

# The Integration of PBL in College English from Core Competence Perspective

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**Abstract.** This article mainly focuses on the basic procedure of how to integrate Problem-based Learning (hereafter called PBL) into an ESL classroom in Chinese universities, so that front-line teachers can draw on some practical skills from this article. This study uses literature analysis to know the current situation on implementation of PBL in the ESL classroom and its implementation procedure in other disciplines. Besides, action research methodology is used to test out the effects of existing procedures and then based on others' research findings, the article provides a basic model for the integration of PBL in the ESL classroom for English teachers. The findings show PBL can develop students' problem-solving skills, ability to cooperate and communicate, critical thinking ability and so on, at the same time, stimulate students' curiosity for English and improve their English ability, especially in speaking. The findings also highlight the urgent need for teachers and students in Chinese universities to get the hang of the basic knowledge and key points of PBL, considering the giant difference between PBL and traditional teaching methods. Hopefully, the universities can prepare students for the challenges soon, cultivate students' core competencies after incorporating new teaching methods into teaching.

**Keywords:** Problem-based learning; Core competency; ESL

## 1. Introduction

Compared with international students, Chinese students are often regarded as the ones with solid subject foundation but lacking creativity, problem-solving skills, which sometimes are called "their shortcomings" [1]. In 2014, the ministry of education in China issued *Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening Curriculum Reform and Implementing the Fundamental Task of Building Morals and Building People* (hereinafter referred to as "Opinions"), put forward "taking curriculum reform as an important starting point and breakthrough to implement the fundamental task of fostering integrity, it was proposed for the first time to formulate a core competency system for student development and combine core competencies with various disciplines [2]. 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China further emphasize "implement the Fundamental Task of Building Morals and Building People; develop Essential-qualities-oriented education". *The guidelines for college English teaching (the latest version)* issued by the ministry of education points out that the teaching objectives for college English should include cultivating students' practical skills of English, enhancing the awareness of cross-culture communication and communicative skills, simultaneously developing independent learning ability, and enhancing comprehensive cultural competency in order to make sure that students can use English effectively in their study, social life and even in their future career life and satisfy the development needs from country, society and individuals. Students develop language skills, problem-solving and thinking skills by doing rather than direct instruction from teachers [3]. Problem Based Learning (PBL) starts from the problems existing in real world, and now it seems to be a proper method to be adopted in English classroom in universities [4]. Under this situation, our education system should strive for developing opportunities for students to explain

meaningfully the experience, events and actions, solve real-life problems and develop their creativity [5]. Those teachers should study and research how to integrate PBL into college English is of great necessity and importance.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Development of PBL. PBL was first shown at McMaster University in Canada.

According to Barrows [6], the acquisition and integration of knowledge for PBL teaching method are based on the real-world problems. Compared with traditional teacher-centered learning, PBL enjoys many advantages. For example, it can push students to explore, develop their independent learning ability, cultivate high-order thinking and immerse students in real-life scenarios [7]. As a brand-new teaching method back then, once spread, it was favored by people in the medical area. In the late 20th century, K12 school started to adopt PBL in teaching. In 1998, a study at Stanford and Vanderbilt Universities shows benefits of PBL for problem-solving and planning. In 2002, Stanford study shows benefits of PBL in mathematics. Since the 1990s, our educators, researchers and the like have started introducing a number of researches in PBL field, and some theory introduction and practical exploration popped up [8]. Currently, research on the use of PBL mainly focuses on medical and other subjects. For English classroom, especially for ESL contexts, little research has been made [9]. So, it is of great necessity to explore how to better incorporate PBL into other fields like College English course in order to satisfy the needs from society, individuals and government policy. However, considering Chinese students are used to teacher-centered teaching mode, and not good at thinking creatively. There is a long way to go for PBL implementation in College English.

## 3. Clarify and Define Relevant Concepts

### 3.1 The Teaching Features of PBL. As a problem-oriented learning method, the main teaching features of PBL are as follows:

**Student-centered:** For teachers, they are no longer instructors but facilitators. Students need center on the questions at the very beginning put forward by teachers figuring out the answers.

**Real-life relevance:** The problems teacher come up with should be related to real life. Under this context, students could have the chance to solve the problems they can meet in real life. They will not have the feeling that classroom teaching is separated from real life, and it is useless to some extent.

**Interdisciplinary:** To solve the problems, students need combine other subjects' knowledge rather than just focus on English itself

**Teamwork:** Students need communicate and cooperate with their team members to finish the tasks given by the teacher just like real-life scenario, they couldn't solve all problems on their own

**Critical thinking:** When they manage to get tasks done, they need search, analyze materials from different sources, collect data, and make their own decisions. Gradually they will have the ability to think critically.

**3.2 The Value of PBL in Developing College Students' Core Competencies** Core competency refers to that the values, essential skills and necessary abilities are shown by individuals facing complicated, uncertain situations in the global, information society when they utilize the knowledge, concept, and methods that they have learned. Core competency emphasizes the value system, and problem-solving ability faced with real life. PBL, based on problems, is devoted to setting the real-life scenario in the classroom in conjunction with teaching objectives. During this process, it helps students develop critical thinking, ability to solve problems, cooperate with others and communicative ability. So this kind of method is suitable for cultivating students' core competencies.

**3.3 The English Class Structure Combined with PBL.** Fig. 1 shows a conceptual framework of PBL within an ESL classroom [10].

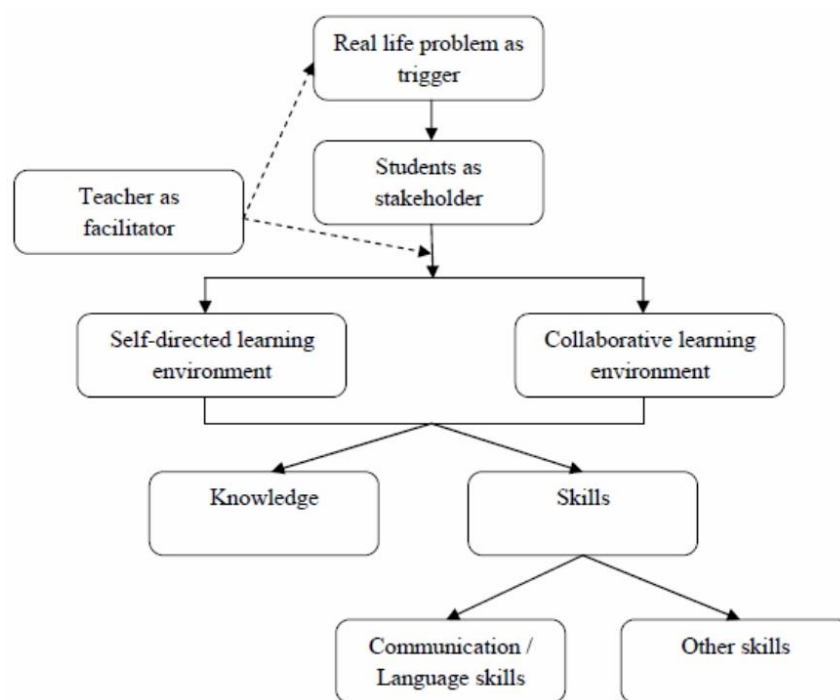


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework of PBL in English Classroom

#### 4. Basic Model for PBL in English Course

Constructivists believed that by constructing meaning in particular occasions, the learning of knowledge can be obtained under the help from others, such as cooperation, communication and information sharing. For an ideal learning environment, four elements should be included: scenario, collaboration, communication and meaning construction.

Based on this, Doctor Lv put forward the basic process followed by PBL teaching method is generally: raising questions - organizing groups - independent learning - displaying results - summarizing and evaluating [11]. Modifying her version and combing Robert Delisle's idea [12], the general process for PBL teaching method should be: raising questions—setting up the structure—organizing groups—producing a product or performance—evaluating.

**4.1 Raise Questions.** As Barrows said: The acquisition of knowledge arises from the process of recognizing and solving problems. Learning begins when encountering a problem, which in turn drives the application of problem-solving and reasoning skills, while also motivates students to independently seek information, learn about the subject matter, its organization, and methods of problem resolution. So, it is of great importance for teachers to incorporate real-life scenarios when make the teaching design.

When teachers come up with the problems, they need stick to the following principles: meet the curriculum objectives; connecting the external world with the theoretical world; relating problems to the most concerns of students; evoke students' curiosity for exploring and the like.

**4.2 Set up the Structure.** As Robert said [12], this structure provides a basis on which students can build their project. It makes sure that students' work has a proper foundation... showing students how to think through the situation and reach an appropriate solution. " Teachers serve as a facilitator rather than the lecturer or instructor. With this structure, we can make sure students move towards a right direction.

**4.3 Organize Groups.** Teachers divide students into several groups. Each group at least has 4 members, which makes sure there is a recorder writing down the key points of group discussion. In this process, students can use their mobile phones, laptops to search information. When they exchange their ideas with group members, they need use English. Students can't learn a language well without speaking it in real life. Every student should be involved in this discussion.

**4.4 Producing a product or performance.** When it comes to the product of learning project, it should cover the following key points: product is related to the devotion-driven questions; it should cover the efforts from individuals and the whole team; it should signify the student's deep understanding for core concept; it should include the description about how it is finished.

**4.5 Evaluate.** The evaluation of this teaching method covers the whole process, and the final product is just the vehicle of the whole process. Evaluation includes peer evaluation, evaluation from teachers and self-evaluation. By doing these things, both students and teachers can benefit from each PBL task.

## 5. Summary

From what we have discussed above, carrying out PBL theory in College English course is a challenging task to do. All in all, for the time being, if you want to incorporate PBL into an English course, you can stick to the procedure mentioned above. The procedure is waiting for optimizing through joint practice and thinking. English course is different from science subjects. Unlike other majors, as a second language in China, when teachers try to design a project based on the textbooks, they need both consider the content and language points. The further exploration on PBL implementation requires the joint efforts from all of us.

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