

Problem-Based Learning in Teaching English for Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT. Problem-based learning (PBL) is a pedagogical approach used in second language acquisition to enable students to improve their critical thinking and social skills, while learning the target language in context by endeavoring to find solutions to real-life or job-related problems. In English language teaching (ELT), the PBL approach implies that students identify problems, design strategies, and also reflect on their resolution process, stages along which they interact with each other, thus further developing their language competencies. Our paper aims to showcase how this approach can be implemented in second language teaching in the context of law enforcement tertiary education.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), problem-based learning (PBL), Law Enforcement English (LEE), tertiary education

1. INTRODUCTION

What is Problem-based Learning?

Problem based learning is a student-centered, collaborative methodology, which requires learners to work in groups and construct the knowledge autonomously, while solving a presented problem. The aim of this educational method is to foster problem-solving skills through a self-regulated learning and cooperative skills. Students are given real world, intricate, complex tasks to find

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solutions for, while taking on the role of the owner of the situation. Thus, students learning in a PBL class will develop skills that are useful in real life. In this line of thought, some researchers mentioned that in a PBL classroom the students have the opportunity to improve their social skills as they are exposed to contexts where they can practice authentic communication (Larsson, 2001). Moreover, learners can benefit from improved critical thinking skills (Maulidia, et al., 2020), knowledge integration, group work skills (Mook et al., 2007), self-management skills (Fernandes, 2021), research ability (Dolmans, et al., 2002), knowledge transfer skills (Campos, 2017).

Problem-based learning is an approach that emerged in the late 1960s (Neufeld & Barrows, 1974) and, as an approach used in second language acquisition, it allows language students to learn both the target language and the content, while working either individually or in groups in order to understand and find potential solutions for real, open-ended problems they are presented with, problems which do not have a single solution (Ertmer, Lehman, Park, Cramer, & Grove, 2003).

Other authors view PBL as a “a collection of carefully constructed problems”, which is presented to a group of students, whose task is to “discuss these problems and produce tentative explanations for the phenomena” being described (Norman and Schmidt, 1992, p. 557). They also acknowledge that there are beneficial outcomes of the PBL approach for the students in terms of developing their problem-solving abilities, encouraging autonomous learning and motivating them to take interest in the course content, as well as improving their memory.

In an attempt to clarify what PBL is, there is another perspective in the literature which suggests that the characteristics of the PBL approach as an experiential strategy are: proposing and solving realistic problems, making use of prior knowledge, practicing logical and analytical thinking and using scientific methods in problem-solving, acquiring new knowledge in the process due to information sharing and exchanging (Walton and Mathews, 1989).

As opposed to traditional teaching, where the teacher takes the central role, usually by presenting concepts and rules first, PBL is an approach that relies on little or no teaching, the teacher being merely a facilitator in an educational context where students’ actual learning takes place while solving the problems that the teacher designs and proposes in class based on the topics included in the course syllabus of a particular semester of the academic year. Therefore, an essential aspect of PBL is that, unlike the traditional teaching approach, the problem to be solved is presented first and the content is learned while solving real life-like complex problems (Boud and Feletti, 1997).

In the PBL class, when the students are engaged in group work to solve authentic, real world problems, they have the opportunity not only to enhance

their content knowledge, but also to better their communicative and reasoning competencies. Thus, Watson (2001, p. 3) shows that in PBL, while working collaboratively with their colleagues to find solutions for authentic and complex problems, the students have the chance to enhance their content knowledge and develop a range of abilities such as problem-solving, communication, self-assessment and reasoning. Other advantages that the PBL class has for the students have been highlighted by Major and Palmer (2001, p. 5), who argue that the collection, the evaluation and synthesis of resources are among the skills students are most likely to improve in the process of finding a solution to an intricate problem. Thus, in a problem-based learning class, the process is of the utmost importance as students are actually learning throughout it. The students take initiative and control of their learning, while they become better at thinking critically, understanding, learning autonomously and working in collaboration with their peers (White, 1996).

The collaborative work of the students in the problem-solving approach may require some research in order to collect the information needed to come to the best possible solution to the problem at hand. For this purpose, they may need to access various resources or, if possible, discuss with experts in the field for a better grasp of the real-world problems. Nowadays, this endeavor is highly facilitated by the advancements in digital technology, which allow instant and easy access to a multitude of reading materials online (Evensen and Hmelo, 2000) on a personal computer or various digital portable devices. The availability of unlimited information on the Internet enables the teachers to take a step back in the PBL-based language teaching approach and gives the students the opportunity to be in charge of their own learning, as they have to work autonomously to reach a valid solution to a certain problem-solving scenario.

One might argue that PBL is another facet of the task-based learning approach. However, what differentiates the two is that in the PBL class the teacher relinquishes the role of content instructor in favor of the role of simple facilitator of the student's learning process by assigning and explaining the problem to be solved, bringing it closer to the course syllabus, arranging students in groups, giving feedback and eventually evaluating the task. In their groups, students discuss the problem after they have divided the research tasks amongst themselves and completed the collection of data from various sources in order to solve the often complex problem based in real-life situations and purposefully designed so as to stir students' curiosity and thus learn the content in a meaningful manner (Tan, 2003). In addition, due to PBL students are trained for dealing with real-life situations, being exposed in the learning context to a series of challenges and skills such as: collaborative work, self-regulated learning, interdisciplinary learning, communication with peers, problem-solving, critical thinking (Tan, 2003).

Although the PBL approach is said to rely on minimal or literally no teaching, when initiating a PBL class for the first time, teachers themselves may find the process of formulating the problems a bit overwhelming, for which reason they may feel the need to have a blend of content teaching and problem-solving scenarios. It was argued in the literature that in the beginning teachers will undertake a painstaking process of researching and creating the problems (Allen, Duch & Groh, 1996).

Therefore, in a case study, we will endeavor to illustrate how this approach can be implemented in the context of law enforcement second language teaching and learning, while simultaneously identifying both the advantages and disadvantages such a teaching strategy brings about in the English language class. Moreover, we will insert specific examples of tasks to demonstrate how the PBL process unfolds.

The Problem-Based Learning Process

As mentioned before, the PBL is a learner-oriented approach in education that offers learners the autonomy to access various knowledge and use different skills in solving problems by integrating theory and practice (Savery, 2006). There are certain pedagogical advantages that have been associated with PBL methodology, such as giving the students the opportunity to enhance their knowledge, teamwork, communication, leadership and reflection (Ansarian & Lin, 2018), therefore PBL has been implemented in various disciplines, including language education (Han, 2024; Lin, 2018).

Irrespective of the discipline that relies on the PBL strategy, in the PBL classroom the roles of both teachers and learners are distributed differently than in a more traditional type of formal learning environment. The teacher assumes the role of a facilitator in the students' learning, providing classroom activities that students have to solve and complete autonomously. The only involvement the teacher has in the learning process is to provide students suitable real-world problems to solve, to guide them in identifying the needed resources and materials, to offer guidance and feedback during the problem-solving process and assess the students' involvement and final solution, with the purpose of enabling them to improve their problem-solving abilities and their language, while practicing both productive and receptive language learning skills.

On the one hand, the PBL process is described in the literature taking into account the students' role (Butler, 2003) and it includes four main steps: introducing students to the problem, exploring what is known and unknown about the problem, finding potential solutions to the problems, reflecting on the effects of each solution and selecting the most feasible one. In fact, during the

PBL process, students have to unravel intricate, ill-structured problems, similar to real-world situations (Lee, 2020) without single solutions (Pretz et al., 2003) and they assume different tasks in the group to solve the problem at hand. In fact, they themselves decide the role each student is going to have in the group. After an exploration of the problem, they assign the tasks among the team members in order to deal with the problem and progress toward a solution. Through this exploration, students have the chance to evaluate the knowledge and skills they already possess and what they need more and, simultaneously, they learn how to deal with time management.

On the other hand, the teacher's role in a PBL approach is that of a mentor, a facilitator, or a coach and it is limited to pre-teaching and assessment of the students' performance in the activity. In fact, the teacher is in charge of the following steps: pre-teaching the language needed, introducing the problem, grouping students and providing resources, observing and supporting them in the process, follow up and assessing progress (Julie Mathews-Aydinli, 2007). Therefore, the teacher is responsible for designing and identifying a problem that should be so intricate and ill-structured so as to stimulate students to reflect on and make inquiries about it. The teacher's task is to construct the problem in such a way to be in alignment with the course content, but also new, unfamiliar and relevant to the work context.

Other perspectives on the PBL process also underline four stages including the students' roles, such as: problem definition, strategy design, strategy implementation and evaluation (Han, 2023, 2024). In the first step, students share knowledge to comprehend the problem and establish goals to be attained and procedures to be followed. In the second step, they design strategies by selecting or creating methods, whose value they evaluate using logical reasoning. In the third step, students implement strategies and evaluate outcomes in the light of the set goals. Through this process, students improve language and problem-solving skills (Han, 2023).

Benefits and Drawbacks of Problem-Based Learning

As a collaborative learner-centered approach, PBL encourages learners to work in teams with each other. This, in turn, creates an ideal context for learners to construct the required knowledge to tackle real-life scenarios.

The applicability of PBL in language teaching has been reported in the literature as bringing about positive outcomes, such as the improvement of learners' skills, especially their speaking ability (Azman and Shin, 2012). Similarly, other authors also concluded that there is a positive effect of PBL on the learners' linguistic and nonlinguistic development in terms of their interest and motivation

being improved simultaneously with their language proficiency (Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin, 2022). The improvement of the learners' life skills was also mentioned as a beneficial outcome of the language education based on PBL (Ghosheh Wahbeh et al., 2021).

When it comes to the benefits, recent research on second language acquisition has focused on PBL as a strategy that promotes valuable interactions in the second language learning settings. As PBL is oriented on real-world problems, the communication occurring in the class between students is more authentic than the interactions produced in role plays, for instance, and it is believed that such opportunities to use the second language in authentic communication lead to second language acquisition (Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier, 2001). Moreover, because the PBL approach focuses on students rather than the teachers during the learning process, it can also encourage students to become more independent learners, who will be able to use the knowledge learned and the skills developed in the classroom in their lives outside the school setting. (James, 2006).

Conversely, PBL was criticized as relying on a large number of students working together to solve the problem assigned, which could negatively influence the collaboration between students and the learning outcome because of the potentially pronounced cultural differences and personality traits in the groups of students (Frambach et al., 2012; Ramadhani et al., 2019). Contrary to this criticism, some theorists argued that since students are divided into smaller groups, the intercultural and individual differences are minimized (Fernandes, 2021).

Speaking of the difficulties involved in the successful implementation of PBL in the EFL context, one of them can be the limitation of the teachers' necessary knowledge and skills (Kassem, 2018) and their reluctance to give up the central role of information providers for that of facilitators (Dolmans et al., 2002). Another challenge is assessment. Researchers have agreed on the point that assessing a PBL is a difficult task. Thus, Vleuten and Schuwirth (2019) state that in a PBL class is challenging to design and implement a good test for measuring learners' knowledge. Another source of difficulty can be the students' attitudes toward PBL and their negative reaction to it (Shamsan & Syed, 2009) or the inability to design an appropriate problem (Rivera & González, 2019).

The literature reports some other factors that could also negatively affect the effectiveness of PBL (Chan, 2009). Some of the issues that deserve attention include time limitation, relevance of the designed scenario with the authentic use of the learning objective, teacher's role, and the quality of assessment (Chen & Fu, 2009). Other drawbacks of the PBL approach in second language learning might be that learners who speak the same first language may use their

mother tongue instead of English when working in groups on the assigned problem or that the PBL methodology may not be appropriate for beginner learners, who are not very proficient in English when it comes to speaking and reading skills.

Whatever the difficulties of implementing PBL in second language education might be, the benefits of the approach derive from the opportunity it offers for the students to exploit real-world relevant skills, on condition that the presented problems or scenarios consider all possible situations in the future and are practically applicable for students (Almeman and Alrebish, 2018).

2. CASE STUDY

Problem-Based Learning in Teaching English for Law Enforcement

The teaching context

In Romania, the organization in charge of the training of would-be commissioned law enforcement officers is the Police Academy, a public higher education institution, which operates under the coordination of both The Ministry of Education and The Ministry of Home Affairs, the latter being the sole beneficiary and future employer of its graduates. While being enrolled in the academic studies, the curriculum allows students to undergo a specialization in various strands of law enforcement such as police, border police, penitentiaries, gendarmerie and firefighters. Moreover, those who attend undergraduate programs of the Police Faculty usually further specialize in different police lines of work such as criminal investigations, fraud investigation, countering organized crime, forensic science, traffic police, public order, transport police, etc. Hence, due to the police-related content of the subjects included in the students' curriculum, a second language teacher needs to accommodate the second language learning syllabus with the specialized content of the other subjects in order to facilitate the students' acquisition of specialized police lexis and to help them improve their language skills.

Therefore, in such a context, we can speak of English for Law Enforcement (LEE) as a variety of English for a certain occupational purpose or a specific profession, which is the police officer's job. For further clarification, the over-arching concept of ELT (English Language Teaching) can be broken down in concepts such as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language), which, in turn, encompass ESP (English for Specific Purposes), a branch consisting of other two subcategories, which are: EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). Therefore, as it refers to an occupational field, English for Law Enforcement (LEE) is a variety of ESP, embedded in EOP (Piellmuş, 2018, p. 569).

Problem-based learning tasks in an English for law enforcement class

As previously mentioned, an English language class at the Police Academy will focus on police-related topics in line with the prerequisites of the second language learning syllabus. Figures 1 and 2 showcase two of the problem-based learning tasks we presented our students in the classroom, which are focused on relevant, real-life, job-related situations. The first task (Figure 1) suggests three incidents police officers might encounter when they are on the job, for which students have to find solutions in terms of effective ways to handle the situations, while enforcing police powers and procedures. The students discuss in small groups of 4 or 5 and have to explain how they will take action in each situation, what police powers and/or procedures they will enforce and how. The second task (Figure 2) presents students with four different scenarios highlighting various criminals in the commission of a range of crimes. The students are required to solve each scenario by providing feasible methods of dealing with the criminals and handling the situations to a positive effect.

What needs mentioning is that most of our students are very proficient in English, their language competence varying from level B2 to level C1 across CEFR, with few exceptions, which renders the implementation of a PBL task suitable, as they possess the communicative ability to discuss police job-related problems.

In addition, they are also confident when it comes to the content the tasks focus on, because, as a rule, they undergo a specialization in various strands of policing and a training in roughly all branches of the law, as well as participate in regular practical training sessions at police stations. Therefore, to a certain degree, depending on the academic year they are enrolled in, the students possess both the specialized knowledge and the practical abilities to reflect on and find solutions for the job-related problems they are presented with in class.

In terms of procedure, when suggesting problem-based learning tasks to our students, we first arranged them in groups of 4 or 5 students with mixed communicative competence and then the students shared the solutions to their problem with the entire class. Thus, all groups have the opportunity to find various solutions to the problem, which they further discuss as a class and agree on the most effective one. Based on our classroom experience, distributing students in groups taking into account their different language abilities enables them to learn for their peers and further motivates them improve their language competence. Moreover, students tend to be more motivated to participate in solving the problem suggested due to the level of learning autonomy they have in the BPL framework.

Activity 1 - Problem-solving: Enforcing police powers and procedures

Here you have a table containing vocabulary related to police procedures. Make use of the words and phrases below to describe how you are going to handle the following three incidents:

- You are a police officer on night patrol. While walking the beat, you notice a silhouette of a man acting suspiciously in the parking lot in the area you are patrolling. It seems that the man is trying to force the door of a VW Passat CC open, because he is handling some kind of tool. When cautioned to stop, the man starts running.
- You are a police officer. You have received information that a man driving a silver-grey BMW with foreign number plates, who is suspected of transporting a drug shipment, is going to enter your city.
- Two youngsters start fist-fighting near a bus stop packed with citizens waiting for their buses. You are called at the scene by one of the passers-by. When you arrive at the scene, the fight is still in progress. Suddenly one of the young men takes out a knife and tries to attack the other man with it. On being summoned to stop, the man with the knife attempts to flee.

Police procedures	Măsuri polițienești
police warning to warn	somația a soma; a avertiza
police stop person stops to stop	interceptarea interceptarea persoanelor a intercepta
asking for ID/showing one's ID to ask for ID/ to show one's ID to establish the identity (of a person) to refuse to show one's ID refusal to show one's ID	legitimarea a legitima/a se legitima a stabili identitatea (unei persoane) a refuza legitimarea refuzul de a se legitima
search person search body search/pat-down search intimate body search luggage search personal belongings house/residence search vehicle search to have the power to stop and search	controlul controlul persoanei control corporal/ controlul persoanei control corporal amănunțit controlul bagajelor efecte personale controlul la domiciliu controlul vehiculelor a avea autoritatea de a intercepta și controla
restraining (a person) to restrain handcuffs to handcuff handcuff restraint tear gas police baton/ night stick	imobilizarea (unei persoane) a imobiliza cătușe a încătușa imobilizare prin încătușare gaze lacrimogene bastonul din dotare
chasing a person/ suspect to chase a suspect apprehension of a suspect to apprehend a suspect foot chase car/vehicle chase	urmărirea unei persoane/unui suspect a urmări un suspect prinderea unui suspect a prinde un suspect urmărirea pe jos urmărirea cu autovehiculul
inviting a suspect to come to the police station to invite a suspect to come to the police station escorting the suspect to the police station to escort the suspect to the police station	invitarea suspectului la sediul poliției a invita suspectul la sediul poliției conducerea suspectului la sediul poliției a conduce suspectul la sediul poliției
detaining/ arresting a suspect to detain/ to arrest a suspect questioning a suspect to question a suspect	reținerea/arestarea unui suspect a reține/a aresta un suspect interogarea/interpelarea unui suspect a cerceta/ a interoga/ a interpela un suspect

Fig. 1. Problem-based learning task 1 (Pielmuș, 2012, pp. 99-100)

Activity 2 – Problem-solving: Dealing with criminals

Imagine you are going to take part in a police officers' recruitment process. One of the tests that you will be required to pass is participating in a police officer role. You will be given several police tasks to perform so as your ability to deal with the situation be assessed.

Work in groups, discuss how you would handle the police officer's duties effectively and describe your solution for each scenario (*Scenario 1*: police officer vs. hostage taker; *Scenario 2*: police officer vs. the abusive husband; *Scenario 3*: police officer vs. suspicious man; *Scenario 4*: police officer vs. law-breaking driver).

Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
You are a police officer on duty who receives the information that a hold-up is taking place at a local bank and several civilians have been taken hostages. Suspects are believed to be armed and dangerous. You are sent to the scene to deal with the situation.	An emergency call is made at the police station and you are sent to settle a domestic dispute. As a result of alcohol abuse, the husband allegedly beat up his wife and apparently tried to forcefully facilitate sexual intercourse with the latter.	You are a police officer on night patrol and you notice a suspicious person lurking in a parking lot in the neighbourhood. The suspicious man is also carrying a bag in his hand and seems most attracted by a parked BMW, C Series.	You are a traffic police officer and you are on duty in the central area of the city. You are ensuring the traffic flow when you suddenly notice a motor vehicle driver driving on the red light, while failing to yield the crossing to pedestrians at a road crossing.

Fig. 2. Problem-based learning task 2 (Pielmuş, 2012, p. 30)

3. CONCLUSIONS

Problem-based learning is an approach that has certain advantages in adult second language education. As our experience of implementing PBL in teaching English as a second language showed, the approach has not only linguistic, but also nonlinguistic benefits. The linguistic benefits of the PBL approach arise from the opportunity the students have to exercise their communicative competence in the second language in their interactions with their peers, while the nonlinguistic benefits consist in the outcomes PBL brings about in terms of enhancing learners' interest and motivation and encouraging their learning autonomy, as well as enabling them to transfer the learning outside the classroom.

However, it is only reasonable to acknowledge that a transition from a traditional-based class to the PBL approach might meet a certain degree of resistance from students, teachers and administrators alike. The students, who have only been exposed to traditional learning settings, are most likely to expect their classes to follow the same pattern, and teachers, who are forced to meet the constraints imposed by variables such as syllabus and time, may find the process of designing problem-solving tasks rather challenging. Based on our classroom experience, even if students initially showed some reluctance to work with the PBL approach, they later on became motivated. On the other hand, as teachers we should be inspired to create more complex problems for the students to solve due to the creative opportunities offered by the PBL methodology. Although there are inherent difficulties the teachers and students may encounter in either designing or solving a PBL task, it's worth noting that the benefits the students usually get from working with this approach outweigh the difficulties. Among the positive outcomes of implementing the PBL approach in an ESL class there are: improved second language communication, critical thinking, course content acquisition.

In addition, our PBL classroom experience led us to the conclusions of the majority of the research studies in the field that assert that the PBL approach implemented in different educational settings fosters a range of skills in certain areas. Thus, we found that PBL has an essential role not only in the development of the learners' cognitive ability and their reflective thinking, in the enhancement of their knowledge and encouragement of autonomous learning, but also in the improvement of their research and social skills, as well as in the expansion of their learning beyond the classroom into the real-world. What's more, the research undertaken by the students in a PBL class in order to solve a presented problem, including reading and listening to various materials or watching audiovisual resources in English, had - to a certain extent - an impact on the development of the learners' language skills, especially the communicative competence.

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