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Problem-Based Learning as a TEFL Context in a Futuristic Democratic Society

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Abstract

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL contexts in the pre- university education stages in Egypt are almost traditional. Learning /teaching are almost based on a teacher-centered rather than a student- centered approach. It does not create students' feeling of belonging to their society, nor does it enhance the required characteristics for a global citizen. On the contrary, English Language Teaching (ELT) should initiate civic-literacy and configure the framework for civic learning and democratic values. The purpose of this study is to explore the basic concepts and core learning/teaching strategies of ELT for democratic citizenship. To ensure the students' critical attitudes and positive initiatives, a Problem – Based Learning (PBL) approach can be integrated into ELT. It entails that learning process components need to be revised. Besides, different democratic concepts, values and practices should replace the traditional concepts of knowledge, intended learning outcomes, and knowledge management. PBL may provide the openness and richness of a democratic context. It represents a prerequisite for life in a democratic society. Hence, the students' personal, linguistic, cognitive, and social characteristics can be changed. Accordingly, the expected change of the students' performance will be reflected on their lives and their futuristic democratic society.

Key words: student-centered approach, a global citizen, democratic society, civic literacy

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a shift in learning paradigms that reflects a worldwide interest in increasing recognition of learning democratic concepts and values, and citizenship practices. In many countries education emphasizes the importance of the concept of "citizenship", both nationally to highlight belonging and, internationally to extend a deeper understanding of global citizenship. Education is often the suggested context for enhancing and extending the concept of citizenship. However, the challenge lies in the educational policy, whether to involve democratic components and citizenship practices in contents and activities.

With the gradual movement of the Egyptian society towards democracy, the perspectives of education should be different. The educational system, i.e., curriculum, intended learning be outcomes, contents, learning strategies, and assessment techniques, should integrate civic-literacy with the educational context. The purpose of this system is to support knowledge, values, and practices of democracy. Educational aims should be revised to cope with the characteristics of a global citizen who is required to contribute positively to the development of a democratic society. It implies that students should be encouraged to contribute to instruction and link their interests to learning activities (Zhou et al., 2009). Teachers should provide a context in which students relate their interests to the knowledge they manage. Guthire & Klauda (2014) view curricula, students' attempts to build up their knowledge, through PBL practices, and teachers' tutoring, as reflective issues that transmit life into the classroom. Nag (2011) views PBL as an approach that reinforces the self-reflective nature of learning, which sharpens students' life skills.

Figure (1): PBL should integrate knowledge and civic-literacy through group dynamics in an interactive context



In the researcher's viewpoint, PBL represents one of the possible alternatives that can contribute to the mobilization towards socially and educationally different scenes, with a qualified global citizen for a democratic society. Scott (2014) analyzes PBL, as a learning approach into different components of: context, students, and the

teacher. This may suggest that some privileges of PBL; such as problem authenticity, problem familiarity, self -directed learning, team autonomy and diversity, and team collaboration provide further freedom of action.

PBL in a Democratic Society

In PBL, learning is an interactive process in which participants mutually engage in dialog. Hence, questioning becomes a dominant feature. Questions often increase the students' enthusiasm and create a meaningful sharing of responsibility for learning. Students are exposed to the richness of analytical and critical openness, which increases their abilities of suggesting various alternatives, making decisions and finding priorities. Accordingly, collaborative work is important for students to reflect the group dynamics, open discussion, and sharing meanings, and responsibilities. This scene can create a competitive critical environment in which students experience enjoyable learning. This scene represents preliminary attempts for practicing democracy outside the school.

PBL is not a linear process in which inputs and outputs are predetermined, and students should be trained on some mechanical drills. However, it is a dynamic process in which students interact with authentic knowledge components. These components are different in every learning context, according to the students' needs, perception of the problem, learning objectives, priorities, and, ways of knowledge management.

Figure (2): Usual learning as a linear process

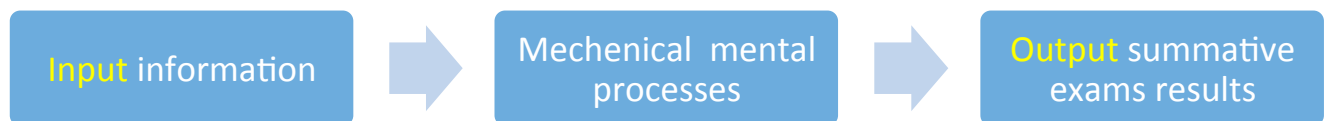
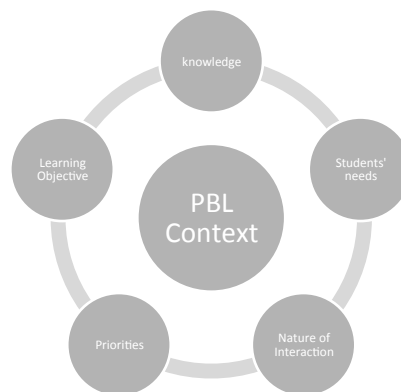


Figure (3) PBL is a dynamic process



Autonomous learning provides a path through which the democratic practices can be established. (Duch, Groh, & Allen (Eds.) (2001) refer to PBL as an instructional

method that challenges students to “learn to learn” through their cooperative work as a means to seek solutions for real world problems. They engage their curiosity and initiate learning the subject matter. PBL prepares students to think critically and analytically, and to find and use appropriate learning resources.

In the present study, the concept of PBL, including the critical nature of knowledge, the collaborative-learning strategies and the inquiry activities, contribute to the schools intentional attempts to create global citizens. In an authentic context, learning is not a mere process to, passively, receive information to be kept in mind to pass exams. On the contrary, students should be participants in their learning environment. They have to determine their priorities and make decisions, as preliminary activities to practice in their communities, where they are required to take social responsibilities. Tittle (2011) argues that learners, in their practice of critical thinking will have more autonomy, independence, and freedom than people who just go with the flow and, accept whatever is given to them. He also suggests that becoming good citizens: not only will people see the problems in society, but they will, hopefully, see the solutions. In this respect, people might consider it as their duty to be critical thinkers. In a democratic learning environment, learners do not take information for granted; however, it is purposefully and critically managed. Citizens of democratic societies should select, elect and think about what should /should not exist.

PBL learning context components need to adopt an autonomous learning procedure in which students learn how to build up and criticize meaning. Barrett (2005) refers to PBL as “both a curriculum and a process. The curriculum consists of carefully selected and designed problems that demand from the learner acquisition of critical knowledge, problem-solving proficiency, self-directed learning strategies and team participation skills. The process replicates the commonly used systematic approach for resolving problems or meeting challenges that are encountered in life and career” (p14).

The Power of Knowledge in a Democratic Society

In conventional communities, students are considered blank sheets of papers. During their schooling years, they had to be prepared for exams just to get their certificates and to find jobs. In such communities, students should not be expected to act positively to participate in social services. However, it is not the case of democratic societies in which students are empowered to practice democracy through classroom collaborative activities. Svinicki (2007) refuses to view students “as blank slates on which our words are inscribed”. She adds that “students bring more to the interpretation of the situation than we realize. What they learn is conditioned by what they already know. What they know can be as damaging as what they don't know” (p.2)

Students' initiatives are the real starting point for learning. In PBL, students encounter ill-structured problems, or debatable issues that elicit thinking and different learning acts such as; inquiry, navigation, collaboration with other team members, brainstorming, mind-mapping ideas and other positive actions. However, what they know in a particular moment may have value than what they actually need to know, and the relevant knowledge they can actually produce. It represents a challenge for constructing meaning for learning. This interactive process of give and take motivates

the learners for further investigation. In other words, knowledge should not be prescribed and pre-determined with ready-made old concepts suggested by specialized experts as usual, because most of them have old beliefs that do not match with the needs of young people or their requirements. However, students' needs for critical knowledge should be determined by the students within a national, cultural, global, and educational framework. Furthermore, civic-literacy components should be recognized as a prerequisite for students' preparation. According to an Eric report (2013) that suggests PBL as a vital approach for engaging students to become active citizens in building their communities they need to:

1. "build global knowledge networks and authentic learning milieus to bring democratic changes in their communities;
2. understand critical communication possibilities and potentials about social justice issues for lifelong learning to recreate dialogical and democratic forms of pedagogy and community engagement; and
3. explore powerful democratic communicational practices that promote dialogues between them, augment cognitive learning skills and generate motivations for multi-generational participations "(p. 2)

PBL and Citizenship in a Democratic Society

The role of education is to prepare citizens for life. The term 'citizenship' should be reconceptualized. Besides, a strong feeling of belonging to a particular geographic, historical, and social identity, students should contribute to the welfare of their country. 'Francois et al., (2002) asserts that "even, in the conventional societies, curricula should consider authenticity and current themes to cope with worldwide changes" (p.9). They explain that a citizenship should move from a conception of citizenship that emphasizes the "feeling of belonging and obedience to the collective rules, to a more individualistic and more instrumental conception of citizenship. (p.9). In the absence of personal as well as collaborative connection, students' engagement declines, leading to disengagement (Griffiths, Lilles, Furlong& Sidhwa, 2012).

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) report titled 'A: Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future' suggests four levels for civic literacy, i.e. knowledge; to ensure students' awareness of basic concepts, values; to manage with the ethical components of democracy, and collective action; for practicing civic inquiry as part of life and work demands for the 21st century democratic society.

Though, knowledge, belonging, capacity to tolerate others, and to resolve possible conflicts according to social constraints and laws are necessary for positive participation in democratic societies, which are absent in traditional learning contexts. However, practicing citizenship is a comprehensive task that elicits the co-operation of multifaceted formal and informal settings, and media resources to provide what should positively affect the learners' convictions and attitudes towards democracy. It is also awareness of curriculum designers to consider democratic positive concepts that pave the way for simple democratic practices in the educational institute and, in the society.

English Language Contexts and PBL in a Democratic Society

The application of PBL starts with concept attainment. Determining concept meaning can be done through collaborative work, brainstorming, and presenting what the students know, and making decisions regarding what they should investigate. It increases the students' awareness of the complexity of real life.

The power of critical knowledge lies in developing the students' autonomous learning strategies that increases the ability of decision-making and determining priorities. In nondemocratic societies, English language learners are submitted to what is called "getting knowledge" that refers to the transmission of knowledge and the authoritarian attitude of the teacher. Accordingly, the end product is a citizen, who does not often possess initiatives. A person who is unable to identify rights and duties; who does not think of the others' rights, nor tolerate them; who cannot share responsibilities with them, nor even engage in collaborative work.

In ELT, autonomous learning is a necessary concept for creating self-confidence and accordingly, self-expression. A mere curriculum design cannot develop the students' cognitive responsibility of constructing an understanding of language concepts. However, autonomous learners, who can believe in their powers as creators of knowledge, and being at the frontiers of practice, can develop their cognitive abilities. Ong, (2012). Language teachers should encourage students to set the statement of the debatable issues, and start investigating their prior knowledge to find answers for expected question marks. "Through the freedom of action provided by PBL, students can vary the techniques for knowledge management according to their individual preferences, problem authenticity, problem familiarity/complexity, as well as research "Ong (ibid.p.12)

PBL application starts with concept attainment. In English language learning, it takes place through collaborative work, brainstorming, and making decisions regarding what students should investigate. It increases the students' awareness of the complexity of the real world issues, which enhances hands-on activities to solve problems. In PBL, students create awareness, collect information, and analyze ideas and their interrelationships of a text. They also find priorities of solutions, learn how to defend their viewpoints, and at the same time, accept or refuse the ideas of others in an argumentative context. At the same time, they can start further investigation, because all the answers are not final, and somebody else may add or modify the current solutions.

In language learning, questioning strategies represent a prominent feature for critical knowledge. Postman and Weingarten (2013) investigated the importance of inquiry through asking relevant and appropriate questions. Still, further investigation is needed to answer more difficult questions rather than settling for simplistic answers

English language learning/teaching is a necessary context for self-expression. Old methodologies, emergent in the 20th century do not match with the new reality of the 21st century. More progressive concepts such as critical knowledge, students' initiatives, self-expression, self-learning, inquiry, group dynamics, collaborative learning, technological attainment, and authenticity should replace the old ones.

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One of the most important techniques of PBL in language learning is 'problem-solving' in which students attempt to seek out the problem from different perspectives. All alternatives are discussed and analyzed to arrive at consensus/compromise.

The researcher suggests the following pedagogic and democratic values and practices:

1. Establishing persuasive, argumentative and debatable processes to provide for self-expression.
2. Acceptance/refusal of others' suggestions with no reference to failure or winning.
3. Criticizing, agreement/ refusal of own or others' ideas are not personal issues.
4. Seeking knowledge, not a mere getting of information, is a preliminary activity for further learning.
5. Mutual understanding, tolerance and respect of others are dominant features of learning.

Furthermore, argumentation, engagement in debates, raising questions, presenting ideas, reflecting and mind-mapping ideas, revising reports and wrapping up of debates, defending own viewpoint, and considering the viewpoints of others, persuasion, seeking knowledge for evidence, finding priorities, making decisions, and feeling satisfaction with the groups' final decision, are all prerequisites that can enhance language learning and support democratic practices.

Testing critical knowledge is different from standardized tests. It cannot separate knowledge into tiny pieces of information stored for exams' purpose. However, the knowledge acquired in an authentic PBL context is validated through the implementation of possibilities and the students' ability to make it fruitful for them and the others. MCQ tests cannot match the intellectual, social, and pedagogic components taking place in this non-conventional context. Nevertheless, narration, telling stories, paper/electronic portfolios, role playing, and conducting projects are possible techniques for assessment. "Those who innovate learning strategies must be ready to adjust new assessment strategies, otherwise, the purpose of the entire enterprise may well be defeated" (Lombardy, 2012).

The teacher is a facilitator, and a tutor, however, s/he is not a resource for information. Barrows and Hmelo-Silver (2005) suggest some strategies through which the teacher ensures positive student engagement in the learning process. Through asking students to summarize, draw charts, and generate hypotheses to help them focus their inquiries to the required knowledge learners' engagement can be increased.

To attain concepts, analyze and criticize them, technological contexts represent a good medium for rapid interchange, Richardson (2009) sees that the weblog is a

democratic tool that supports different learning styles for students. He suggests some technological devices such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networks to render learning independent of time and space.

To wrap up, 'citizenship' is not a mere social concept. However, it has pedagogic, political, cultural, critical and, linguistic reflections. Duerr, Spajic-Verkas, and Martins.(2000) confirm that "the term "citizen" firstly, does not merely imply a legal status within the political system; rather, it implies competences, skills and capabilities that must be transmitted in a lifelong learning process". Fostering the civic concept is not an issue to practice in learning institutions, however, various social, cultural, and political institutions, as well as, art and media are all partners in this responsibility.

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