

PROBLEM-BASED STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING MILITARY ENGLISH

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Abstract: Educators generally concur to the idea that one of the most essential goals of schooling is to empower students to become efficient problem solvers for the knowledge-based society. Problem-based learning (PBL) is an instructional methodology mainly focused on developing students' abilities to deal with solving realistic issues by employing team-oriented strategies. The present paper discusses the opportunities of integrating PBL in the teaching of English for specific purposes, starting from the firm belief that by putting students in the role of effective collaborators, critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and capable communicators, the proposed strategies efficiently prepare cadets for real-life environments, for the challenges of their professional careers, and for an active citizenship. Drawing on a solid theoretical conceptualization of problem-based instruction, the article outlines the advantages of PBL for both teachers and students and proposes a series of practical strategies that are intended to facilitate our cadets' development in four key skills – critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, –with the help of project-based learning.

Keywords: problem-based learning, foreign language instruction, military students, critical thinking skills, cooperative learning.

1. Introduction

Among other aspects, the present military higher education context focuses on the development of linguistic and communicative competencies in English (STANAG level 2222 or B2 level according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*). Learning a foreign language is, for obvious reasons, quite different from learning any other subject matter. The challenge consists in the fact that language is normally the tool not the actual subject. In the case of language learning, the instructional goal is the acquisition of both the instrument (the language) and the knowledge (the content).

Against this backdrop, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) can be considered an active method of teaching foreign languages for a number of reasons: it is student-based and context-specific, and it tackles real-life problems while engaging critical thinking skills and cooperative learning strategies. Employed efficiently, PBL can turn into a useful method that benefits students and teachers alike.

2. Problem-based learning – definition of concepts

Fundamentally, PBL introduces new concepts based on complex real-life problems, aiming to “motivate, focus and

initiate student learning” [1]. As opposed to traditional education, which is teacher-centred, more lecture-based and focused on dry theoretical presentations of concepts and notions, this approach facilitates student cooperation, and in the long run, empowers recipients to actively pursue and engage in their own learning.

Lai [2] provides a definition of PBL very much in line with Bloom’s [3] cognitive approach, which emphasizes the need for PBL to create contexts in which students

solve real-life problems by linking previously acquired knowledge to new information and vice versa. Integrated in the framework of Bloom’s model of cognitive levels, well-constructed PBL problems stimulate learners to function at high levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Comprehension, questioning and critical thinking dominate over memorisation, which, according to the traditional approach, requires students to learn passively.

Table 1 Bloom’s cognitive levels

Cognitive level	Student activity
Evaluation	Making a judgement based on a pre-established set of criteria.
Synthesis	Producing something new or original from component parts.
Analysis	Breaking material down into its component parts to see inter-relationships/hierarchy of ideas.
Application	Using a concept or principle to solve a problem.
Comprehension	Explaining/interpreting the meaning of material.
Knowledge	Remembering facts, terms, concepts, definitions, principles.

Overall, theorists agree that PBL is a resourceful tool in the context of learning, in general, and of foreign language acquisition, in particular. Some of the new directions of application of PBL include a deeper approach of the curriculum, the activation of high-order cognitive skills and not merely the acquisition of factual knowledge, ensuring long-term effects as opposed to instant learning results, while fostering students’ positive attitudes.

3. Implications of PBL for foreign language teaching

Drawing on Vygotsky’s and Dewey’s educational theories, based on socio-cultural and constructivist theories of learning and instructional design, PBL remarks itself as a controversial method which challenges the traditional roles of teachers and learners alike.

Basically, PBL is an approach that does not involve teaching. Students solve problems that are carefully created by the teacher in accordance with the course syllabus. However, the teacher does not assume a

passive role; he/she acts as a facilitator carrying out well-defined tasks: organizing the students in groups, scheduling deliveries of presentations, and preparing evaluation and assessment instruments for both teacher and peer review.

As PBL activities require teaching at a minimum, teachers must work on their own strategies to successfully manage PBL classes: choosing the right content to be delivered, formulating authentic and relevant problems based on thorough research and constructing appropriate evaluation and feedback instruments. Copland [4], a PBL practitioner at Stanford, remarks: “the key thing in making [PBL] successful is the amount of time and energy that goes into the creation of the project. Finding a problem that really means something to the participants is absolutely critical”. Consequently, the primary attribution of the teacher is to facilitate the pursuit of knowledge beyond textbooks and to enable learning through critical thinking skills and problem-solving strategies. Furthermore, teachers need to address some

basic concerns related to designing a PBL-based instruction:

- ✓ At which level should PBL be introduced?
- ✓ What skill(s) should it target?
- ✓ Which are the available sources for the problem?
- ✓ How do students benefit from solving the problem?
- ✓ Who else benefits from resolving the issue?

With these questions in mind, the teacher embarks on a challenging endeavour which reconfigures teaching and divorces it from traditional lecture-based and content-oriented methods, proposing a new approach to language learning that is more focused on criticality, creativity, communication and cooperation.

From the perspective of the learner, PBL offers meaningful and contextualized learning through challenging, open-ended, problems. Learners cooperate and are expected to be captivated by the task, which, in addition to increasing content knowledge, also enhances communicative and cognitive skills as students interact, reason, evaluate the issue, assess solutions, and ultimately resolve them. Foreign language students should be aware of the importance of the outcome, which has long-term consequences through the application of the skills they acquire to other domains. By feeling empowered to take responsibility of their own instruction, students become self-directed, autonomous, confident, and learn to focus more on developing skills than on memorizing content.

The advantages of PBL for learners could be summed up in the following list of abilities [5]:

- teamwork;
- independent learning;
- communicative skills;
- problem-solving skills;
- information-mining skills;
- interdisciplinary learning;
- higher-order thinking skills.

Probably the largest benefit of PBL is that it encourages students to acquire a deeper understanding of the content and of the language at the same time. Solving authentic problems provides students with a genuine sense of practical achievement, and ultimately eradicates superficial learning based on memorization and reproduction, often inapplicable in real life contexts.

4. Using PBL in teaching basic military English to the Land Forces Academy cadets

The following section suggests three sample problems to be used in the context of military English teaching. We present the problems as mere scaffolds that can be subsequently developed depending on the language to be taught. The proposed scenarios have been created for the use of specific vocabulary in the context of a certain topic in the target language.

4.1. “The ideal military post”

The first problem is directly connected to a syllabus topic – *Military Posts* – and aims at introducing, reinforcing and practising specific military vocabulary and at developing reading and writing skills in a creative context. The scenario consists in a descriptive prelude (contextual details) and formulation of the task. There should also be a lead-in stage before the start of the activity, aimed at raising the students’ awareness regarding the specific objectives that this exercise targets: vocabulary, grammar, research, sources, group dynamics.

You and your group are tasked with designing the ideal military post in your country. You have started looking at maps and photos of different locations and facilities in order to design a plan of the post.

When you later describe your vision to the implementation team, you should be very precise regarding the details: number and location of checkpoints, type and location of facilities, configuration of green spaces, infrastructure, on-base housing.

However, the implementation team will only get one final plan. Discuss your suggestion with the other teams, present the advantages and disadvantages of your project and decide together on the most comprehensive design to be further applied.

4.2. “Message from the past”

The second problem links language and military history in a very meaningful context. The scenario is not very complex but the four tasks are resourceful enough to enable the activation of all skills and to provide several follow-up activities that give the assignment a sense of relevance. The letter in the scenario may be (ideally) authentic or created by the teacher in a way that is suitable for the context.

One of the main advantages of such a scenario is that it builds up on individual problem-solving strategies in order to create a larger cooperative context that involves group work. In the first three stages of the assignment, the learner becomes an individual thinker, capable of assessing the problem on their own and of discovering their own resources to use for the implementation of the solution. The individual skills to be developed at this stage are those that empower subject-matter experts, who are capable of recognizing the fundamental characteristics of the problem at hand, of reflecting on solution options, of implementing the best option, of evaluating the outcome of the implementation and of avoiding reasoning biases [6]. Self-directed learning is then supplemented by teamwork, as the same abilities are now practiced in a group setting and reinforced by common efforts.

You are doing research for a military history project. One day, you come across a hand-written document in an old dusty box forgotten in a dark corner of the library. The document is a personal letter, written by a World War II soldier to his family.

TASK 1: Decide who might have written this letter, when and where, and to what purpose. Select an appropriate timeframe and level of detail.

TASK 2: Use this letter as a contextualization prompt for your paper in history. Write the story of the author of the letter, based on the data you retrieved during stage 1. If you consider that the information in the letter is insufficient, use other relevant sources.

TASK 3: You have to write a fictitious, but plausible and historically accurate reply to the letter. Decide who you are (as a recipient), what your relation to the author of the letter is, and what information you would like to include in the response.

TASK 4: Some time later, a history teacher from a U.S. military college contacts your group, informing you that he/she found your projects extremely interesting and valuable and that he/she would like you to give a speech on the subject to his/her class.

Prepare a ten-minute speech, to which will contribute all the members of your group. Each member of the group should approach the topic from a different angle.

4.3. “Saving cadet Alex”

The third problem activates argumentation skills within the framework of persuasive discourse. Given the complexity of abilities involved in solving this task, it is advisable that it is practised with advanced learners. In addition to the prelude which sets the context (an otherwise familiar situation for cadets who study abroad as part of academic partnership programs), the task fans out into three secondary tasks, with each deriving from the previous one. Before starting to solve the problem, the cadets need to cooperate and discuss issues related to: vocabulary involved, grammar to be used, format of the response, register. The main type of skills activated and practised by this task are based on argumentative language functions and on persuasive abilities. Cooperative work is also very important as the learners need to work together to solve the tasks and to produce the targeted discourse.

You are a group of cadets attending the international semester in a foreign military

academy, as part of the Erasmus mobility program. Alex, one member of your group who is the most academically proficient is having some personal problems and finds it difficult to cope with the challenges of living far from home. Consequently, his behaviour and attitude are unbecoming for a cadet and he creates problems with his colleagues, teachers and instructors.

One day you are informed that the faculty has decided to expel him and send him home based on his conduct. However, you are given the chance to defend and rehabilitate him in front of the faculty council. In your group, decide on the strategy most likely to help him get out of this situation (write a letter, speak in front of the council, etc.).

TASK 1: Get as much information as you can about Alex's situation.

TASK 2: Prepare your defence, giving reasons and arguments in favour of Alex.

TASK 3: Write the letter/Prepare and deliver the speech.

5. Conclusions

PBL might be seen as more suitable for disciplines that are closer to the real world and everyday life. However, what can be considered more real and every day for humans than languages?

We can conclude by stating that applying PBL to language education might constitute an incredibly resourceful challenge to teachers and students alike. It creates an exciting and stimulating context of study for foreign language learners. Students who work through these PBL scenarios are required to simultaneously activate their linguistic and academic skills into a unified whole and develop operational communicative frameworks that are easily transferable from an academic military setting to professional contexts. Working together, foreign language departments and military institutions could create a set of authentic problem-based materials that would enable cadets to explore manners in which the target foreign language and academic needs and interests coexist in a way that is pertinent and relevant to the real world.

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