers.

Phase 2 : **Announcing the problem or Trigger**

Facilitator's Role : To introduce the topic in the form of a trigger

To elicit information related to the problem from students

To provide elementary sources pertaining to the problem

Students' Role   : To understand the trigger or problem

To be mentally ready to meet the problem confidently

Phase 3   **: Grouping and Surveying**

Facilitator's Role : To divide the students into groups by adopting strategies.

To provide access to resources such as Books, Internet, Journals, Magazines, etc.

To extend conducive environment for learning to take place

Students' Role   : To develop a rapport with fellow group members
To explore knowns and unknowns

To investigate the problem into its minute details

Phase 4:   **Monitoring and Coaching**

Facilitator's Role : To monitor the progress of students and provide support as and when needed

To avoid controlling and directing their efforts in solving the problem

To provide constructive feedback during the activity

Students' Role   : To have healthy and constructive discussion among peers
To generate possible solutions to the problem

Phase 5   **: Assessing the performance**

Facilitator's Role : To provide students with opportunities to share their findings

To extend follow-up activities

To assess the performance of students and give feedback

Students' Role   : To present the findings in the form of presentation

To assess the performance of facilitator

To assess the performance of self and peer

Assessment in Problem Based Learning

The word "assess" has the Latin origin "assidere" which means to sit down beside. In PBL, sitting down beside is an essential thing in order to monitor closely the progress of students. In this methodology, assessment is an integral part in learning. Assessment is a continuous process as it provides opportunity to improve skills, knowledge and abilities with respect to learning objectives.

Within each group, the facilitator will be expected to assess the preparation, organization and overall contribution of each student to the small group process. Correspondingly, the students will provide feedback to each other and to the facilitator on a regular basis. Each PBL session will end with a "wrap-up", both to discuss the progress of the session completed and to clarify objectives to be completed prior to the next meeting and the participants will be actively involved in the process of regular review. With PBL, the facilitator is no longer the sole yardstick by which the progress is measured. Students will coordinate with the facilitator for relevant and meaningful assessments.

Student assessment is a multidimensional process, integral to learning, that involves careful and unbiased observation of individual's performance and judging them on the basis of collaboratively determined developmental criteria, with resulting feedback to that learner. Assessment must be seamless and ongoing; it must be part of the PBL process. Students must also learn during assessment; it is not simply a "grade" that is tacked on at the end of a paper or transcript.

Students will be assessed in three broad areas:

1. Applied Competence
2. Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving and Communicative Competence.
3. Collaborative and Leadership Competence.

The following Assessment Forms may be prepared to assess the performance by concentrating on the criteria mentioned against each form.

Sl.No.	Assessment Forms	Criteria
01	Assessment of student participation in PBL by facilitators	Preparation, Accepting Responsibility, Team skills,

		Attitude, Professionalism and Communicative skills
02	Student assessment of the PBL facilitators	Facilitation, Guidance, Encouragement, questioning and probing techniques, Providing feedback.
03	Self-assessment of participation in PBL	Decision-making skills, Critical reasoning, participation, group dynamics, Attitude, professionalism, Communication
04	Peer assessment	Level of Knowledge , Attitudes, Involvement in Group process, Accepting criticism and giving feedback

PBL IN Language Learning

Presenting language in a structured way and reinforcing the content through non-contextualized practice may help the learners to know about the language but not how to use it. This method creates an aversion in the minds of learners as it does not encourage the understanding. PBL method helps the learners to learn the language and provides them ample opportunity to use it. It helps to bridge the gap between learner and the language. Problems used in PBL are ill-structured and do not have specific answers.

In addition, they propel learners to explore resources including books and Internet to draw knowledge from various sources. During the different stages of PBL, learners acquire relevant knowledge and use language to communicate, share and negotiate with fellow learners. They learn rules of grammar and conventions of language use. To sum up, they understand and use the language with real-world contexts.

The Language Teacher's role in PBL

In a PBL setting, teachers need to decenter their roles as the source of knowledge by consciously refraining from giving only right-wrong answers and helping students observe how other resources can teach them about effective language use. Acting as facilitators and cognitive coaches [5], teachers need to ask questions such as: Why? What do you mean? and How do you know that is true? [6} **instead** of content-laden questions. The purpose is to challenge the students' reasoning and to help them consider carefully each step they take in their inquiry. By asking such questions, facilitators also model critical thinking, with the purpose of stepping back and letting students begin to ask themselves and their peers those same types of questions. As facilitators, teachers also design problems and provide critical resources needed for the inquiry process.

PBL in Language Learning : An Illustration

The following illustration will help to understand how PBL works in learning a language:

i) Facilitator identifies or designs an ill-structured problem or task relevant to the learner. (e.g., *Complexity in using Past Tense and Present Perfect Tense, Basic difference between these tense forms, Structures of Past and Present Perfect tenses, Rules for using these two tenses, Where to use past tense and Present Perfect Tense. Solve the complexity)*

ii) Facilitator presents the problem to the learners.

iii) Learners explore pre-existing knowledge

iv) Learners, in their own groups, collaboratively
   o Discuss in detail
   o identify resources to look up or consult
   o assign tasks to the various group members (i.e. *who is responsible for working on each learning issue*.).
   o gather information from different sources
   o Compile the findings
   o Prepare handouts, worksheets, etc on the topic
   o propose solution(s).

Some of the steps in (iv) may be revisited. Throughout the process, learners will need to act as scribes or recorders to take notes.

v) Present their findings before the Facilitator in the form of "presentation".

vi) Facilitator presents "the presentation" to the students.

vii) Learners and facilitator assess the performance

What holds the key to success of PBL?

In his article "**Persevering with Problem Based Learning**", Peter Schwartz [7] has listed out some of the most important factors which are responsible for success of PBL.

They are:

1. Commitment to the philosophy of this type of learning

2. An understanding of the philosophy

3. A realistic acceptance of the role

4. The ability to model process skills

5. Frequent opportunities for students to gain feedback

6. Real assessments

7. Institutional support

8. A pragmatic and realistic approach

Conclusion

Problem-based Learning is an approach to structuring the curriculum which involves confronting students with problems from practice which provide a stimulus for learning. Successful implementation of PBL does not come easily. In this process, the strengths and skills of facilitators will be tested. They should have enough knowledge to overcome complex difficulties and need the ability to explore options and generate solutions to cooperative contexts. Commitment, determination and team work are sought from the people involved in the process. PBL has been found and proved to be a successful method of learning. PBL is a boon to the student fraternity to overcome the barriers and challenge the limits in learning.

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