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Two Models Compared: Problem-Based Learning and Task-Based Learning

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Abstract

Task-based learning (TBL) and Problem-based learning (PBL) approaches are two comparatively new models of language teaching and learning. They developed as a reaction to the traditional models of language teaching such as PPP (presentation, practice, production) and subject-based learning. The concept of problem-solving lies at the heart of TBL and PBL. Problems are essential in PBL, being the only things that students have to deal with. Problems and problem-solving activities in TBL are of somewhat less importance than in PBL.

Introduction

This paper deals with two fairly new approaches to language teaching and learning, namely, Task-based learning (TBL) and Problem-based learning (PBL). They have been developed against traditional models of language teaching such as, for example, the PPP model in which students had to master “the target language in ready-to-assimilate pieces” (Foster, 1999), starting with easier elements and gradually moving towards more difficult types of activities, or against the “passive learning” of the special subject in a lecture mode-dominated classroom where students are supposed to “listen, record, and store information for later memorizing”. (Kosel, 2002: 2)

PBL and TBL introduce the concept of problems and problem-solving. Problems are the cornerstone of the two approaches, especially in PBL. In PBL students must find solutions to the problems whose answers are not known to the teacher either. They have to link new and old information to come up with the solution.

The first part of the paper discusses TBL. The second part deals with PBL. And the last part compares and contrasts TBL and PBL.

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Task-based approach to teaching language is a recent view which is based on the findings of linguists and psychologists. This approach is against traditional approaches such as PPP model of language teaching (“presentation, practice, production”). Traditionally language has been regarded as a process of mastering a succession of steps, each one building on the one before (Foster, 1999). The PPP model of language teaching is also based on the assumption that a language is best

presented to learners as a series of structures. “Errors are evidence of poor learning, requiring more PPP treatment” (Foster, 1999).

Task-based syllabus which is the cornerstone of TBL is defined by Richards, et al (1991) as:

“A syllabus which is organized around TASKs, rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary. For example, the syllabus may suggest a variety of different kinds of tasks which the learners are expected to carry out in the language, such as using the telephone to obtain information; drawing maps based on oral instruction; giving orders and instruction to others, etc.” (pp373-4).

Tim Bowen mentions Jane Willis’ (1996) model of task-based learning which is built upon sound theoretical foundations and takes into account the need for authentic communication. He says that her model is based on three stages:

“The first of these is the Pre-task stage during which the teacher introduces and defines the topic and the learners engage in activities that either help them recall words and phrases that will be useful during the performance of the main task or to learn new words and phrases that are essential to the task. This stage is followed by what Willis calls the “Task Cycle.” Here the learners perform the task (typically a reading or listening exercise or a problem-solving exercise) in pairs or small groups. They then prepare a report for the whole class on how they did the task what conclusions they reached. Finally, they present their findings to the class in spoken or written form. The final stage is the “language focus” stage during which specific language features from the task are highlighted and worked on” (p. 1).

Richards, et al. (1991) define task as “an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular language goal.” Rabinni (2002) regards tasks as being relevant to the real world language needs of the students. That is, the underlying theory of the task-based approach seems to suggest that activities in which language is used to complete meaningful tasks enhance learning. Foster (1999) explains that there are different task-based approaches which share a common idea: giving learners tasks to transact, rather than items to learn, providing an environment which best promotes the natural language learning process.

Often problem solving is an element present in tasks and to solve a certain problem students need to use the target language. Students accomplish this by using whatever language resources they possess and, as they move on, they notice the gap between what they already know and what they need to know or improve so that they can carry out a specific task in English (Martinez).

According to Bowen, the main advantages of TBL are that language is used for genuine purpose, meaning that communication should take place and that when preparing the report for the class, students should consider language form in general rather than concentration on a single form (as in PPP model). The aim is to integrate all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency.

Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a curriculum development and instructional system that develops both problem-solving strategies and disciplinary knowledge bases and skills by placing students in the active role of problem-solvers faced with an “ill-structured problem” that mirrors real world problems (Stovers, 1998). PBL emphasizes the learning part of the teaching-learning process (Gvardjancic, 2001). It is based on the idea that learners learn what is meaningful to them and learn better if they feel in control of what they are learning (ibid).

In education the idea of PBL is not new. It was developed in the 1970's when McMaster Medical School introduced a learning environment as a reaction to traditional models of teaching that first were used in medicine, health science, and other natural sciences. It has been a major success since the 1970's. PBL turns the instructions topsy-turvy. In the place of covering the curriculum, learners probe deeply into issues searching for connections, grappling with complexity, and using knowledge to fashion solutions (Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). According to Stover (1998) PBL "will increase retention of knowledge, help students transfer concepts to new problems, enhance students interest in the content and enhance self-directed learning" (p. 2).

The main idea of PBL is that a group of students is presented with an "ill-structured" problem—that is, it has many solutions—that reflects a real problem from their professional field. Students who encounter the problem will not have most of the relevant information needed to solve the problem from the very beginning. Real problem are the heart of PBL model. But what are the characteristics of good problems? Duch lists some of the characteristics of good problems as:

1. An effective problem must first engage students' interest and motivate them to probe for deeper understanding of the concepts being introduced.

2. Good problems require students to make decisions or judgments based on facts, logic and/or rationalization.

3. Cooperation from all members of the student group is necessary in order to work effectively through a good problem.

4. The initial questions in the problem should have one or more of the following characteristics; they should be:

    open-ended
    connected to previously learned knowledge
    controversial issues that will elicit divers opinions.

5. The content objectives of the course should be incorporated into the problems, connecting previous knowledge to new concepts and connecting new knowledge to concepts in other courses and/or disciplines.

In the field of language teaching and learning, however, the use of PBL is relatively new (Kosel, 2002). This novel teaching approach according to Vukadinovic (2003) has been introduced with the desire to integrate language and content study to facilitate autonomous learning. In this model, a group of students are given a problem to solve in their field of study, prepare a report, and present the results in the class. The idea to use PBL in language learning was developed by a Leonardo da Vinci pilot project for the year 1999/2000 entitled Teaching English for Technical Purposes—TENTEC.

Gvardjancic (2001) says the following about the results:

"The results of the project showed that was especially appropriate for teaching languages across the curriculum for some reason. Firstly, there is the question of motivation. ESP teachers sometimes find it difficult to motivate their technically or professionally oriented students for language learning. Even carefully designed curricula, which follow needs analysis, do not always meet the real interests of young student population. Updated textbooks soon become boring and obsolete since new information is easily accessible on the internet. So, a real-life problem raises motivation. Secondly, and closely connected with the question of motivation, is the

significance of teaching languages across the curriculum. Languages at tertiary level are often treated as second-rate subjects. This situation is reflected in students' attitude towards language as a faculty subject which they consider a necessary evil but not linked to what they believe to be their genuine study program. This situation can be changed. Working closely with "subject teachers", language specialist becomes involved with the faculty programmes, while the students feel they can combine their professional knowledge and their knowledge of language" (pp. viii-ix).

Kosel (2002) enumerates the following as some of the advantages of PBL approach in teaching English across the curriculum:

1. A real problem raises motivation, much more than a preselected sequence of information from a course book.

2. In the model, students can integrate their professional knowledge and their knowledge of English.

3. The model makes them better equipped with functional skills needed for their professional careers and thus makes them more competitive on the job market.

4. Individual and social learning are combined.

5. English is learnt while doing something else, which goes together with the slogan "Learn by Doing."

PBL and TBL Compared

At first glance PBL and TBL look the same. They have many things in common. Kosel (2002, p. 2) says that "they both developed as a reaction to traditional models, only that they developed along different paths." She goes on saying that "PBL developed as a reaction to subject-based learning which starts with large tracts of the subject matter transmitted by the teacher to the students, and which they are expected to learn. Subject-based learning is a passive way of learning, where students listen, record, and store information for later memorizing, whereas in PBL they are much more actively involved in the learning process. In PBL students have to think independently, link old and new knowledge, develop a set of problem-solving criteria, find a solution to a case from real life, and function well in a group."

Her comments on TBL are as follows:

"Just the same active involvement is strived for in TBL. Willis (1990, p. 127) defines TBL as an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome. Various task-based approaches all share the same idea: giving students tasks to transact, rater than items to learn, and in this way create a real purpose for learning. It is in this last aspect that PBL and TBL are similar" (ibid).

The concept of the problem and problem-solving which lie at the heart of both approaches is the source of difference. Both approaches claim to use real problems, that is, the problem whose answers are not already known. TBL often exploits problems whose answers are already known to the English teacher, but the tasks are of a special type since the purpose of the task is not to solve a problem but to be a carrier for the language items to be taught which have been specified by the teacher (Barron, 2003).

In the TBL model, according to Kosel (2002), problem-solving is mainly considered as a type of task, whereas in PBL problem-solving is the whole learning process. Problem-solving elements which are present in TBL suggest to some teachers that they are engaged in problem-based learning. But Barron (2003) says that the emphasis "is on perfecting knowledge of the language system in the students whereby the interweaving of knowledge and language that is necessary for problem-solving is neglected. Language is only a tool and knowledge is controlled" (p. 9).

In PBL the answer to the problem is not known to the teacher. Students should search for solutions to that problem through library work or the internet. There is no control of knowledge, as is present in TBL. Learners are free to bring in any new finding about the problem. And the improvement of the language system is an unconscious phenomenon that takes place when students are in search of solutions to the problems.

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