



Creating a Balance between Examination-Oriented Activities and Meaningful Language Learning through PBL in Beninese EFL Classes

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Abstract – English teaching and learning in Beninese English as a foreign language (EFL) classes is much more examination-oriented than activity-oriented and it lacks creativity and fun. Finding an adequate way to take into accounts both examinations and creativity in the teaching/learning of EFL is necessary. This study explores the use of PBL in EFL classes to support and facilitate learning. The methods used during the investigation are experimenting and evaluating students through project-based learning (PBL), interviewing educational stakeholders, and observing some PBL lesson-based classes. The results showed that classrooms activities can no longer be confined to repetitious drills, and teachers who use the model report a significant decrease in their dependence on workbooks and worksheets and an increase in their reliance on creativity and fun in their classrooms, which actually motivates both teachers and learners.

Keywords: PBL, EFL classes, stakeholders, creativity, workbooks

Résumé – L'enseignement/apprentissage de l'anglais langue étrangère (ALE) est toujours orienté vers les examens et la prise en compte de l'aspect communicatif reste encore un défi à relever en République du Bénin. Il s'avère donc nécessaire d'adopter une méthode qui prenne en compte aussi bien les examens que la créativité et la bonne ambiance dans les salles de classe. Cette étude explore l'utilisation de l'apprentissage basé sur les projets (ABP) pour l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère, afin d'évaluer son impact sur l'apprentissage de cette langue. Les méthodes utilisées au cours de notre recherche sont l'expérimentation et l'évaluation de l'apprentissage de l'anglais langue étrangère basé sur l'ABP. Les résultats prouvent que les apprenants peuvent effectivement apprendre par le biais des projets et améliorer leur expression écrite et orale en anglais langue étrangère (ALE). L'ABP motive aussi bien les enseignants que les apprenants.

1. Introduction

I have been involved in secondary and high school examination preparation for years and I have noticed that there is too much emphasis on examination-oriented activities with very little creativity and fun in EFL classes where the English language is a compulsory subject for all students. As a result, students in examination classes (*3^{ème}* and *Terminale*) have to spend most of their school hours doing examination drills. According to Laourou's study on '*Students' failure in English National Examination*' (2011), students frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually perform in the language, and the majority of them fail in national as well as international examinations. The results of her investigations in the national examinations show that *for Baccalauréat 2009*, the total number of candidates was 29,370 and only 18.85 percent succeeded; in

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2010, out of 29,946 only 09.49 percent passed and in 2011, 09.59 percent succeeded.

The emphasis on examination-oriented activities does not favour learners' effective success in examinations and does not enable them to communicate effectively either. At the same time, English has become the most operational language all over the world. It is a language that can help EFL learners to secure international positions after their studies. It can also help them get an easy admission into universities where English is the medium of instruction and above all to communicate with English native speakers.

This research is focused on creating a balance between examination-oriented activities and meaningful language learning in *Terminale* classes. The author of the article, after defining what PBL is, and after investigating teachers' beliefs and views about it, has experimented its applicability in the teaching/learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in *Terminale* classes; then has suggested the use of a curriculum-based project method to teach EFL.

2. Previous Studies on Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Knowles (1989) advocates that students learn best when they are engaged, when the topic is of immediate relevance, which means it can be applied right away in their personal and professional lives. A Project-Based Learning (PBL) is one of the standard teaching methods and it is generally considered as a means by which students can develop autonomy in learning, engagement as well as responsibility in social practices, and democratic modes of behaviour (Pütt1982, p. 12). From Dewey (1989)'s formula of "education for democracy", all actions could be classified as projects as long as they satisfied the criteria of self-determination and self-satisfying needs. The project-based learning approach creates a learning environment in which students construct their own learning. In PBL, students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge. While allowing students' involvement, rigorous PBL activities are carefully planned, managed and assessed to help students learn key academic content, practice through 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication and critical thinking. In order to reach 21st century educational goals, the PBL approach must be at the centre of today's task instructions and teachers should be flexible enough to use this approach. This is only possible through adapting to change and updating one's knowledge. Douglas (2007, p.24) confirms this by stating, '*Every day, teachers learn something from their students; from the first day of apprenticeship and training to the final stretches of experience, teachers are in a constant stage of change.*'



EFL teachers must teach differently and have greater success than ever before. And in order to teach better, teachers have, according to Lieberman et al. (2001) to *'be at the centre of all efforts to reform and improve schools'*. They added:

EFL Teachers should never stop learning. The complexity of the dynamic triangular interplay among teachers and learners and English continually gives birth to an endless number of questions to answer, problems to solve, issues to ponder. Every time a teacher of English walks into a classroom to teach, s/he faces some of those issues and if s/he is a growing teacher s/he learns something new. S/he finds out how a technique works, how a student processes a language, how classroom interactions could be improved, how to assess a student's competence, how emotions enter into learning, or how his or her teaching style affects learners. The discoveries go on and on-for a longtime. (p. 21)

Students learn best when they are doing. They learn more when they are engaged and learning for a purpose. Everything in the literature on pedagogy and how students learn supports using PBL. Successful language learning entails learner motivation, cooperation and it enables learners to assume responsibility for their own learning. This implies transferring some traditional teacher's roles to learners, which allows them to become more independent. This is the aim of the PBL approach. Students gain a deeper understanding of the concept and standards at the heart of a project. PBL can even motivate learners who might otherwise find school boring or meaningless. Alan et al. (2005) identifies many characteristics to PBL such as:

Students make decisions within a prescribes framework and There is a problem or challenge without a pre determined solution
 Students design the process for reaching the solution and are responsible for accessing and managing the information they gather
 Evaluation takes place continuously, students continually reflect on what they are doing
 A final product is produced and is evaluated for quality; the classroom has an atmosphere that tolerates errors and changes. (Alan et al., 2005, p. 13)

PBL can be used extensively as primary curriculum organizer and instructional method. It can still be used occasionally during school year. PBL can be effective at all grade levels and subjects and in career/technical education, afterschool and alternative programs. The exceptionality of this study is to experiment the PBL approach so as to provide some alternatives in African developing countries, more specifically in Benin Republic, where English is taught as a foreign language. My objective is also to make this model more effectively adopted so as to enhance students' achievement in real life as well as during examinations.



3. Materials and methods

In order to understand teachers' beliefs and views about PBL, I developed a questionnaire and distributed it to 40 respondents in 15 different schools. With the collaboration of a few teachers we conducted a 'PBL Roadshow' where we got teachers in three different schools to try out the PBL Model. The road show consisted of a series of visits to each of the schools involved in this research. At the first visit, we talked to the teachers and introduced the model to them. We shared some ideas on how the model could be implemented. The teachers tried to find out how the PBL model could be translated into a lesson that would focus on one of the examination items. They were given the opportunity to try out the model through lessons that we conducted together. I collaborated with the teachers to plan, conduct and assess a lesson based on the PBL Model. Throughout the roadshow, I conducted a total of three visits to Schools. I also interviewed four inspectors (the person in charge of co-coordinating EFL activities in the region) on the issue of PBL).

4. Results

This part pinpoints the outcomes of the questionnaire as well as the interview with EFL inspectors. All these findings are followed by a discussion section.

EFL teachers who used the model reported a significant decrease in their dependence on workbooks and worksheets.

Through the questionnaire, I discovered that more than 60% of the respondents agreed that a well implemented PBL method would benefit teachers. The latter believed that PBL would give them a sense of achievement and satisfaction. They also said that PBL would please school administrators and enable teachers to be fairly appreciated by the students' parents.

75% of the respondent teachers were confident that a well implemented PBL would also benefit the students. They said that students would thereafter be able to develop independence, a sense of responsibility and self-esteem. I can conclude that many teachers agreed that PBL was important and feasible. Here are some excerpts from the respondent teachers:

"Teaching examination-oriented activities make me feel guilty all the time. I wish I had more time for more communicative activities, but no, I don't have time. We don't have time" (Teacher a).

"I have always wanted to do something fun and creative. But I do not think my headmaster will like [it]. We have to focus on drilling, my students are very weak". (Teacher b)

"Fun learning? For students who are not in class examinations, yes. But not for Terminale. Definitely not for Year 7 ... too much work, expectations are high. We are pressured under the syllabus" (Teacher c).



From the interviews and the PBL-based lessons conducted, it can be concluded that it is possible to bring creativity into the classroom while still aiming at good results in the examinations. I have also learned that when teachers bring passion and interests (their students' as well as their own) into the classroom, creativity soars. Another conclusion that I can derive from the implementation of PBL is that the best teaching/learning takes place when it is customized. Last but not least, when teachers and students are having fun in the classroom, it facilitates learning in many ways. Very often, teachers focus too much on making learning too "serious" for their students and they forget that it is important for *the latter* to have fun too (Lanmantchion, p. 2013). It is true that a great teacher inspires, but she/he has to be inspired first. *If our students can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.* (Alan et al 2005, p.53). And according to Yildirim, (2005) Citing Ron Clark "*The best teachers...are the ones who are able to think outside the box and put themselves in the mind-set of the children they teach.*

Students improve and they are more interested in learning. 90% of the students who used the project-based learning approach improved tremendously and had better results than those who did not use it. As a matter of fact, the students with whom project-based learning was used had more advantages than the other students. The evidence is that project-based learning not only give students the opportunity to practice and develop their ability to function in complex thinking environments, but it also helps make the learning relevant and useful to them, by establishing connections to life outside the classroom, addressing real-world concerns, and developing real-world skills. More importantly, many of the skills learned through project-based learning are those expected by today's employers, including the ability to work in teams, to make decisions, to take initiatives, and to solve complex life problems.

Learning a language depends on learners' needs. However, it may be difficult for EFL teachers to find out these needs given that the number of learners they have to teach is generally very high. The approach has not only positively impacted our students' performance, but it has also had a positive backwash effect in other areas. Firstly, it has greatly influenced our teaching styles, which have become more student-centred and have focused on students being more aware of their learning. It has made us more aware of targeting fluency in a systematic way. I have dug deeper and looked at speech rates, non-lexical fillers and interjections, and setting more effective criteria to establish a more student-centred approach. I realized that most students' speech rates had increased after a five-week cycle, and I also noticed that nearly all students' self-confidence had increased after the implementation of the approach, even among those who were generally shy and anxious.



It appears that Benin teachers in general, and especially EFL teachers, need to adjust their craft and expand their teaching toolkit so that they might be able to meet new challenges and educate children to their fullest potential. Through the experimentation, I have learned how to use real-life problems to motivate students, to challenge students to think deeply about meaningful contents. I have also learned to make them work collaboratively. In addition to that, learners have been directed towards discussions with professionals in the PBL field to obtain additional information, or towards specific sources (journal, articles, websites, encyclopedia etc.). This has made me learner as my students embark on a variety of learning projects which involve unfamiliar territories.

I have also realized that there is an urgent need to reinforce teachers' capacity in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language through the command of information technology, of time management tools, etc., in order to enable them to assess and monitor students' works. Obviously, the prosperity and development of EFL students are infected by their teachers' coaching styles and techniques. Brooks, (1918) rightly states, "*A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops.*" p.4

5. Conclusion

I can conclude that motivation coupled with the taking into account of learners' needs is indispensable to ensure success in EFL learning. As a teacher of English, one should be more determined to use methodologies which expose students to meaningful contents and topics, within the scope of their fields of study, so that students might feel they are not only learning English just to sit for examinations, but also that they are learning a lot *through* English, and more importantly for short and long-term life goals. This research has confirmed that effective teaching should create the need to learn by means of challenging and significant activities which, in turn, will activate motivation and thereby create an effective learning setting. Teachers must make some extra efforts to tailor their teaching to what students really want and need to learn. I hope to be able to say that our students have improved their level in English because I have motivated them to do so.

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