

THE USE OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN AN
ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL PURPOSES CLASSROOM
AMONG FINAL SEMESTER STUDENTS OF
DIPLOMA IN OFFICE MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

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To

Kester my hubby, bestfriend, confidant, soulmate;

Jaomi and Timotheus the apples of my eye;

and the memory of

Linda Chang Ping Tek my Grand Mah.

You have taught me to run with horses.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of PBL in an EOP classroom by determining, firstly, whether the use of PBL benefited the EOP respondents' language skills, and secondly, whether there are any significant improvements in their language skills. The study also attempted to describe the respondents' responses in the use of PBL in learning EOP. The respondents involved in this study were five final semester students from diverse backgrounds and different levels of English Language proficiency pursuing Diploma in Office Management and Technology at a local university in Sarawak. This study was conducted using the qualitative approach. Observation Checklists were used to collect data on the respondents' oral language skills in their group discussions and presentations to ascertain if the use of PBL had benefited the respondents' oral skills. Pretest and Posttest were administered at the beginning and the end of the study to determine if the process of learning EOP using PBL had benefited the respondents' written language skills in the area of writing reply letters of complaints. The Posttest letters were also analysed for significant improvements in the language used by the respondents. Besides that, various types of Evaluation Forms were distributed to the respondents to obtain data on their responses towards the use of PBL in an EOP classroom. The findings from this study revealed that the respondents had responded positively towards the use of PBL. Their oral and written language skills had improved significantly. On top of that, their generic skills had also improved, and this would enhance their rate of employability upon graduation. All the results of this study pointed towards the fact that the use of PBL in an EOP classroom had benefited the respondents' oral and written language skills.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji kegunaan 'Pembelajaran Berasaskan Masalah' (PBL) dalam kelas 'Bahasa Inggeris Bagi Tujuan Pekerjaan' (EOP). Ini dilakukan dengan menentukan pertamanya, sama ada pengguna PBL boleh memberi faedah kepada kemahiran bahasa pelajar EOP dan keduanya, terhadap jenis kemahiran bahasa yang dapat diperbaiki dengan signifikannya. Kajian ini juga ingin menggambarkan tindak balas pelajar yang menggunakan PBL untuk mempelajari EOP. Pelajar yang terlibat dalam kajian ini adalah lima orang pelajar semester akhir daripada latar belakang dan tahap kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris yang berbeza, iaitu pelajar Diploma Pengurusan Pejabat & Teknologi di sebuah universiti tempatan di Sarawak. Kajian ini dijalankan dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Satu Senarai Semak Pemerhatian digunakan untuk mengutip data mengenai kemahiran lisan pelajar dalam sesi perbincangan berkumpulan dan pembentangan. Ujian pra dan pos dilakukan pada awal dan akhir kajian untuk menentukan keberkesanan proses pembelajaran EOP menggunakan PBL melalui kebolehan pelajar menjawab surat. Borang Soalselidik juga digunakan untuk mendapatkan maklum balas mengenai perkara yang sama. Hasil kajian ini mendapati bahawa tindak balas terhadap kegunaan PBL dalam EOP adalah positif. Kemahiran bahasa dalam lisan dan penulisan didapati bertambah baik dengan signifikannya. Kemahiran generik mereka juga bertambah baik yang seterusnya boleh meningkatkan peluang mendapatkan pekerjaan setelah tamat pengajian. Oleh itu, semua keputusan kajian ini menjurus kepada kegunaan PBL dalam bilik darjah EOP telah dapat memberi faedah kepada kemahiran secara lisan dan penulisan bahasa.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE
	DECLARATION	ii
	DEDICATION	iii
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
	ABSTRACT	v
	ABSTRAK	vi
	TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
	LIST OF TABLES	xii
	LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
	LIST OF ACRONYMS	xv
	LIST OF APPENDICES	xvi
1	INTRODUCTION	1
	1.1 Introduction	1
	1.2 Background of the Study	3
	1.3 Statement of Problem	4
	1.4 Purpose of the Study	5
	1.5 Objectives of the Study	6
	1.6 Research Questions	6
	1.7 Significance of the Study	7
	1.8 Scope of the Study	7
	1.9 Conclusion	8
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	9
	2.1 Introduction	9
	2.2 Current Status of PBL	9

2.3	Approaches to Language Learning and Teaching	10
2.3.1	Constructivist Approach	11
2.3.2	Learner-Centred Approach	11
2.3.3	Approaches in Language Acquisition and Learning	13
	(a) Behaviourist Approach	13
	(b) Innatist Approach	15
	(c) Natural Approach	16
	(d) Interactionist Approach	18
2.4	What is PBL?	21
2.5	Rationale for Using PBL	22
2.6	Early Success of PBL	23
2.6.1	PBL in Medicine	23
2.6.2	PBL in Pure Sciences	25
2.7	Recent Developments in PBL	25
2.7.1	PBL in Education	26
2.7.2	PBL in Law	27
2.7.3	PBL in Language Teaching and Learning	27
2.7.4	PBL in English for Academic Purposes	28
2.7.5	PBL in English for Occupational Purposes	29
2.7.6	PBL and Generic Skills	30
2.8	Design Process of PBL	33
2.9	Characteristics of PBL	35
2.10	Scaffolds in PBL	36
2.11	Characteristics of a PBL Poorly-Structured Problem	36
2.12	Role of the Facilitator in PBL	37
2.13	Role of the Learners in PBL	38
2.14	Constraints in Implementing PBL	38
	(a) Cultural Change	38
	(b) Manpower	39
	(c) Infrastructure	39

2.15	Conclusion	39
3	METHODOLOGY	40
3.1	Introduction	40
3.2	Research Design	40
3.3	Population	42
3.4	Sampling Design	43
3.5	Respondents	43
3.6	Instrumentation	44
3.6.1	Instruments used in Data Collection	45
	(a) Questionnaire	45
	(b) Written Essay	46
	(c) Poorly-Structured Problem	46
	(d) Poorly-Structured Problem Reply Letter	46
	(e) Tests	47
	(f) Evaluation Forms	48
	(g) Problem Logs	51
	(h) Checklists	53
3.6.2	Instruments used in Data Analysis	55
	(a) Assessment of General Language Skills	55
	(b) Assessment of Specific Language Skills	56
	(c) Assessment of Oral Presentation	57
3.7	Research Procedure	59
3.7.1	Preliminary Study	59
3.7.2	Preparation of Instruments	59
3.7.3	Piloting of Instruments	61
3.7.4	Improvement of Instruments	62
3.8	Data Collection	63
3.9	Data Analysis	68
3.9.1	Poorly-Structured Problem Reply Letter and Pretest	68

	3.9.2	Tests (Pretest and Posttest)	69
	3.9.3	Assessment of Oral Presentation	70
	3.9.4	Evaluation Forms	70
	3.9.5	Problem Logs	72
	3.9.6	Checklists	72
	3.10	Conclusion	73
4		FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	74
	4.1	Introduction	74
	4.2	Benefits of PBL on the Respondents’ Language Skills	74
	4.2.1.	Ability to Decide To Write a Reply Letter of Complaint	75
	4.2.2	Ability to Write a Reply Letter of Complaint	76
	4.2.3	Improvements in Written Language Skills	76
	4.2.4	Discussions of Respondents’ Overall Performance	82
	4.3	Aspects of Language Skills the Respondents Improved Significantly	83
	4.3.1	Significant Improvements in Written Language Skills	84
	(a)	Grammar	86
	(b)	Punctuation	87
	(c)	Vocabulary and Expression	87
	(d)	Rhetorical Aspects	88
	4.3.2	Discussions of Respondents’ Overall Written Performance	90
	4.3.3	Significant Improvements in Oral Language Skills	93
	(a)	Language Used When Communicating With Group Members	93

	(b) Effectiveness in Oral Language Skills	93
4.3.4	Discussions of Respondents' Overall Spoken Performance	97
4.4	Informants Responses to the Use of PBL in Learning EOP	98
4.4.1	Interpersonal Skills	99
4.4.2	Self-Management Skills	101
4.4.3	Communication Skills	105
4.4.4	Problem-Solving Skills	110
4.4.5	Discussions of Respondents' Overall Responses to the Use of PBL in Learning EOP	114
4.5	Conclusion	114
5	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION	115
5.1	Conclusion	115
5.2	Recommendations	118
5.3	Pedagogical Implications	119
5.4	Suggestions for Further Research	120
5.5	Limitations of the Study	121
	REFERENCES	123
	Appendices A-V	132-163

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE NO.	TITLE	PAGE
3.1	Likert Scale used in Evaluation Form	49
3.2	Grading Scale for Evaluation	51
3.3	Assessment of General Language Skills	55
3.4	Assessment of Specific Language Skills	56
3.5	Assessment of Oral Presentation	57
3.6	Grading Scale for Oral Presentation	58
3.7	Types of Improvement in the Posttest Letters	69
4.1	Analysis and Comments of the Respondents' Letter from the Pretest and Poorly-Structured Problem Reply	77
4.2	Marks obtained by the Respondents in the Pretest and Posttest Letters	84
4.3	Types of Improvement Obtained by the Respondents in the Posttest Letters	85

4.4	Checklist of Generic Skills: Self-Evaluation of Interpersonal Skills Before and After the Use of PBL in Learning EOP	99
4.5	Checklist of Generic Skills: Self-Evaluation of Self-Management Skills Before and After the Use of PBL in Learning EOP	101
4.6	Ratings Obtained by the Respondents in the Group Evaluation	103
4.7	Checklist of Generic Skills: Self-Evaluation of Communication Skills Before and After the Use of PBL in Learning EOP	105
4.8	Marks Obtained by the Respondents in the Oral Presentation	107
4.9	Checklist of Generic Skills: Self-Evaluation of Problem-Solving Skills Before and After the Use of PBL in Learning EOP	110

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE NO.	TITLE	PAGE
2.1	Design Process of PBL	34
3.1	Research Design	41
3.2	Process of Data Collection	63

LIST OF ACRONYMS

EOP	-	English for Occupational Purposes
PBL	-	Problem-Based Learning
EAP	-	English for Academic Purposes
ELT	-	English Language Teaching
FBI	-	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ALM	-	Audio-Lingual Method
SLA	-	Second Language Acquisition
LAD	-	Language Acquisition Device
L2	-	Second Language
NA	-	Natural Approach
CI	-	Comprehensive Input
L1	-	Native Speaker
Non-L1	-	Non-Native Speaker
CO	-	Comprehensive Output
UBD	-	University Brunei Darussalam
SPM	-	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
CGPA	-	Cumulative Grade Point Average
PTPTN	-	National Higher Education Fund

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX	TITLE	PAGE
A	Questionnaire	132
B	Written Essay	135
C	Checklist of Generic Skills	136
D	Pretest	138
E	Poorly-Structured Problem	139
F	Checklist of Observation	140
G	Scaffolds 1	141
H	Problem Log 1	142
I	Self-Evaluation Form 1	145
J	Group Evaluation Form 1	147
K	Scaffolds 2	149
L	Problem Log 2	150
M	Scaffolds 3	151
N	Problem Log 3	152
O	Scaffolds 4	154
P	Problem Log 4	155
Q	Assessment of Oral Presentation	156
R	Group Evaluation Form 2	157
S	Poorly-Structured Problem Evaluation Form	158
T	Self-Evaluation Form 2	160
U	Posttest	162
V	Poorly-Structured Problem Reply Letter	163

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The lecturer entered the EOP class all prepared to deliver the first lecture of the new semester. Exuberating with enthusiasm and well-prepared with transparencies and printed notes, she introduced the final semester undergraduates to the course content. Expecting enthusiastic responses from these undergraduates, she was certainly not prepared for what was to transpire. Comments such as ‘dry’, ‘boring’, and ‘technical’ were the responses she received. She was taken aback by this lacklustre attitude of the undergraduates, and on probing further, she discovered that they were not in the least interested in learning the EOP skills so important for their career.

There has to be a departure from this approach of learning and teaching to one that will enable the learners and teachers to see the relevance of learning. It has to be an approach that views learning as a process that constructs knowledge; one that is not only concerned with the **end product** of acquiring that knowledge but rather the **process** of constructing that knowledge. This is to run away from the non-constructivist approach of learning to one that looks at learning from the constructivist point of view (Brooks and Brooks, 1993). Learning, to a constructivist, involves a process where **knowledge is constructed not transferred**. It is based on the principle that learning takes place when there is construction of

knowledge. Brooks and Brooks (1993) explain it well when they say that the focus in learning is the receipt of knowledge and the learning activity. They add that this type of learning approach will free the learners from the

“dreariness of fact-driven curriculum and allow them to focus on large ideas; (they) place in students’ hands the exhilarating power to follow traits of interests, to make connections, to reformulate ideas, and to teach unique conclusions”

(Brooks and Brooks, 1993: 22).

Gone were the days where education was seen as a transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the learners, and as long as learners were given knowledge, they would be able to use it (Gordon, 1998).

One method which advocates learning by engaging learners in authentic learning activities is PBL which uses real-life problems as the starting point and focus of learning (Barrows, 1985; Dunlap, 2005). It is based on the premise that the place where learning occurs lies not with the head-knowledge of the learners but in the arena where there is social interaction (Mardziah, 1998), and where the social participants play a deciding role in the content and amount learnt (Cole and Engestrom, 1993; Salomon, 1993).

The use of PBL in the science disciplines has been successful in producing learners who are responsible for their own learning and equipping themselves with the relevant generic skills for life outside the classroom (Wood, 2003; Oliver and McLoughlin, 2001). This method of learning and equipping can be adopted in the EOP language classrooms where PBL is used as an approach to pave the way for this self-learning to take place.

1.2 Background of the Study

The present scenario in the classrooms where learners are unable to see the importance of what they learn as being instrumental in succeeding in the real world has to undergo a paradigm shift. Traditional education practices are churning out disinterested and bored learners who go to school and come home with huge amount of facts to memorise – an activity that does not in the least prepare them for life outside the classroom. Their attitude towards the learning process is reflected in their declining attendance rate and poor academic performance (Zhonglei, 2004; Ahlfeldt, 2004).

Learning in the classrooms cannot be confined to just the content to be taught for the day, nor the syllabus to be completed in the semester. It will be so unnatural because acquisition of knowledge comes in a package together with the acquisition of other skills. In other words, these learners are not just learning and improving on their language skills, but also simultaneously picking up a variety of generic skills.

Research has unveiled an important role of PBL and its ability to motivate learners to learn as they would in the real-world (Mardziah, 1998); learning which is self-directed and encouraged by the learners' own intellectual curiosity to find solutions to problems. Through PBL, the learning horizon of the learners is opened to a wide spectrum of skills and knowledge which they can acquire besides just the target content.

Wood and Head (2004) in their research on the application of PBL in the EAP classroom manage to successfully use PBL in their EAP class and in its process enable their students to gain the necessary skills. The same can be done for the EOP classrooms by using PBL in the teaching and learning of EOP language skills. In this case then, the use of real-world problems in the learning process will enable the

learners to acquire the end product which is the construction of the target EOP language skills, and at the same time, develop generic skills relevant for life-long learning. This learning experience will be a simulation of the real-world. Instructional sessions will never be boring any more, and learners will be more enthusiastic towards the learning experience as they take charge of their own learning.

While substantial research and studies have been carried out in the field of pure sciences and medicine, there has not been much in language in general and EOP in particular. Thus, this study looks at the use of PBL in learning EOP language skills where learners are themselves responsible for solving a problem that mirrors real-world problems which are not well-phrased, have many solutions and use a myriad of generic skills, such as those pertaining to oral or written communication, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, leadership, and team work which serve the basis for life-long learning (Peterson, 1997; Murray-Harvey *et al.* 2004; Ellis *et al.*, 2005).

1.3 Statement of Problem

The trend in language teaching and learning has been one where learners learn language in a structured, linear fashion using unrealistic examples. Language has been taught and learnt in isolation with importance placed on the content to be learnt but not on the learning activity. Many times, these learning activities are not only few but far from being real. The lessons are reinforced through practice which learners find hard to grapple with. Products of this type of teaching and learning process are learners who know all about the rules of the language but do not know how to use the language proficiently in the real world (Short, Harste and Burke, 1996). In response to this, teachers in the language classrooms can use PBL to close

the gap between language used in the real world and language taught in the classroom. This can be done by embedding into the classroom learning activities which support the type of thinking process that is synonymous with the real world (Mardziah, 1998; Brown *et al.*, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Studies on PBL in the fields of medicine and pure sciences, such as Physics and Biology, have generated theories and assumptions that PBL can successfully create a learning environment where learning is done in context within its target domain using learning tasks which are as close to real life as possible. Such a functional approach if used in language learning will ensure that all learners have practical knowledge of the contextual use of the language and learners are able to use it in real-life situations. Despite these studies, PBL in language teaching and learning has not been studied comprehensively. More studies should be undertaken in this area to shed more light into the role PBL can play in the teaching and learning of language.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of PBL in an EOP classroom. It is a qualitative investigation that seeks to describe how PBL can benefit the learners' language skills in an EOP classroom in the area of writing reply letters of complaints. It is hoped that through the PBL learning experience, these learners will experience significant improvements in their language skills in writing reply letters of complaints.

The study also attempts to describe the responses of the learners towards PBL approach of teaching and learning. Their responses will be helpful in finding out if PBL is favourable in facilitating their learning experience.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

- 1.5.1 Determine whether the use of PBL in an EOP classroom benefits the respondents' language skills in writing reply letters of complaint;
- 1.5.2 Find out which aspects of the respondents' language skills, namely, speaking, and writing reply letters of complaint, have improved significantly with the use of PBL; and
- 1.5.3 Analyse the informants' responses to the use of PBL in learning EOP.

1.6 Research Questions

- 1.6.1 Does the use of PBL benefit the respondents' language skills in an EOP classroom?
- 1.6.2 What aspects of language skills do the respondents improve significantly when using PBL in learning EOP?
- 1.6.3 How have the informants responded to the use of PBL in learning EOP?

1.7 Significance of the Study

The findings on whether PBL improves the learners' language skills in an EOP classroom will help pave the way for the introduction of PBL in teaching and learning language. This will further enhance the use of authentic learning activities within the target context of language learning in an EOP classroom. Data on the aspects of language skills that the learners improved significantly when using PBL in learning EOP will give teachers an indication of the language skills that can benefit the most through the use of PBL.

Gaining an insight into the responses of the learners towards this approach of teaching and learning is invaluable in assisting the teachers and the management in planning ways to maximise the benefits of PBL. An awareness of the problems that hinder the learners from benefiting from this approach will enable the teachers and curriculum planners to minimise the problems they face.

The findings of this study will be of great significance especially to teachers who are considering using different and more novel ways of making learning more student-centred and meaningful. With the results, these teachers will be able to know how to insert more meaningful learning tasks based on real-world problems into their target context. It is hoped that the findings of this research will lead to PBL playing a more prominent role in the language classroom.

1.8 Scope of the Study

This study investigated the use of PBL in an EOP classroom. It focused on the language used by the respondents in writing formal reply letters of complaints, and oral communication. This study involved five final semester respondents who

were pursuing Diploma in Office Management and Technology in a local university in Sarawak. It used a qualitative approach with different types of instruments, such as, Questionnaire, Tests, Observations and Evaluations to obtain data on the benefits and significant improvements in the language skills of the respondents after the use of PBL in their EOP classroom.

1.9 Conclusion

Therefore, it is hoped that this study will provide invaluable information pertaining to the use of PBL in helping the learners find the learning experience relevant to them in the EOP classroom.

This first chapter on the Introduction of the study is followed by four other chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the Review of Literature while the Methodology in Chapter 3 explains how the study was carried out. Chapter 4 presents the Findings and Discussion, and the report ends with Chapter 5 on the Conclusion and Recommendations.