PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN AN ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the use of projects in an English for Business course at a university setting. Selecting English Language major has become a hot trend for high school graduates. They hold the view that this major can support their future employment in a wide range of professions such as translation and interpretation, business, or tourism industries. Higher education institutions, therefore, have made English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses an essential part of the curriculum. Among those ESP courses, a highly preferred one is English for Business. However, with the characteristics of being quite proficient in English and the need to stimulate learners’ autonomy, the traditional approach of lecturing has been regarded as not being sufficient enough, and project-based learning (PBL) is, in fact, more capable of helping learners develop both English language for Business discipline and understanding of the field. The students develop their language through different projects and reports. Besides, they are able to build up the soft skills relevant to the business field due to the authentic classroom settings in forms of business meetings. However, obstacles do exist when applying PBL in English for Business classrooms. Through observations and questionnaires with 30 students and 3 instructors in an English for Business course, the study reveals positive effects on language, soft skills, and professional development along with certain drawbacks due to the lack of specialised knowledge of the discipline of both instructors and learners. As a result, recommendations for creating a solid foundation in both language and professional knowledge are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of PBL in English for Business courses. Besides, curriculum modifications are also mentioned to better the teaching and learning in the course.

INTRODUCTION

Being increasingly popular worldwide due to its benefits, English language has become one of the most preferred majors at college. High school graduates associate high English language proficiency with potential opportunities for professional and personal developments. However, it is estimated that almost 19% Vietnamese graduates are not able to meet the English language demand for their career, which leads to the need for further training (Nguyen & Pham, 2016).

Understanding the importance of English in learners’ future career, higher education institutions have integrated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in their curriculum to help learners gain not only English Language proficiency but also professional knowledge of the fields. Among those ESP courses, the current institution where this study was undertaken runs two ESP courses, namely English for Tourism and English for Business. Of these two, the researcher pays attention to the English for Business (EB) course since he got the opportunities to be in charge of this course. It is said that learners can obtain such language and professional skills in Business and Economics areas, which also a career goal of many language learners.

Although the inclusion of an EB course in the curriculum is certainly an innovation in language education, the teaching approaches to maximise learners’ acquisition of the knowledge is a major concern. In fact, many problems have been raised in teaching and learning of those EB courses. It seems that the traditional lecturing method is no longer appropriate because those courses require much
interaction and numerous practical experiences in getting to know the fields and how to apply the knowledge in authentic business situations.

In response to that matter, projects have been employed in those courses with the hope that learners will be able to undertake self-study, develop autonomy, and apply their knowledge to their intended business fields. This paper takes project-based learning as its main aim to investigate (1) teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of PBL in those EB courses and (2) the difficulties that those teachers and learners encounter when doing PBL. Based on the revealed challenges, suggestions will be made to make a better use of PBL.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English for Specific Purposes

Defined by Ahmed (2014), ESP courses are those that provide learners the knowledge of English language for a specific area. It is intended to equip learners to be able to use English to cope with situations that can occur in their professions (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). However, it was Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who propose distinctive features of an ESP course. It can be highlighted that ESP courses do not necessarily focus on only the terminology of a particular area because language is largely used in different situations, and successful communication can be carried out in different styles and forms with a variety of words and structures. Therefore, it should not be misunderstood that ESP courses surpass the roles of general English language features. Besides, ESP courses involve more than just teaching English vocabulary in certain areas. Categorised as hidden curriculum, ESP courses require the transmission of specialised knowledge and skills in certain areas in combination with improving English language ability.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) also highlight the two different purposes of learning English. The first reason is learning for exams where students are instructed to deal with the exam format and strategies to achieve expected results in those exams. The second reason which they name learning for profession refers to English intended for further use in learners’ career paths. While the former is said to focus on General English (GE), the latter is, in fact, English for Specific Purposes which colleges design for learners.

Challenges in ESP courses

An obvious challenge that researchers in ESP area discuss is the method of teaching. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) require a learner-centered approach in teaching ESP courses. The reason for this suggestion refers to the purpose of ESP courses. It has been previously mentioned that ESP courses aim to equip learners to be able to use English in their professional settings. To be able to do that, learners need to be exposed to those settings so that they can gain necessary skills as well as to really use English in the settings. However, the reality of teaching and learning in many educational systems still rely on the traditional method of lectures. In other words, teachers are still widely seen as the center or the main source of knowledge that will transmit the knowledge to learners. Hence, learners are in a quite receptive manner.

However, the idea of getting students used to professional settings in which English is seen as the medium of communication also raises another challenge. Tudor (1997) and Basturkmen (2010) mention the challenge in teaching ESP courses, namely the knowledge of the subject. An example of this is English for Nursing. It is required that educators need not only the English language but also a quite in-depth understanding of Nursing terminology, patient consultation skills, or reading and writing health reports. Therefore, even a well-educated English teacher is not guaranteed be successful in teaching that English for Nursing course without the knowledge of Nursing discipline.

Regarding the case of ESP education in Vietnam, which is also the focus of the paper, Nguyen and Pham (2016) specifically outline three categories of difficulties in ESP education in relation to students, teachers, and learning environment. Firstly, students may not be ready for ESP courses. Hutchinson and
Waters (1987) emphasise the differences between ESP and GE courses. Unfortunately, Nguyen and Pham (2016) remind that English language learners in Vietnam are far more familiar with the traditional form of teaching than the learner-centered one. Therefore, the goals of ESP courses may not be fully or effectively reached. Secondly, students’ language proficiency may not be sufficient for ESP programs. In fact, GE creates a basis for learners’ English language competency before they move to the area of ESP. However, since learners’ language ability is limited, getting them into an ESP course is a big challenge for language acquisition. In case of teachers in ESP programs, Nguyen and Pham (2016) discuss the problems of teaching methods, course materials, and specialised knowledge. In their views, EFL teachers, despite being well-trained and proficient in English, may not have appropriate methods to support learners’ language acquisition. Another important point is the teachers’ lack of specialised knowledge. In fact, EFL may not have sufficient knowledge and skills in the particular professional area that they are teaching. Researchers have seen this as a major disadvantage of EFL teachers in teaching ESP courses. About learning environment, Nguyen and Pham (2016) are concerned about insufficiency of teaching materials. ESP coursebooks have much focus on reading and vocabulary although the productive skills are also necessary. The purpose of ESP courses may not go beyond the exam-oriented objectives. This means that ESP has become part of EFL curriculum, and the teaching of ESP does not serve the purpose of using language but passing language exams.

In short, ESP courses are declared to be necessary for EFL education and have their aims in enhancing not only learners’ language skills but also professional development of learners. However, those aims are also challenging to language educators and learners due to insufficient teaching methods, lack of specialised knowledge, and low language proficiency of learners. Those obstacles demotivate teaching and learning attitudes and impact the effectiveness of ESP courses. Therefore, there is the need to figure out ways to solve the problems or at least make the matters better.

Searching for different strategies in teaching ESP courses, the researcher has come up with the idea of Project-based learning (PBL) which, in the view of many educators and researchers, is a particularly effective approach.

**Project-based learning in ESP courses**

- **What is a project?**

According to Petersen and Nassaji (2016), the terms “projects” and “project-based learning” have been widely defined and differed in names. Some of the names can be listed as “experiential learning”, “problem-based learning”, and “project approach”. Fragoulis and Tsiplakides (2009) when discussing projects in education refer to the idea of experiential learning. The two researchers indicate that learners will be able to create knowledge through practical experiences, and project-based method is said to be an illustration of learning by doing.

As defined by Foss et al (2007), PBL is a method that can help learners develop multiple skills thanks to its provision of authentic situations or problems for learners to solve. In other words, it provides learners real-life contexts with specific requirements, and learners need to integrate language skills and other skills to meet those demands. When applying PBL in EFL education, Foss et al (2007) and Petersen and Nassaji (2016) note that projects are seen as a series of tasks which learners need to incorporate skills and knowledge to solve and achieve project output. An important point in PBL is that teachers are advised to allow learners freedom to determine how their projects should be carried out. This principle, in fact, has both sides. First, it offers opportunities for students to choose the specific points or topics of their interest as well as the preferred method to do that projects. On the other hand, it reveals a disadvantage, namely that the projects may go far beyond what is required, which is difficult for teachers to control and evaluate the projects.

- **PBL in language education**

PBL has long been praised for its benefits in language education, particularly in ESP courses. This section of the paper focuses on benefits in terms of language and professional development.
First, it provides learners with opportunities for using language in real-life contexts, which is believed to help learners develop language and other social skills. Petersen and Nassaji (2016) refer to the empirical research of Beckett (1999) who investigated teachers’ and learners’ towards PBL. It is said that teachers are in favour of this approach since it allows them to integrate multiple skills in the lessons, and the learners also admit that they learn much about the areas of their projects. Learners, since the moment of starting the projects upon completion, need to use language to discuss, share, and present their projects to their teachers and peers. Besides, projects are based on authentic cases; learners have a chance to apply the language learned in classroom settings to real-life situations. This can push their language skills to a higher level.

Researchers and educators have agreed on the benefits that PBL offers in terms of learners’ professional development. According to Wang and Farschauer (2004, as cited in Petersen and Nassaji, 2016) PBL offers more authentic interactions which are closely related to students’ lives and careers. Therefore, learners are able to obtain some hands-on experience. Fragoulis and Tsiplakides (2009) add that projects contain a series of activities or tasks that are frequently in form of problem-solving cases. In order to complete the projects, learners need a high order of critical thinking. In case a project is undertaken in groups, besides some certain skills in communication, leadership, cooperation, learners need to gain a sense of responsibility to complete the projects. This is seen as a preparation for students’ future professional development. Besides, projects are considered to motivate learners and increase their interests in learning (Legutke, 1993). Referring back to the idea of Foss et al (2007) and Petersen and Nassaji (2016), learners are encouraged to decide the focus or specific topics as well as the way to undertake their projects. Hence, projects which require team work, outside-classroom research, and autonomy are in fact interesting to learners than the traditional way of mere lectures. In other words, projects do create learners’ enjoyment in learning.

**Project-based learning and ESP courses**

PBL is beneficial and relevant to the characteristics and goals of ESP courses. In detail, ESP aims at developing learners’ not only language but also professional understanding, which is similar to the principles of PBL (Foss et al, 2007; Petersen & Nassaji, 2017). PBL does help learners explore in-depth the areas or topics that interest them or are related to their careers. Learners will be able to develop both language, specialised knowledge, and other necessary skills through undertaking and completing projects in certain fields.

However, the application of PBL in ESP courses also reveal challenges. First, ESP requires more than just English language but also a certain level of specialised knowledge, which is similar to PBL. In fact, Nguyen and Pham (2016) discover the struggle of lacking specialised knowledge to supervise and undertake projects. Besides, EFL education in Vietnam has a fixed curriculum while projects may require long-term investment and efforts to complete. Therefore, the application of PBL in ESP courses may encounter problems related to curriculum and assessment. This obstacle may demotivate both EFL teachers and students in using PBL for ESP courses though the benefits of PBL is strongly acknowledged.

To further investigate the use of projects in ESP courses, the paper attempts to answer two research questions as:

- What are EFL teachers’ and learners’ perceptions about PBL in ESP courses?
- What are the difficulties EFL teachers and learners face when using PBL in ESP courses?
- What needs to be done to make a better use of PBL?
METHODOLOGY

Participants

The research involved 30 randomly selected English-major students at a university in Vietnam. At the time of data collection, those students were in their third year at college and were taking an English for Business course. Besides, there were 3 instructors teaching English for Business to those students. The English language level of those student participants was estimated at B2 level due to their completion of previous courses which were designed up to B2 level. The reason for choosing this group of participants was that projects require a certain level of proficiency to be able to undertake and present their project outcomes (Nguyen & Pham, 2016).

Data collection instruments

- **Projects**

  The students were required to sit in groups and decide an area for their projects. The projects were mainly about how to start business and how to gain profits. Those students were given guidelines on how to carry out a project as well as criteria for a good project in their courses. Following the idea of Legutke (1993) in giving students’ freedom to choose their focus, the instructors did not provide specific topics for their projects, but a limit in Business, Finance, and Banking areas since this was an English for Business course. In order to avoid choosing similar topics, the instructors required students to sign up their topics on a list so that other students would not repeat those topics.

  For their projects, students were encouraged to discuss with people who had experiences in the related fields to receive advice on how to start and how to be successful in their business. They were encouraged to go to companies, shops, and other places to observe and gain experiences. The students were given three weeks to prepare for their projects, and they had to present their ideas to the instructors and peers for marking. The reason for this doing this in the second half of the course was for students to gain a certain understanding of the language used in this area and also to have some understanding of doing business through previous lessons in the course.

- **Questionnaires**

  The instructors and students were given questionnaires at the end of the course when marks and feedback on the students’ projects were released. The questionnaires were designed with both closed and open questions so that the participants could provide further comments. The researcher designed the questionnaires in themes including (1) their experience of using projects in EB courses (2) their perceptions of projects in EB courses, and (3) their suggestions to make a better use of projects in EB courses.

  The questions were made based on the literature regarding the benefits of projects and certain requirements when using projects in EB courses, which are also seen as challenges.

Data analysis

For projects, the researcher based on the instructors’ comments and marks to evaluate how the projects were done and how much students had developed their English language and skills through those projects.

For questionnaires, the researcher grouped those questions in themes and analyse them to find out the perceptions of teachers and learners towards projects.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Project analysis

There were five 6-member teams. The topics for the projects focused on how to start a kind of business. Following what has been suggested by Foss et al (2007), the topics for the projects are proposed by the students. Specifically, the areas of their business can be listed as below:

- An English language center
- A flower shop
- A restaurant
- A tourist company
- A fashion shop

The students’ projects focused on why they chose the topics, what elements they needed to meet to have a successful business, and what challenges they might face when starting business. Those were the basic elements that the instructors suggested them to include in their projects. Besides, the student participants also provided good answers to their teachers’ and peers’ questions. After the presentation, the participants were marked on their project reports. The marks were all above 8.0 out of 10.

Questionnaires

The data received from questionnaires were analysed in accordance with their themes. The themes were (1) participants’ opinions about the use of projects in an EB course, (2) the difficulties they encountered when conducting projects, and (3) their suggestions on how to make better use of projects in an EB course.

- Opinions about projects

All 30 student participants and 3 lecturer participants agreed that projects were useful in an EB courses. The participants were required to list the benefits they gained from projects, and the results can be seen as follows:

Table 1. Benefits of projects indicated by student participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Percentage of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Much time to complete the projects</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Opportunities to get to know the business area of interest in depth</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teamwork and collaboration</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use of English for specific Business area</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Broader network and relationships</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Improve skills through oral presentations and written reports</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Not much pressure</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For three lecturer participants, projects were also claimed to be beneficial to both teaching and learning.

### Table 2. Benefits of projects indicated by lecturer participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Percentage of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Chances to work closely with students</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Opportunities both teachers and learners to get to know different business areas</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teachers’ and learners’ development in English language for Business</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Not much pressure for both teachers and learners</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Creating students’ interest in the course</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Support for learners’ research, critical thinking, self-study skills</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Difficulties when applying PBL

- **Comments of the student participants**

  When being asked about their difficulties in conducting the projects, the student participants indicated some problems in choosing the topics that were of interests of their team members. They had hard time to select the topics that fit their peer’s interest. Secondly, those participants had difficulties at first when they got to know the areas of their projects. Over 20 participants (60%) agreed that being interested in a topic did not mean they had a good understanding of that topic. Therefore, they needed to work hard to gain an initial understanding of their areas before conducting their projects.

  Another point mentioned by these participants (75%) was the elements of the projects. They admitted that projects, despite being quite interesting, were still new to them. Therefore, they were not very clear on how a project should be conducted at first and needed to search for further information on this matter.

  Since the projects were used for assessment, those participants were quite confusing about self-evaluating their projects before presenting them to the lecturers. One participant commented that his team was not sure their project was a good one because the members, despite being instructed carefully on the criteria, were not skilled enough to evaluate their own project.

  Regarding the language use, it was reported that there were terms that they were unclear about the they had the tendency of not using terms related to their fields because of their concern about misusing those terms. Besides, they also held the view that their primary goal was to present their projects to others, so they found it unnecessary to always search for complicated and new terms in their presentations.

- **Comments of lecturer participants**

  All three lecturer participants surprisingly mentioned only one problem when using projects in their EB classes, namely the lack of specialised knowledge. The participants mentioned that they were used to guiding and marking presentations, but they found it a bit difficult to instruct and evaluate business projects. They admitted that they lacked specialised knowledge to effectively assess and to give students feedback. For example, when assessing the project about establishing an English language center, the lecturers were able to give detailed feedback since this project was related to their major. However, for the projects about Flower shop and Tourist company, the lecturers were not sure because they did not
understand much about different kinds of flowers or how to organise good tours. So, the information presented by the students was not effectively assessed.

**Suggestions to make better use of projects in EB courses**

All lecturer and student participants (100%) suggested that there was a great need to provide such foundations about specialised knowledge of Business for them. The participants also mentioned the need of providing materials related to the fields at an appropriate level for both teachers and students. Although the lecturers are proficient in English, they considered themselves as beginners in Business discipline. Therefore, they needed materials appropriate for their levels. Those participants reminded that the materials should be in English so that they would get used to using the terms correctly.

Particularly, an important point that two out of thee lecturer participants made was to invite speakers to introduce how to do business projects, particularly on those chosen topics. They thought that people with practical experience would be able to provide them with more useful advice rather than just mere theories.

**DISCUSSIONS**

Regarding the first research question on teachers’ and students’ perceptions about PBL in an EB course, it was concluded that projects are helpful and interesting to them. It can help them gain not only experiences in their selected areas but also better language skills and other soft skills. Besides, being able to select the topic based on their interests, PBL is able to engage students in the course since students devote much time and efforts to complete their favourite projects, which further leads to more understanding of the subject and improvement in English language. As Foss et al (2007) and Petersen and Nassaji (2016) state, numerous skills are also gained through projects. To name a few, learners are able to develop their critical thinking through selecting and deciding how their projects should be done. They also deal with numerous problems when conducting their projects. All of these require a high order of thinking. Learners can also develop soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and time management to complete the projects timely and effectively.

For the second question about difficulties in using PBL, it is said that the very first problem is the lack of specialised knowledge. Although Foss et al (2007) and Petersen and Nassaji (2016) strongly encourage teachers to allow students to choose their topics for the projects, this has revealed difficulties for teachers. In detail, teachers have to deal with different topics, some of which are beyond the teachers’ major. Therefore, the primary disadvantage of the teachers in PBL is their lack of specialised knowledge to guide and assess learners effectively (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). This problem also occurs with the students who are majored in English but inexperienced in business. Besides, most researchers point out the lack of specialised knowledge, but very little research mentions the lack of general knowledge about projects. The study shows that learners need firstly instructions to gain an understanding of a project in general before they begin doing it. This puts a requirement on teachers to give very specific guidelines on how a project should be done and provide regular supervision to assist students.

From all challenges mentioned above, it is suggested that there would be teacher training programs on how to do projects and improve their understanding of the business area. The suggestions provided by the teachers and students resonate with previous research on PBL (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). The best way recommended is to invite speakers who are experienced in the field to give short training courses or workshops on this topic. Besides, materials are concerned. Both teachers and students need to have materials which are written in English appropriate for their levels so that they can do self-study effectively.

**CONCLUSION**

PBL has been long applied in many institutions. At the institutions where the research is undertaken, PBL has just recently applied in an EB course. Numerous benefits and challenges are pointed out in this study, which strongly encourages the use of PBL in education in general and in ESP courses in particular. To
deal with the negative issues, both teachers and students need to have a strong foundation in not only English language but also specialised knowledge in order to complete the projects successfully. Supports from the institution in providing training programs and materials are in need to help them make better use of PBL in language education. Further research can be done in other fields and with a variety of participants to gain more understanding of the impacts of PBL on learners’ language and professional development.

REFERENCES


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