

Putting Real Work Practice into Class: A Case Study on the Application of Project-Based Learning to Teaching English for Professional Purpose

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese vocational education has progressed a methodological paradigm that places a greater emphasis on the idea of “competence” in order to increase student employability. Given the professionalization of vocational education, more flexible and engaging teaching-learning environments are required. The goal of this study is to conduct research on the application of Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) to improve instructional strategies in Vocational English for Professional Purposes (EPP) classrooms. This study applied a qualitative case study methodology to gather information from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The analysis of the data revealed that the instructors’ application of PBLL has the potential to improve students’ language proficiency and foster the growth of problem-solving skills and relevant competencies that are essential for achieving employability. In summary, this case study offers empirical proof of PBL’s effectiveness in EPP learning. Through the study’s findings, instructors and researchers with an interest in PBL integration in vocational CE classrooms may gain some insight of how teachers perceive and use PBL in actual classroom settings.

Keywords: Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL); College English (CE); English for Professional Purpose (EPP); Higher Vocational Education; English Curriculum Reform

1. Introduction

College English (CE), which is a compulsory course for the majority of non-English majors in Chinese universities, focuses primarily on teaching basic English knowledges. Its main objective is to help language learners master a variety of language skills, placing a strong emphasis on the requirement that students understand the fundamental grammar rules of English. And because of the long-standing influence of the traditional teaching mode, practically all departments and majors demand their students to take the CET-4 and CET-6 tests as the benchmark for evaluating the impact of English teaching, which furthers the investment in fundamental English content in college English classroom. As opposed to stressing verbal communication skills in English, the teaching and learning activities in the CE classrooms tended to place more focus on comprehending the language’s norms, such as studying grammar, reading English texts, and memorizing vocabulary [1]. The National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Programme (2020), however, clearly stated that the focus of vocational education should be given to preparing vocational high school students for a specific job and helping them develop professional skills in a particular field [2]. And considering the current situation of English teaching in most Chinese vocational universities, a reform from teaching English for general purpose (EGP) to teaching English for specific purpose (ESP) is inevitable.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), or more precisely, English for Professional Purposes (EPP) is a pedagogical approach that was designed to meet the needs of learners who need English language proficiency in relation to a specific discipline [3]. It was developed in collaboration with research in educational psychology, linguistic theories, and social needs for English [4]. Project Based Learning (PBL), as a learner-centered method [5], is one of the beneficial approaches to teaching English in the EPP context. Incorporating PBL approach into English classrooms allows students to completely absorbed in it and will help students learn English in a more engaging and comparable way, which can better develop their multi-capabilities by promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and innovation as well as communication and collaboration. The only thing CE teachers need to do is develop a project that specifically target the proper student. Students are more likely to spontaneously engage with the second language and forget their anxiety of speaking English when they are using texts, contexts, and situations from their areas of expertise.

Numerous studies have found that PBL approach improve students' academic performance and capacity for learning. However, research into the practical integration of PBL method in EPP classroom is still in its early phases under the background of Chinese vocational education. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research on the successful integration of PBL practices to improve EFL learners' professional understanding. In order to adapt vocational qualifications and provide students with the opportunity to advance their professional skills, teachers must modify their pedagogical approaches. However, there is little guidance accessible to teach them how to integrate their instructional strategies with professional skills to effectively meet the demands of students.

2. Context of the Study

The case study reported in this paper was carried out at a vocational university in the Hainan Province of South China. Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) has been implemented in the first semester of EPP classrooms since 2021-2022, with the overall objective of promoting professional abilities in CE curricula and boosting student motivation for learning. In the PBL classroom, students must comprehend and apply various professional skills to resolve significant open-ended projects by connecting theory to practice. Additionally, the importance of collaboration and project management is highlighted because these skills aid students in developing some of the required skills for their future careers.

The implementation of PBL in the first year of EPP classrooms at the vocational university is coordinated by a team made up of the lecturers and researchers. The participants of the study were chosen from the students enrolled in the first semester of the academic year 2021/2022. The researchers in the team offered guidance to the selected teachers and oversaw the project's development. The role of the teacher is to monitor and support students' academic progress. Through the application of the PBL methodology, the team seeks to bring a more pragmatic form of instruction that encourages active student participation, self-directed learning, and contact with future professional world. Five teachers and ten students were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations were conducted with the participants' consent to identify and better understand the PBL integration in their EPP classrooms.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the study is to investigate how PBL is incorporated into CE courses at Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology in China. The PBL project, which was conducted during the academic year 2021–2022, had the students and teachers in this vocational university as study participants. The research design was qualitative in nature, and a variety of data collection techniques were employed. The data collected for this study concentrated on how to apply PBL in the CE course and how to acquire the necessary skills and competencies through its implementation, which is intended to assist students become more prepared for their future professional practice. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

- (1) How well is PBL being employed in the EPP classrooms at the vocational university?
- (2) What are the advantages and challenges of PBL use in EPP classrooms?
- (3) How is PBL used in EPP classrooms to prepare students for their future professional practice?
- (4) Data Collection and Findings.

Students in the EPP classroom were instructed to form free teams with a minimum of four members each. Each team was given three weeks to come up with a solution after being given a problem statement that was purposely designed in accordance with what they had learned over the previous three weeks and how the knowledge applied in the actual future professional context. At the end of the problem-solving cycle, each team produced a power point, and one representative delivered a 10-minute presentation to the class during which they were expected to offer a solution. The chosen EPP teachers documented the instructional activities used for the PBL research in an inquiry notebook. The notebook included information about the instructional practices, the advantages and limitations of PBL integration, and weekly summaries detailing the important discoveries in their classrooms. The notebooks were periodically presented to the researchers for evaluation, the details of classroom observation projects are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Classroom Observation Items

Tasks	Communication	Language Product	Instructor Feedback	Assessment
Brainstorming on topic	Student-Student	Brainstorm Sheet	No	No
Discussion about possible implementation	Student-Student	Implementation Plan	No	No
consultation on process and progress	Student-Teacher	/	Yes	No
Presentation	Student-Student	PPT	No	Yes
Q&A	Student-Student	Q&A Sheet	No	Yes

In the second phase of this research, five teachers and ten students were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews. According to the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and teachers' inquiry notebook, it presents a comprehensive view of how PBL is implemented in the EPP classrooms at a vocational university.

The majority of students said that while not quite as realistic as working on the job, the scenarios (cases) utilized in the PBL project did mirror actual problems that graduates were likely to encounter within their professional careers. Many students expressed how enjoyable and engaging they found the non-traditional approach to learning, while also finding it to be quite challenging but beneficial. Some students, however, voiced their disapproval, saying that the complexity was unnecessary, the representation of reality was inadequate, too little instruction and poor feedback are also made them feel uncomfortable.

According to the analysis of teachers' perspectives, most teachers believe that PBL is a good model of what students can expect from their future professional practice, which requires greater attention and more instruction. Although PBL implementation takes some time at first as content and syllabus integration are developed, it is regarded as a great method for connecting real-world experience to classroom instruction. PBL is also seen by EFL teachers as a way to improve students' language and content understanding as well as their language and employability skills. Project tasks and activities give students the chance to utilize English in authentic settings. Additionally, EPP programs give students the language and subject-matter expertise they need to function in work-related settings. PBL integration into EPP courses will undoubtedly support independent, active, autonomous, and creative learning while also boosting students' competencies and competitiveness in the future job market.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The overall case study was concentrated on examining how PBL is actually implemented, which was specifically designed for the EPP setting in the Chinese vocational university. The study revealed that PBL seems to be well suited for students in this setting, and students shown high levels of motivation and willingness to take responsibility of their language learning. The study has also emphasized the significance of practice language through project subtasks in authentic professional contexts, which can help students develop their problem-solving skills and get them ready for the future professional practice.

Teachers in conventional CE courses are committed to their subject, eager to impart information, and content-focused. However, this form of teaching frequently has unintended consequences like as demotivating students, undermining their autonomy, and failing to adequately prepare them for the challenges they will confront in their future workplace. The approach of PBL, on the other hand, gives students more autonomy and teaches them to take greater responsibility for their learning by transferring authority away from the teacher, who now serves as a facilitator of student learning rather than a knowledge distributor. PBL undoubtedly enhances students' ability to connect theory to practice by having them work through real-world problems. This improves learning outcomes and fosters the growth of work-place related skills such as teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills.

Nevertheless, the researchers also concluded that both teachers and students still have doubts on PBL implementation at the vocational CE classroom. From the perspective of the students, PBL design may be enjoyable, but also challenging. While they were used to being reactive learners and receiving all the information they required from the instructor, students had to adjust to being proactive learners who were responsible for their own knowledge acquisition. Changing from a traditional curriculum to a PBL

program might be uncomfortable for some students, who found this to be a difficult transition to make. More assistance is needed to help students get used to the new pedagogy while also teaching them how to solve complex problems and collaborate with others.

Implementation difficulties are a common occurrence for teachers as well. They claim that employing the PBL approach poses a variety of challenges that multiple tasks need to be well-planned and implemented through the necessary procedures and criteria. It goes without saying that instructors need specialized guidance and training on how PBL works best in order to help them adjust to their new roles as facilitators of student inquiry, distributors of constructive feedback, and implementers of new classroom management strategies.

The implications of PBL for teaching and learning EPP in vocational education are fairly considerable, not only in terms of shifts to the roles of students and teachers but also in terms of how the CE curriculum will be developed. The new pedagogy must be tightly tied to the instructional objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation procedures. Diverse teaching and learning strategies are essential for engaging students in learning and assisting them in acquiring the core skills required for their future professional involvement. Both teachers and administrators need to have a positive attitude toward the new teaching methods in order to apply the most effective instructional approaches in our classrooms. For this reason, the government and universities should arrange PBL workshops and trainings to provide assistance for the instructors knowing how to use PBL throughout their teaching experience in order to make PBL a much simpler and more widely used method.

Acknowledgement

Fund project: This study is supported by Research Project of 2021-2022 Foreign Language Teaching Reform in Higher Education Institutions in Hainan Province of China, entitled “Exploring the Reform and Innovation Path of Vocational College English Courses in the Context of the Construction of Hainan Free Trade Port” with No. Hnjgw2022ZD-3.

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