

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM FOR EFL LEARNERS: WHY AND HOW?

Lailatul Kodriyah

Islamic University of Kalimantan (UNISKA), Banjarmasin

lailatulkodriyah@ymail.com

Abstract

Since English is only as a foreign language in Indonesia, students do not perceive this language as a necessary tool for their future. Students perceive English merely as a subject matter of the curriculum without having their own inner reasons why they learn English. When the students do not have their own reasons why they learn English, they will have low motivation during teaching and learning process. They tend to be inactive in the classroom. One way to motivate the students to learn English is by engaging students in to project learning. This paper aims to explain on why teacher should implement project-based learning (PBL) in the classroom and on how to implement PBL during classroom instruction. The discussion begins with the introduction and the description about PBL. Then, it goes on stages in implementing PBL and it continues with the advantages of PBL. At the end of this article, some recommendations are given for the teachers who want to apply PBL in their class.

Key words: Project-based learning method, motivation, EFL learners

Introduction

In Indonesia, English is considered as the foreign language which is learnt and taught in every level of education in Indonesia starting from basic primary school until secondary school. However, since it is only a foreign language, there are a lot of problems found during the classroom instruction. One of the problems is the students' motivation in learning English. Many students think that learning English is not important and it is not easy. Therefore, they tend to ignore English subject. Gardner (cited by Root, 1999) associated motivation with both a high effort and desire to learn the target language. This concept is focused on inner reasons, which are only perceived when positive attitudes of the learners appear during the learning process. In other words, motivation entails feelings as involvement, effort, persistence, and enjoyment during the learning process.

When the students have low motivation in learning, they tend to be passive during teaching and learning process. As the result, they do not enjoy the class and they cannot learn well. Some factors that affect the students motivation are students' negative experience in the past about teachers correcting mistakes and teaching strategies which is only focused on grammatical mistakes (Ruby, 2014). Souriyavongsa et al, (2013) identified some factors affecting the English learning as foreign language. The main difficulties they identified are: a) the lack exposure to the language outside the classroom, b) the students exhibits a high shortage of vocabulary limiting their performance, c) the lack of motivation or the negative attitude to learn English when learners do not see the need to use it.

One factor that affects the students' motivation in learning English is the teacher role (Ruby, 2014). Teacher can select teaching method which can be implemented in the classroom in order to stimulate the students to engage in classroom instruction. One method that is believed can improve students' motivation in the classroom is by implemented project-based learning. Project-based learning (PBL) allows students to actively explore, create authentic language and use language in real life situation. This approach encourages student-centered classes that focus on developing skills for lifelong learning and collaboration among students working in either small groups or a class (Eguchi & Eguchi, 2006). Solomon (2003) explained that PBL is a process of learning that students are responsible for their own education. Students work collaboratively to solve problems that are "authentic, curriculum-based, and over interdisciplinary. Learners learn how to design their own learning process and decide what and where information can be collected. They analyze and synthesize the information then apply and present their new knowledge at the end. Throughout the process of learning, teachers act as managers and advisors (Simpson, 2011).

Project-based learning (PBL) was consistently presented by the majority of authors in second language and foreign language as a powerful and motivating teaching method to develop learners' second and/or foreign languages through learning by doing. In addition, PBL allows learners to work together with hands-on experience in an authentic and meaningful context (Booth, 2002) and drives language learners with a problem to solve or a product to generate. Learners either work alone or in groups with their own responsibility and the challenge to solve authentic problems and decide their own approaches for accomplishing their goals (Hutchinson, 1993). At the end, students present their newly acquired knowledge and a product which shows their learning. They assessed throughout the process by peers and teachers. The teachers' role in this method is as facilitator and advisor.

Many researches showed that PBL is an effective method to improve students' motivation in learning English. Ruby (2014) investigated the implementation of PBL in English language tourism classroom in a Thai university. He examined whether PBL could enhance students' English language proficiency, their learning skills and self-confidence. The results showed that PBL had statistically significant effect on the development of low and medium achievers' English language skills, with exception of the structure and written expression of the low achievers. Another study is conducted by Jackeline (2013). He investigated the use of PBL to increase English skills as well as the development of certain human values in students. The results reveal that students remain motivated to learn English when addressing issues related to their context. It is also revealed that the strategy of mini-projects strengthens the relationship between students and teacher even more.

Implementing Project-Based Learning in the Classroom

Realizing the great potentials of PBL method in ELT for EFL learners that can be used to improve not only students' motivation in learning English but also students' proficiency in mastering that language, it is suggested for Indonesian teacher to apply this method during classroom instruction. There are three stages in applying PBL in the classroom as suggested by Katz and Chard (1989). The first stage is getting started. In this

step, teachers give some questions or selected topic to be studied. The teacher and students make a list of familiar topic. Moreover, they also make connections between what they had read or heard in other areas and in their daily lives. Topics to be explored are discussed in detail. Usually, students elaborate questions to be analyzed. These questions contribute to focus the topic and predict the findings at the end of the project. In this case, the students were focused on thinking and solving problem. For example, in university level, the teacher gives questions about how to teach vocabulary to the elementary students. The teacher asks the students to think about the materials and the media which is suitable for students in elementary students.

The second stage is field work or the doing the project itself. In this stage, learners can investigate about events, objects, places, or topics. It allows them to get in contact with different contexts and their activities. In addition to increasing English learning motivation, through their work, students can draw skills from observations, construct models, and verify their new understanding. For instance, after selecting material and media to teach elementary students, the university students (the teachers to be) try to develop material and create media to teach vocabulary for students in the elementary level. They work in group and they have to decide what topic they liked or whatever media they wanted to develop.

The next stage is culminating and debriefing events. In this last phase, students demonstrate their acquired knowledge. They prepare and present information through different artifacts and their own contributions. Previously, proposed questions by the teacher will be answered during the final stage. In this stage, the students can exhibit their final product to answer the teacher questions. If in the previous example, the teacher asked the students how to teach vocabulary for elementary students. In the final stage, the university students presented they product from their project. The students presented their results from the previous stage.

Another phase which is also crucial is the evaluation phase. Evaluation refers to the assessment of the activities from the students. The evaluation can be done by peers or by the teacher. Teacher can ask other groups to evaluate the final product. In this case, the teacher should give description on how to evaluate the product in all the aspects. At the end of the sessions, teachers should also give feedback to every result of the project. The feedback should not only focus on grammatical aspect but focus more on the content of the product.

The Advantages of Project- Based Learning in the Classroom

There are many benefits if the teacher incorporates PBL in second and foreign language settings. Booth (2002) stated that the process leading to the end-product of project-work provide opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence. In addition, students demonstrate increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning (Stoller, 2006). Students' autonomy is enhanced especially when they are actively engaged in project planning. A further benefit is that because project-based learning progresses according to the specific context and students' interest, students have enhanced motivation, engagement and enjoyment (Lee, 2002). From a motivational perspective, projects being authentic tasks, are meaningful to students, increase interest, motivation to participate, and can promote learning (Brophy, 2004). Enjoyment and

motivation also stem from the fact that classroom language is not predetermined, but depends on the nature of project (Freeman,2000).

Another benefit is to the development of problem-solving and higher order critical thinking skills (Allen,2004). These skills are very important, since they are life-long, transferable skills to settings outside the classroom. According to Dornyei (2001), among other potential benefits, project work encourages motivation, fosters group cohesiveness, increase expectancy of success in target language, achieves “a rare synthesis of academic and social goals”, reduces anxiety, increases the significance of effort relative to ability and promotes effort-based attributions. After completing a project, students understand content more deeply, remember what they learn and retain it longer than is often the case with traditional instruction. In addition, PBL moves students from passive learning into active learning and is able to improve knowledge retention and the learners’ ability to apply prior knowledge in creating their final products (Felder et al. 1991).

In traditional classroom teaching, teachers assign reading materials and require students to do homework or exercises. The teachers only focus on textbook materials and teachers’ presentation. In addition, teachers grade students on the basis of their ability to remember factual information. Meanwhile, in PBL teachers play a role as provider of information by providing input language and language preparation. Teachers play role as facilitator and counselor by giving support and guidance. Teachers in PBL are as co-learners where they can learn together with the students.

Above all, PBL makes students more engage during teaching and learning process. In PBL, students are invited to be more active by doing project which provides real-world experience. Besides, PBL makes teaching more enjoyable and rewarding. By doing a project, teachers work more active and the students engage in meaningful work to discover the joy of learning. Project-based learning provide students with empowering opportunities to make difference by solving real problems and addressing real issue. Besides enhancing students’ participation in the learning process (active learning and self-learning), it also helps to improve communication and collaborative skills that are important in their working life later (Hadim & Esche,2002).

Teacher’s Role in the Project-Based Learning Classroom

Effective project-based learning requires the teacher to assume a different role (Levy, 1997). The teacher’s role is not dominant, yet he/she acts as a guide, advisor, coordinator and facilitator (Papandreou, 1994). In implementing the project method, the point of the learning process moves from the teacher to learners, from working alone to working in groups. At the beginning before doing the project or at the first stage called getting started, the teacher plays the role of a knower. As a knower, the teacher helps students to select a topic, helps students to generate ideas through brainstorming/mind mapping, guides students to formulate their project objectives, and tries to develop a contract/proposal for the group. During project stage, the teacher plays the role of a consultant or a facilitator or a co-learner. In this stage, the teacher helps the students to gather ideas, define objectives, draw up the schedule and provide input for language skills. The teacher can intervene if students’ direction not practical and he/she can offer suggestions to solve the problems.

At the post-project stage, the teacher plays the role as a commentator and appraiser. Teacher shares the reflection on the students' activities during the project by providing a balanced picture of strength and weakness. The teacher tries to offer suggestions for improvement. As the evaluator, teacher collect and analyze feedback from students, collect and analyze feedback from mentors if any, collect and analyze feedback from parents (if necessary), collect and analyze feedback from school authority. At the end, the teacher asks the students to revise and improve the project based on the results of evaluation.

Challenges in Implementing Project-Based Learning

Krajcik et al. (1998) and Marx et al. (1997) describe the difficulties encountered by teachers as follow:

1. Time: PBL investigates project as such require more planning time and classroom time than typical lessons on both long term and daily bases.
2. Classroom management: Teachers must balance student autonomy with order.
3. Subject depth: Teachers need to focus on a driving question and link concepts and diverse activities, helping the students to construct their own knowledge rather than didactically teach single subjects.
4. Assessment: PBL requires alternative forms of evaluating the students' knowledge.

Teachers need extra work to evaluate the students' project. They also require managing the learning process as well as to develop authentic assessment. In line with the previous statement, the result of the recent study conducted by Marx et al. (1997) showed that the common problems faced by teachers are time management, classroom management, and control, support of students learning, technology use, and assessment. Teachers' content knowledge, students' lack of experience in PBL and their preferences for traditional-structured approach that emphasize passive learning are some challenges in implementing PBL in the classroom.

Students also face some difficulties during the implementation of PBL method. As the results of study conducted by Fragoulis (2009) on the implementation of PBL in Greek primary school, it showed that some students were not familiar with the group work. At the beginning, although clear roles of group member were assigned, some students dominated the work, while others did little work. Another difficulty concerned the fact that some students felt that the duration of the project was too long. Some students seemed to have lost their interest and motivation by the end of the project. In addition, several students had difficulty accepting the new role of the teacher as a facilitator and coordinator, and not as a source of knowledge and provider solutions.

Conclusion

Having only traditional teaching interaction is not enough for students in learning English especially for EFL learners. Teachers should think another learning method which enables students to be more motivated in learning. Project-based learning is one of effective methods in teaching English. Project-based learning contributes to enhance not only the motivation of the students to learn English but it promotes individual and social values to improve the coexistence (Jackeline, 2013). When English learning is based on

problem solving, the teaching and learning English becomes more motivating. It is because the students feel seriously engaged in solving the problem. They enjoy the activity and all of them cooperatively work unlike in traditional teaching where the students only listen to the teacher presentation that cause the classroom instruction becoming boring activity and the students will be low motivated to learn.

PBL is an instructional approach that provides meaning to the students' learning. A classroom that practices PBL requires some physical features that will allow student room to work and collaborate with their teacher and peers. Many studies reveal that by implementing PBL in the classroom, students will actively engage in the classroom because it inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of subject they are studying. Research also indicates that students are more likely to retain knowledge gained through this approach far more than through traditional textbook-centered learning.

Besides the great beneficial effect on the implementation of PBL method in the classroom to English language teaching, the implementation of PBL also has its disadvantages and also some challenges. Time and classroom management are the great challenges for the teacher to be handled. Teacher may find difficulties in control classroom as well to assess the students' works. Thus, it is necessary for the teacher to prepare her/himself well before implementing PBL method in the classroom, so that he/she will get the great advantages of PBL in teaching English.

Recommendation

Realizing the great potential of PBL in teaching English in the classroom as one of alternatives method instead of traditional teaching, it is suggested that teachers in Indonesia implementing this method in their class. However, there are some problems need to be considered by the teachers. Teachers need to take on the role as the facilitator and coach. Teachers need to manage the time well and try to distinguish between short-term project and long-term project so that they will not waste the time. There are six steps teachers should use to help plan in the beginning of a project. First step is by developing a project, then continue to decide the scope of project. Project ideas come from articles, real-world issues, current events, conversations, interest, and curiosity.

Teachers also should to consider the scope of the project. Projects can range from short, one to two weeks, or last many weeks to entire semester. Projects can involve research, interviews, library visit, and community inquiry. Teachers should decide the scope of the project based on the students' experiences, readiness, the school schedule, the subject, and the level of teachers' comfort and expertise. Teachers also need to consider the students' experiences and capabilities since they will influence the scope of the projects. Before starting the projects, teachers should explain to the students the standard that they want to achieve. The criteria of assessment and evaluation during the project and also the result of the project should be presented clearly at the first stage. This has a purpose to make students aware on the aspects that being assessed.

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