



Engaging the Community in a Problem-Based Model of English Language Learning

Melissa Lavitt, Diane Boothe

Boise State University (United State of America)

melissalavitt@boisestate.edu, dianeboothe@boisestate.edu

Abstract

This presentation focuses on actively engaging community members incorporating a problem-based learning (PBL) model to strengthen English language acquisition. This transformational learning strategy is based on three elements; achieving success in English language learning (ELL) through innovative pedagogy, creating hands-on PBL real world activities to empower students, and supporting learning by building community partnerships and fostering collaboration. Community members actively engaged in robust ELL contribute economic, societal and cultural benefits and create new avenues to inspire creativity and enthusiasm for learning. By utilizing PBL methods that empower critical thinking and incorporate real world experiences and community interaction, ELL becomes a collaborative effort rewarded by communication with community leaders who will challenge students and strengthen learning. Implementation of this innovative PBL multi-dimensional model engages and motivates all students, including those from underserved populations, and provides the opportunity to build relationships and connect with community members in ways that they never thought possible. Integrated technologies can also be utilized to improve ELL instruction and build workplace skills across the spectrum of community responsibilities. This presentation and paper will provide examples of ways to leverage a variety of community resources and professionals to transform ELL. This approach can also be expanded to myriad contexts and disciplines incorporating content across the curriculum. The pedagogical potential including meaningful research opportunities and analytics, as well as strategies for ELL educators to frame best practices focused on the diverse learning needs of the students will be discussed. When ELL students and educators leverage stimulating and dynamic PBL student-centered experiences sustained by community engagement, achievement and performance is increased. This model can be replicated for the specific needs and abilities of all ages and levels of learning. We found that community members welcome the collaborative opportunity to become involved, interface with students, build relationships and make positive contributions to ELL performance and outcomes. This positive interaction provides rich and high quality experiences for community members and students adding value to learning and setting the stage for future accomplishments and success.

Community involvement is a key contributor to success in English language acquisition. Numerous complexities exist within communication composed of multicultural environments and multilingual citizens. When the focus becomes English language acquisition, problem-based learning (PBL) has been found to be successful in engaging learners in relevant settings that reinforce and sustain successful outcomes. PBL has evolved from the medical field to numerous disciplines and the pedagogy for linguistically diverse students encourages them to interact and engage in real world problem solution. From a cognitive constructivist point of view, learners are presented with a problem that activates previously acquired knowledge. This knowledge is built upon as learners collaborate in small groups coming up with empirical evidence to support hypotheses and engage in problem solving and the process of learning [1]. Through the use of community involvement and active communication, essential language skills are mastered and reinforced. The use of authentic student-centered community engagement accomplishes far more than rudimentary language skills. Through the valuable process of integration of language with involvement in high-quality community experiences, this format simultaneously develops learning that is student-centered and transformational. Globally, what better way to impact language learning with innovative PBL pedagogy than to focus on real-world learning activities that sustain community partnerships and encourage collaboration among citizens? In Idaho, we have a significant Latino or Hispanic population of native Spanish speakers. However, over one hundred native languages other than English are represented requiring opportunities for English language learners from various backgrounds to interact and collaborate. In Boise, Idaho, refugees displaced from numerous nations are making a significant impact on the community.



Because they will not be returning to their native country and there is no chance for repatriation, the need for English language acquisition is even more powerful.

What follows is a discussion of the community activities focused on the PBL model incorporating student-centered language learning through community engagement.

The literature provides many creative and powerful examples of PBL and ELL. As a teaching approach it has both linguistic benefits, as shown in the research on the role of natural, meaning-focused classroom interaction in language learning, and affective benefits in the form of raising student motivation and promoting learner autonomy and transfer of learning beyond the classroom [2]. The research provides less guidance, however, relative to selection of the site for PBL projects. The critical and transformative feature of this pedagogical approach requires thoughtful selection of the partner agency. One challenge is that students who share a common first language may use that language rather than English when working in groups on the assigned problem. This difficulty can be addressed by placing students of different language backgrounds in the same group [3].

In general, it is important to select a partner site that has deep roots and broad connections in the community. Not only will the authenticity of PBL be enhanced, but future engagement is more likely. With on-going engagement, ELL becomes stronger. More specifically, criteria of good partner include the following:

- **Mutual benefit:** In addition to being established or well-connected, PBL sites should be able to articulate an organizational benefit in developing stronger connections with the refugee community; in fact, each PBL team should identify a benefit to each participant. This often means looking to neighborhood recreation centers, social service agencies, or mission-specific community-based agencies that actively seek participation and broader community inclusion. For example, a refugee-serving social service agency benefits from access to a pipeline of newcomers to long-term residents. Furthermore, local government offices that focus on serving specific neighborhoods also see value in engaging with established and newer immigrant families.
- **Sustainability:** In order to truly empower participants, it is critical that relationships are formed and teams designed with sustainability in mind. It does not serve the student or the community if the professional teacher holds the keys to the community network. Instead, participants need to be fully engaged in creating mutually reinforcing relationships. In this way sustainability over time is ensured and both the ELL and the community partner see value-added. PBL projects often have a specific product or end-point. Planning should include post-project updates, roles for "alumni," or tutors for future classes.
- **Skill or competency based:** Successful community-based PBL initiatives should provide opportunities to either develop and/or demonstrate an existing skill or competency. This is important because outcomes are clearly identified, and areas for improvement are obvious and not blurred by cultural misunderstandings. For example, participants in a community garden are likely to have shared ideas about what constitutes a successful garden; that is, recognition of a bountiful harvest is likely to transcend cultural definition. The process of designing and working in the garden, however, may highlight ethnic, national and social differences. For example, what and how to plant will reflect cultural variation. When students arrive at a problem with pre-existing competency, they are more likely to feel comfortable taking other linguistic risks.
- **Access to and availability of broader network:** The quality of the PBL project and experience are influenced by the context of a particular setting. More importantly, however, is the quality of the agency's community network. Therefore, the selection and partnering process must take into account the broader community in which the student will interact. To be truly transformational, the learning must extend and endure beyond completion of the learning product.

Many PBL activities (gardening, art, international food events) often have a sponsoring entity. When selecting partners, it is important to identify the type of network connected to the PBL site. For example, possible sponsors include: faith based organizations, schools, social service agencies, and governmental offices. Each of these entities represents a powerful community-based network. However, not all programs, learning opportunities, and initiatives provide easy access to the partner's network. In order to ascertain the "connectability" of a sponsor's network, it may be important to find out about a partner's advisory boards, volunteers, and related professionals, and their involvement in the PBL activities. It is through these broader community connections that habits of inclusion and engagement are most likely to develop to the benefit of all participants.



The power of PBL in a community setting rests on the extent to which students remain active participants in a community connection - beyond the classroom. Newcomers must reconstruct their identity as they build a new home in a culturally unfamiliar place. The process is facilitated through interactions with a broader swath of community members who represent various facets of the student's new home. For example, in a recent project for the City of Boise, a webpage of translation resources was created in partnership with the university's school of social work, the city, and several local refugee serving instructors and agencies. A diverse, multi-national group of "students" also served as language experts, while working with university student interns and city employees. Furthermore, this real-work project also provided access to and instruction in software that is easily found in most public libraries. The experience provided specific skills and products, as well as access to deep networks of connections. Each participant came to recognize their role and contribution to each other's civic interactions. Furthermore, these connections are rich because the participants interacted from multiple perspectives student/teacher/consumer/citizen.

To summarize, there are many examples of PBL projects, partnerships, and products. Popular and effective initiatives have been developed at ethnic markets, community gardens, dual language schools, sports programs, community art programs, and language learning centers. Across settings, the process is generally similar. English language learners first identify a meaningful problem, such as growing a garden, running a booth at an art fair, or developing social service programs for families. Furthermore, typical phases can be identified in most projects. These include: problem selection, planning, researching, preparing outcomes or deliverables, sharing results and assessing the conclusions [4].

Benefits

The benefits of this pedagogical approach are observable for ELLs, community members, sponsoring agencies, and the community at large. It appears that PBL in community settings provides students with a direct pathway inside a community, while retaining key competencies of an older identity, and embracing the opportunity to acquire new cultural competencies in a safe environment. Students have opportunities to "validate their own knowledge, and construct new knowledge" [5]. Furthermore, this pedagogy is likely to support deeper integrative learning because it likely to be perceived as relevant, personal, and experiential. Students solve problems they find meaningful. The community setting provides an opportunity to identify with a role other than "newcomer" and use less linguistically based skills such as gardening, art, and religion.

More practically, PBL for ELL provides experiences and competencies that are valued by employers. Students' projects may, in fact, focus on micro enterprise initiatives.

Benefit to community partner: PBL helps an agency move from culturally adapted to culturally specific practice. PBL makes it more likely for a project to be co-constructed and therefore culturally specific [6]. Furthermore, engaged and experiential learning experiences offer a powerful relational component. Relationships between participants are often key to effecting personal and organizational or community change. In fact, some would argue that ELL should include "opportunities to think critically about and perhaps to effect change in their lives" [7].

Future research should explore how to operationalize and measure the community benefit of these learning opportunities. Through observation and anecdote, it is clear that benefits are mutual. Assessing and describing these positive outcomes would help us understand how to design future transformative learning experiences.

Investigation of community engagement in PBL can be extended to other learning contexts. For example, business, international business, and universities. Our work identifies key criteria that are essential for selecting a partner for PBL projects. In general, opportunities that lead to on-going, sustainable engagement are those that are competency based, and allow connections to robust community networks. PBL supports authentic learning and improves/increases language acquisition. When this occurs in an engaged and supportive community, students can develop skills that are valued by employers. Using sustainable community-based projects, learning deepens and extends to mutually reinforcing networks [8].

References

- [1] Henk G Schmidt, Jerome I Rotgans, and Elaine HJ Yew. August 01, 2011. "The process of problem-based learning: what works and why." *history: from those who wrote it*.



- [2] Julie Mathews-Aydinli. April 2007. "Problem-Based Learning and Adult English Language Learners." *Center for Applied Linguistics Brief*.
- [3] Julie Mathews-Aydinli. April 2007. "Problem-Based Learning and Adult English Language Learners." *Center for Applied Linguistics Brief*.
- [4] Donna Moss and Carol Van Duzer. 1998. "Project-Based Learning for Adult English Language Learners." *National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education*.
- [5] Klaudia M. Rivera. 1999. "Popular and Social Transformation: A Community-Based Approach to Critical Pedagogy." *A Journal for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*.
- [6] Lynet Uttal. 2006. "Organizational Cultural Competency: Shifting Programs for Latino Immigrants from a Client-Centered to a Community-Based Orientation." *American Journal of Community Psychology*.
- [7] Dana Frye. "Participatory Education as a Critical Framework for an Immigrant Women's ESL Class."
- [8] Donna Moss and Carol Van Duzer. 1998. "Project-Based Learning for Adult English Language Learners." *National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education*.