Project Based English Language Learning in Vocational Courses

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ABSTRACT

Project-Based English Language Learning is not a new concept, and incorporating realia, realistic scenarios and real-world projects for language learning has been a critical issue. Project-Based English Language Learning prepares learners for academic and professional excellence; hence, the real-world project which engages learners should facilitate in improving their knowledge-acquisition ability, their oral and written communication skills and above all their analytical and critical thinking skills. The paper proposes a practical approach to identify the relevant and realistic scenarios or projects that can be aligned with learning outcomes, teaching pedagogy, learning materials / resources and assessment methodology to enhance the four skills (i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) of language learning.

In the process of conceptualizing PB-ELL, the participants will explore various realistic projects, news reports, case studies, research papers and reports of latest industry trends to select relevant authentic learning / teaching material that aligns with learning outcomes. Based on the learning outcome and assessment criteria, the participants will incorporate suitable teaching pedagogy to create a context for learning. Participants will address issues of mixed learning styles, mixed abilities and variable analytical skills of their learners while adapting the learning material for their classrooms. The proposed teaching methodology ensures progress from LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills) to HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). At each step – selecting the relevant learning material, deciding the teaching pedagogy, creating learning context and framing assessments based on the context – the participants are guided by checklists and rubrics which have been developed after an intensive research and study.

KEYWORDS : Project-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based English Language Learning (PB-ELL), real-world projects for language learning, industry-based learning

INTRODUCTION

Education plays an important role in developing the learner's knowledge, his critical thinking ability, his effective communication skills and his intellectual ability that promote forward thinking into the future. Project Based Learning (PBL) is a dynamic learner-centered approach to teaching and learning, in which the learners explore the realistic scenarios and real-world projects to learn about the given theme and explore further possibilities of using their knowledge to develop futuristic projects. Project-Based English Language Learning (PB-ELL) is an interesting, practical and active approach to develop the language usage skills and language fluency of learners. PB-ELL is rather a relevant instructional approach for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to various specializations and various levels of learners.

Generally, ESP modules are a part of course curriculum for learners who already have a basic English certification (usually at the level of A2 to B1 on the Common European Framework Scale). This sets the pre-requirement at basic English fluency to understand and interpret basic task instructions and task requirements. This also determines the ability of learners to interpret the learning material, explore further options of learning and write relevant proposals or projects. Several studies have revealed project-based instruction as being capable of providing English language learners with prospects for comprehensible output and integrated language learning (Essien A.M., 2018). PB-ELL allows learners to adopt projects which become the focal point of learning and these projects are the basis of curriculum rather than being the extensions of curriculum.

BASICS OF PROJECT-BASED ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Old-fashioned learning styles in classroom-based education is questionable and lacking in providing the necessary tools needed by the students to survive in the ever-growing intricacy in our lives and societies (Essien A.M., 2018). The Project-based learning has been part of the educational practice approximately at the beginning of the 1980s and it was greatly influenced by the communicative approach (Du X.M., Han J., 2016). The history of PBL can be traced back to the progressive tradition advocated by John Dewey. Dewey insisted on the idea of "learning by doing". He argued that the classroom should be a kind of society and the students should be encouraged to become the center in the learning process (Du X.M., Han J., 2016). Project-based

learning drives teaching and learning in accordance with skills, engages learners into the learning process, motivates and develops learners' creativity (Thuan, P.D., 2018)

The PB-ELL activities delegate authority to the learners to use their existing knowledge about the theme, to build-upon the acquired knowledge, to reflect upon the concepts and existing trends, to apply critical thinking to remodel the concepts, to reflect on the benefits of the innovation and to finally recommend modifications and suggestions that lead to extension and development of existing systems. Projects are organized around a driving question, and students participate in a variety of tasks that seek to meaningfully address this question (Essien A.M., 2018). Stoller (2006) defined PBI as: 1) having a process and product; 2) giving students (partial) ownership of the project; 3) extending over a period of time (several days, weeks, or months); 4) integrating skills; 5) developing students' understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content; 6) collaborating with other students and working on their own; 7) holding students responsible for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources; 8) assigning new roles and responsibilities to students and teacher; 9) providing a tangible final product; and 10) reflecting on both the process and the product.

The projects drive the learners to explore and intensively research about the central concepts which are critical themes for learning the subject. While the projects allow the learners to acquire knowledge about their specialization concepts, their attempt to learn and explore, their endeavor to complete the activities assigned as project tasks help them to develop fluency in English language. Through PB-ELL, the English as Second Language (ESL) learners are expected to develop fluency in all the four language acquisition skills – Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing. The PB-ELL is a collaborative process of team of learners and facilitators of different specializations. In the process of acquiring knowledge learners explore reading texts, watch videos, listen to podcasts, make notes from texts and discourses, acquire theme-related vocabulary, apply appropriate grammatical structure in descriptions and comparisons and finally write reports and recommendations all of which help in enhancing the language acquisition skills.

EVALUATING AND SELECTING LEARNING MATERIAL

"Learning Resources / Material" refers to any authentic educational material which is acquired locally or globally in-print, electronically through Internet or websites and which will be used in formal or informal teaching and learning purposes with proper citations and source references. They may be in the form of printed text, online text, video, audio podcast, visuals, or other forms which are accessible to the learners use for learning.

Project-based learning is a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning that is designed to engage students in the investigation of authentic problems. Students become active learners and participate in hands-on activities, while lecturers provide guidance to students during their project work. The PBL method of learning and teaching thus requires a new mindset and a change in role for both students and teachers (Shekar A., 2014). There is a change in instruction and teaching strategy where the trainer provides and guides learners to explore, learn and develop individual skills. Hence, the trainer has to ensure the learning and teaching material is useful, appropriate, aligned and authentic. The learning material should address the learning needs as well as the learning autonomy needs. In project-based learning, teachers facilitate and guide students through the engineering design process, while students actively engage in research and problem-solving activities within a team setting (Shekar A., 2014).

The projects and concepts selected for learning should be based on the learning outcomes of the course. The learning material should be adopted to an extent that it completely aligns with the learning outcomes, defines boundaries of freedom, allows validity for multiple solutions and doesn't conclude into a specific guided solution. These criteria open doors to several resources which may or may not be authentic. The role of the trainer here is to evaluate the material that is most likely to be adapted as course material or learning resources. Building upon the professional expertise that determines the learner's language fluency level, the trainer should select and share learning material that has enough clarity and comprehensibility to engage the learners and is still progressive enough to develop the fluency of the language. It is also important to consider the time factor required for accessing the literature and learning from the authentic material. The learners in the vocational course would be professionals in the industry in the due course of time, so the process of developing expertise in their fields has to be

supplemented with enhancement of communication and English fluency skills during their training period. The learning material needs to be outcome-based learner-centered material, which targets the development of all language skills – Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing.

It is undeniable that the trainer maximizes the learning opportunities and skills development of each learner - both as an individual and as a team member. So, the trainer should identify the need of each learner and each group through need analysis which is done prior to assigning the project task. Diversity of interests and perspectives including variation in learning styles and maturity level of each learner and each group has to be taken into consideration. Based on the need analysis, links to guided resources or generalized resources can be provided to the learners. A list of commercially produced authentic in-print educational material like books, industry-specific magazines, workbooks and study guides provides flexibility options that are affordable and accessible to the learners. Sources of online reference material have to be highly-guided because the learners at their level are not expected to distinguish between opinion-based blogs, authentic educational resources, on-going research and ill-fated research.
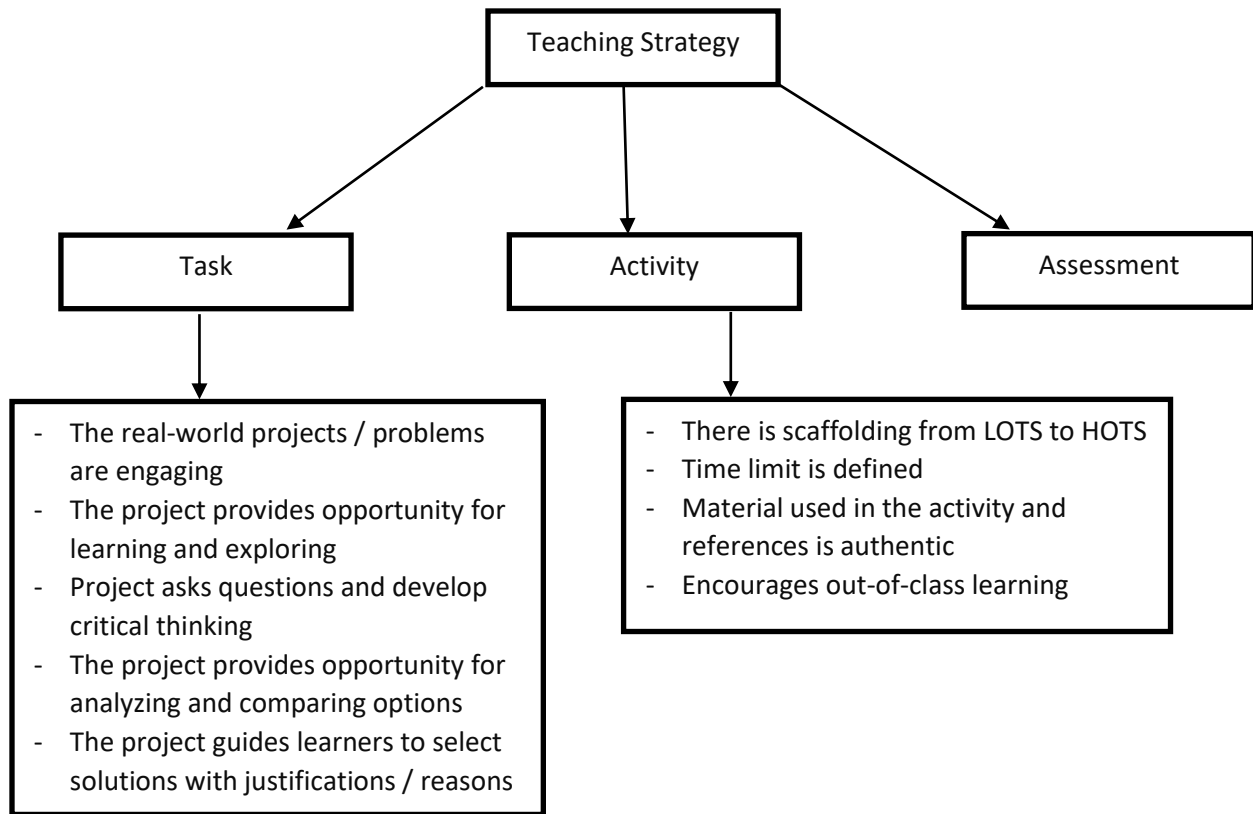
The Checklist-1 for evaluation of learning material attached in the Appendix details out the various criteria for evaluation.

DESIGNING ROADMAP FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING
The facilitators of PB-ELL are expected to use creative instruction methods to construct an innovative model of learning which develops language fluency while revolving around the focal theme. The strong correlation between the subject specialization and language learning in ESP courses should be tapped to develop workplace communication skills among the vocational training graduates. The study by Lou S., et al (2012) proposes that the four dimensions of creative instructional design which are the following: 1) creative character traits; 2) ability in the creative process; 3) innovative product design, and 4) an instructional environment for creativity, with a total of 23 design indicators; this model can effectively enhance student creativity learning effects and, in turn, achieve the objective of an overall elevation of national competitiveness.

The facilitator should foresee various learning traits and styles while designing or adapting the learning material and task activities for the vocational training group. Since the PB-ELL is a learner-centered approach, it is presumed that the learners are adventurous, enthusiastic and investigative which helps them to accept challenges, take reasonable risks to conduct experiments for possible solutions, and express better creativity while writing proposals. So, the focus remains on creating material for auditory, visual, kinesthetic and read-write learners who adopt various roles in the collaborative project work. Differentiated instruction has to be incorporated to address skill deficits among the learners and to connect them well with the group activities. Opportunities to explore independently gives liberty of self-learning, but the psychological dependence on facilitator for guidance, support and monitoring cannot be ruled our in any phase of the PB-ELL. The trainer needs to develop a time schedule and guidance plan for interaction with project groups to ensure maximum potential output from the project work.

With the development of digital technology, instructional strategies and tools have changed, and creativity instruction must evolve with them (Lou S. et al, 2012). The facilitator needs to decide the extent of guidance regarding the learning goals, create group dynamics, initiate discussions and ensure authenticity of the resources referred by the learners. In the diagram that follows, the main steps in designing the teaching strategy – selecting the task, designing the activity and preparing the assessment - are illustrated.

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                          │  Teaching Strategy  │
                          └─────────────────────┘
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              ▼                   ▼                  ▼
      ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
      │     Task     │   │   Activity   │   │  Assessment  │
      └──────────────┘   └──────────────┘   └──────────────┘
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Task

- The real-world projects / problems are engaging
- The project provides opportunity for learning and exploring
- Project asks questions and develop critical thinking
- The project provides opportunity for analyzing and comparing options
- The project guides learners to select solutions with justifications / reasons

Activity

- There is scaffolding from LOTS to HOTS
- Time limit is defined
- Material used in the activity and references is authentic
- Encourages out-of-class learning

PREPARING ASSESSMENTS AND GRADING CRITERIA

The overall goal of the entire learning process is to be able to produce knowledge output in the form of oral presentation, written reports, essays, etc. which can be graded qualitatively or quantitively and which serve as a measure for acquired knowledge and skills. A variety of assessment tools to assess the ongoing learning relative to the learning outcomes in the form of quizzes, short text writing, comparative reports, interviews etc should be used to address evaluation various learning styles, skills and learning abilities. The formative assessments not only measures learning in bits, but also helps the learner and the trainer to make informed decisions about learning to adjust or modify instruction style, presentation style and support and guidance points. The major advantage of PB-ELL is the negative connotations attached to the English exam like the burden of reading an elaborate text, referring to long-complex text for inferring details, writing long essays using complex vocabulary, grammar structure and format can be wiped-out.

The alignment of the assessment with the learning outcomes reflects that there is a practical and authentic measure to judge the learning criteria and the outcomes. The learner should demonstrate progressive learning and language competencies through practical and measurable tasks. The benchmark deliverables should be assessed using a sliding rubric in a predefined time schedule.

Instead of the traditional quizzes and interviews interesting tasks like evaluating group discussions during the brainstorming process, assessing graphic organizers which the learners prepare for task completion, smart vision plan for project completion and Gnatt charts can be used to determine acquisition of vocabulary and note making techniques that are critical for language development. Culminating events of the PB-ELL can ideally be presentations to a specific audience. Debriefing and reflection session should be the end of PB-ELL project.

After the completion of the task the learner should be able to answer outcome questions like:
- This project was relevant to me because………
- I developed the language skills of ………..
- I moderately / significantly developed fluency in oral / written……..
- I developed the confidence to speak / write about…….
- I have built upon my skills of ………

Since solutions in PBL projects can vary and be achieved in different ways, grading can be challenging (Clark B.A., 2017). Rubrics for the task should help to measure learner understanding at various stages of the project. Alignment to the driving theme / concept and alignment with the learning goals need to be considered for every assessment formative or summative assessment. Several benefits on a student's basic skillset that show the true impact of project-based learning – where students get an opportunity to both learn content but also obtain those 21st century skills in a way that resembles many situations they will face as adults. Because PBL allows for differentiation of assessment, gives students autonomy and a sense of responsibility, and prepares them with skills for their future, students have many ways to be motivated (Clark B.A., 2017)

Constant monitoring, formative assessments, reflective journals and short-partial reports that are periodically and effectively used during the project completion time keep the learner and the trainer informed about the progress. So, embedding regular formative assessments, varied assessment practices create a sense of responsibility and a culture of excellence among the learners. Regular feedback is another effective tool that keeps the progress on track in a PB-ELL task. Feedback should help the learner to identify aspects of their performance that are successful and also aspects that require improvement for better future learning.

REFLECTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Learning resources should be project-based or activity-based that promotes hands-on working experiences while learning and encourage te learners to questions, think react, reflect and decide. Decision-making skills should be guided by critical thinking and analytical evaluation, although this may vary based on learners' aptitudes, abilities, intelligence and learning styles. Resources also need to be sensitive to the cultural approach, gender orientation, ethnic traditions and should be designed to motivate learner's self-esteem while respecting diversity around the world. Project dynamics should help to develop positive traits, communication process and language fluency.

CONCLUSION

The world has changed rapidly in the last decade and major changes such as globalization, technological advances, inter-connectedness, and accessibility to information influence the way current and future generations of students learn (Shekar A., 2014). In order for students to practice as engineers, they need to have had exposure to a number of projects that offer real-world problems, along with the complexity and uncertainty of factors that influence such problems (Shekar A., 2014).

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APPENDIX

CHECKLIST 1

CHECKLIST TO EVALUATE TEACHING / LEARNING MATERIAL

S. No.	CRITERIA	YES	NO	REMARKS
SOURCE AND RELEVANCE OF TEACHING / LEARNING MATERIAL				
1.	Is the learning material relevant to the subject and theme of the project?			
2.	Is the learning material aligned with the learning outcomes?			
3.	Is the teaching / learning material retrieved from an authentic source?			
4.	Is the source of the content mentioned? Is the content referenced correctly?			
5.	Is the content relevant to the ESP / specialization?			
6.	Is the learning material self-directed, practical and logical?			
7.	Is the learning material and further referencing easily accessible?			
CONTENT OF THE LEARNING MATERIAL				
8.	Does the teaching / learning material match with project requirements?			
9.	Is the level of difficulty appropriate for the level of learners?			
10.	Is the language level of the learning material appropriate for the learners?			
11.	Is the content relevant and accurate?			
12.	Is the learning material level-appropriate for self-reading and for comprehending accurate details?			
13.	Is the content aligned with the assessment pattern?			
14.	Does the learning material have enough scope for practice and proficiency?			
LEARNING AUTONOMY				
15.	Are the instructions clearly stated to accomplish the task?			
16.	Is there clarity of instructions in the task requirements that guide towards the learning goals?			

CHECKLIST 2

CHECKLIST TO EVALUATE TEACHING STRATEGY

S. No.	CRITERIA	YES	NO	REMARKS
EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING STRATEGY				
1.	What is the dominant teaching strategy – lecture mode, discussion, inquiry-based, exploratory learning, flipped learning…………			
2.	Does the facilitation strategy provide flexibility for various learning styles?			
3.	Does the facilitation and instruction strategy reflect globally accepted methodology?			
4.	Does the instruction strategy provide enough scope for out-of-class learning?			
5.	Does the facilitation / instruction strategy incorporate enough visuals and			
6.	Does the facilitation / instruction strategy provide scope for independent learning away from the class session and lectures?			

CHECKLIST 3

CHECKLIST TO EVALUATE ASSESSMENT DESIGN

S. No.	CRITERIA	YES	NO	REMARKS
LEARNING OUTCOMES				
1.	Is the learning outcome of the course measurable?			
2.	Is the learning outcome learner-oriented?			
3.	Does the learning outcome relate to a discrete language learning skills?			
4.	Does the learning outcome represent the level and competence?			
5.	Does the learning outcome have one active verb? Is the verb appropriate?			
ASSESSMENT CRITERIA				
6.	Do the assessment criteria lead to achievement of learning outcomes?			
7.	Do the assessment criteria for each learning outcome encompass progression of difficulty?			
8.	Do the assessment criteria contain one active verb in description? Is the verb appropriate?			
9.	Do the assessment criteria stipulate specific outcome related to the learning outcome?			
ASSESSMENT TASK				
10.	Do the assessment tasks align with the learning outcomes and assessment criteria?			
11.	Does the assessment task support accomplishment of assessment criteria and attainment of learning outcome?			
12.	Is the content of the task related to a specific project and subject?			
13.	Are the instructions to accomplish the task clearly stated?			
14.	Is the entire assessment timed appropriately?			
15.	Does the assessment test knowledge acquisition at the appropriate level?			
16.	Is the content – vocabulary and grammar - of the assessment task grade and level appropriate?			

17.	Do the assessment tasks show progression (development from LOTS to HOTS)?			
18.	Does the assessment task promote critical thinking and analytical thinking skills?			
19.	Does the assessment task encourage creativity and originality?			
GRADING RUBRIC				
20.	Is the assessment task supplemented with clear grading instructions for trainers?			
21.	Is the scoring rubric appropriate for the writing task?			
22.	Is the scoring rubric flexible to accommodate uniqueness and unexpected creativity from the learners?			