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بِوَسِيْلَةِ سُنَّتِيْ اِسْلَامٍ اَنْبَارٍ اِيْجِيْبًا مِلْدِيْنًا

A STUDY OF THE PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING
(PBL) APPROACH IN AN ESP CLASSROOM AT
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
MALAYSIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to examine the feasibility of using problem-based learning in an English for Specific Purpose (ESP) classroom. This study examines the implications of using problem-based learning on students' language proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing and how the problem-based syllabus affects the students' performance in the second language. It also attempts to identify the effects and outcomes of problem-based learning on students' critical thinking skills. Furthermore, it analyses the advantages and disadvantages of using problem-based learning as a language learning tool for ESP learners and as a teaching approach in an ESP classroom. Proponents of problem-based learning have promoted this approach as one that is active, dynamic, self-motivational and directed and a change from the traditional method of everyday teaching for teachers. With the current scenario of ESL in Malaysia where normally students are taught English Language skills in isolation, e.g. grammar identification and exercises at sentence level, reading of passages followed by questions, writing of essays based on given topics, etc., there is a need to find an approach that allows learners to become more proficient in their communicative skills of the English language and at the same time, able to think and reason creatively and critically. In this study, 86 undergraduate students, enrolled in a Business English course at the International Islamic University Malaysia, were divided into two groups and underwent either the problem-based approach to learning or the traditional lecture mode. Data were collected from a series of oral, cloze and essay writing tests, questionnaires, classroom observations, interviews and journal writings. At the end of the study, it was found that students who were taught using the problem-based approach improved in their language proficiency particularly in their speaking skills due to the extensive and intensive reading essential in the learning process. In addition, they demonstrated high levels of confidence in using English and seemed to be more receptive to the problem-based approach. Their critical thinking skills were further developed when they showed increased evidence of critical analysis in their written work and high order linguistic structures in their interaction in class. This study contributes to the on-going research in the methodology of teaching English in Malaysia. Problem-based learning may not be entirely perfect but it has its merits and therefore could be adapted as a teaching and learning approach at tertiary level.

ملخص البحث

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لاختبار استخدام طريقة التعلم على أساس المشكلة في فصول دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية للأغراض الخاصة، كما تحاول التعرف على الآثار الناتجة من استخدام هذه الطريقة على مهارات الطلاب اللغوية، خاصة المحادثة والكتابة. إضافة إلى ذلك، تكشف الدراسة عن مدى تأثير المناهج القائمة على أساس المشكلة على قدرات الطلاب في عملية التفكير النقدي. وأبعد من ذلك، تقوم الدراسة بتحليل مميزات وعيوب استخدام هذه الطريقة كأداة دراسة اللغة في فصول دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية للأغراض الخاصة ولطلابها. وقد أكد مؤيدو هذه الطريقة على أنها طريقة حية، قائمة على النشاط والتحفيز والتوجيه الذاتي، وتعتبر انتقالاً من الطريقة التقليدية إلى الطريقة الحديثة. والوضع الحالي في دراسة اللغة في ماليزيا يدلنا على أن غالب الطلاب يكسبون المهارات اللغوية بشكل منعزل، مما ينبؤنا وجود حاجة ملحة في توسيع دائرة تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية بحيث تزداد خبراتهم اللغوية، وترتقي قدراتهم في الإبداع والتفكير النقدي. قامت الباحثة في هذه الدراسة باختبار 86 طالباً في مرحلة البكالوريوس في قسم دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية للتواصل بها في مجال العمل، وتم تقسيمهم إلى مجموعتين، مجموعة يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية بطريقة التعلم على أساس المشكلة، والمجموعة الأخرى يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية بالطريقة التقليدية. وقد جمعت بيانات هذه الدراسة عن طريق استخدام مجموعة من الامتحانات والاستبيانات والملاحظات المدونة والمقابلات مع الطلاب وتحليل مدونات الطلاب. وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن استخدام طريقة التعلم على أساس المشكلة يحسن من قدرات الطلاب اللغوية، خاصة في مهارة الكلام، كما يزيد استخدام هذه الطريقة من ثقة الطلاب في استخدام اللغة، ويمكنهم من تحسين مهارات التفكير النقدي واستعمال اللغة بشكل أفضل. فهذه الدراسة تعد إسهاماً للبحث العلمي عن أفضل الطرق لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في ماليزيا. فطريقة التعلم على أساس المشكلة قد لا تكون طريقة كاملة خالية من العيوب، إلا أن هذه الدراسة تؤكد صلاحيتها للتطبيق على المستوى الجامعي في ماليزيا.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Maimunah Abdul Kadir

Signature

Date

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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To Mak and Bah

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The twenty-first century requires professionals who are equipped not only with a vast amount of knowledge and a number of functional skills, but also with the aspiration to continuously keep that knowledge up-to-date and to use that knowledge and skills to solve problems either individually or as part of a team. Such a requirement will necessitate changes to be made both at the workplace and to the workers themselves. The changes that occur and continue to occur at the workplace force educators to modify and vary the ways these future professionals are to be educated.

In line with this need to produce skilled professionals is the call for competent users of the English language. Since English is a major international language and the first most widely used foreign language in Malaysia and often called a ‘second language’ (Centre for Curriculum Development, 1992; Pennycook, 1994, Crystal, 1998), there is a dire need for Malaysians to demonstrate a satisfactory ability to communicate in this language. Many past and present leaders of Malaysia, among them, the former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (*The Star*, 1988; *The Star*, 1989; *New Straits Times*, 1990), have highlighted the fact that the nation requires a sufficient number of people proficient in English to participate in the global economy. A direct consequence of these two circumstances – the urgent need for Malaysians to display proficiency in using English as a second language and the nation’s intention of playing a bigger role at the international level – is the call for education to go beyond the conventional goal of imparting knowledge.

The traditional systems of schooling at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Malaysia emphasise teacher-directed learning whereby teachers spend each lesson giving information through modes of lecturing and providing exercises while students participate minimally and in most cases remain orally passive, but do rote memorisations of massive amounts of information in preparation for monthly tests or end-of-term examinations. While this has, over the years, produced an increasing number of students scoring highly in *Sijil Persekolahan Malaysia* (SPM) or the Malaysia Certificate of Education (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003) which concludes one's secondary education, potential employers, especially those in the private sectors, claim that school-leavers these days fare badly in their communication and writing skills particularly in English (Razlan, 2002; Nor Hartini, 2006; Zaharuddin, 2007), which is more prevalently used in the private sectors due to their need to correspond with their foreign counterparts around the world.

In particular, when Malaysian students complete their secondary or later their tertiary education, often the most common thing that becomes obvious about them is their inability, firstly, to communicate their thoughts, and secondly, to communicate their thoughts coherently in the English language. They seldom go beyond the simplistic nature of providing or relating known information to new ideas (Pennycook, 1994; Nunn, 2005). Employers comment that fresh graduates are not able to provide convincing answers to problems posed to them; some cannot even converse accurately at all, even during the interview session (Nurulhuda Salim¹, personal communication, February 7, 2005; Zaharuddin, 2007). Leading academicians in Malaysia are of the same opinion: many local graduates are not capable of competing at international level

¹ Nurulhuda Salim is an Assistant Manager at Kenanga Investment Bank Berhad, Kuala Lumpur. Apart from meeting and working with fresh graduates, she is also on the committee that interviews and hires new employees.

or making themselves marketable after graduation (Yusuf, 2002; Mohd. Sani, 2005). Hence, there is a high number of unemployed degree holders in the country and this is surely putting a strain on the nation's social and economic aspirations.

Effective communication skills in the English language is not the only thing that appears to be lacking in Malaysian students. Their thinking skills are inadequate and this is reflected in the way they verbalise their opinions and ideas. These problems of communicating and thinking create major barriers when these students, having completed their secondary and tertiary education, have to deal with other people at the workplace who expect some convincing input from them (Li and Mead, 2000; Nurulhuda Salim, personal communication, February 7, 2005; Nor Hartini, 2006). Therefore, teaching students how to think has become a priority in schools across Malaysia. Educators have, over the years, been consistently concerned about how students think in the classroom and have worked to improve teaching and learning methods that maximise thinking abilities. Unfortunately, such attempts have often been replaced by the more pressing needs to cover factual and academic information to prepare students for tests and examinations which teachers hope students would score highly in. Teachers are often required to teach students by providing them with information immediately, e.g. grammar rules, meaning of words, model answers for comprehension questions or model essays which students can use so that they can do well in examinations. This has often been seen as the most important task for many teachers. In some schools, getting high scores in national examinations may be the main concern of some school administrators and teachers as the results may affect the overall standing of the school in the whole country.

When students are provided model essays, for instance, and told that they can "use" them in tests or examinations in order to get high marks, it curtails the students'

ability to think critically and consequently come up with different ideas from those exemplified in the model essays because all they want is to get things correct and therefore, score high marks (Asmah, 1990; Aishah Ali², personal communication, August 12, 2004). Regurgitating the essays may get students high marks. Thinking and using their own ideas may not. According to Swartz (1989: xi), “good thinking can be taught as a normal and comfortable element of educational practice.” Thinking can be ‘taught’ in the way instructions are given and how students solve tasks, brainstorm ideas, answer questions and do other classroom activities. However, the questions and answers that are constructed in the classrooms are often of the low order type (Azimah Sazalie³, personal communication, January 11, 2005, Juliana Othman⁴, personal communication, January 20, 2005); they are those that require students to repeat information already known. Students are seldom asked for their own views or justifications for their views (Akram, 2005). Almost everything, by virtue of its factualness, is either right or wrong. Furthermore, students are neither encouraged to analyse their answers nor expected to give alternative views that are not of the masses (Akmal, 2005; Siti Marzira, 2005). Meanwhile, teachers are under pressure to complete the syllabus within the stipulated time to ensure students are well prepared for monthly, mid year and final year tests and examinations. They usually have 40 minute periods per school day to complete “planned” lessons, so many prefer to use a method of teaching which is fast, easy and guaranteed to be completed within the given period (Aishah Ali, personal communication, August 12, 2004; Chan Si Si⁵, personal communication, August 12, 2004).

² Aishah Ali was the Head of the English Department at Sekolah Menengah Sains Muar, Tanjung Agas, Johor.

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⁵ Chan Si Si was the Head of the English Department at Sekolah Menengah Sg. Abong, Muar, Johor.

This approach to teaching and learning has belatedly been seen as increasingly inefficient and outmoded. A new approach has to be taken and rightly so. A few changes have been made intermittently within the education system at primary and secondary levels, for instance, the KBSR and KBSM curricula since the early 1980s (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1984). Meanwhile, at the tertiary level, students are primarily taught in the lecture mode with increasing application of group and individual discussions and presentations. While this approach should ideally increase participation, not all students have been able to demonstrate high levels of language proficiency as well as expected outside the classroom (Akmal, 2005; Akram, 2005; Siti Marzira, 2005). The next section will discuss how English is taught in Malaysia, particularly at the tertiary level, and the concerns by different people about the standards of English in the country.

ENGLISH AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

As Malaysia forges into the new millennium and takes part in globalisation, we cannot be apathetic about the standards of communication skills that Malaysians possess. Many have pointed out the decline in standards, in all forms of interaction. Professor Khoo Kay Kim of the University of Malaya (as cited in Lau, 2002) complains about the fact that “the English spoken in university campuses today is horrible, irrespective of whether the speaker is Malay, Chinese or Indian” and adds that students in public universities usually come from a Malay-medium background and their command of English remains poor even after graduation. Other observations are given below:

This [the use of English in teaching several subjects in schools and most subjects in universities] follows a decline in English standards and concern that Malaysia will lose its competitive edge in the global economy unless they improve. According to official statistics, barely 50

percent of Malaysians are literate in English, while up to 90 percent can speak, read and write Malay ... (Richardson, 2002: 5).

Concerns about the continuing decline in English standards have sparked a keen debate here [in Malaysia] with the government worried that if the slide continues the country could lose its competitive edge. Already more than 44,000 public university graduates remain unemployed because they have unmarketable degrees and a poor command of English (Lau, 2002: 11).

More than 65% of female graduates in this country are unemployed because they lack social and communication skills in addition to a poor command of language and low levels of self confidence. They had achieved excellent academic results but could not secure employment without the relevant skills required in the labour market (Minister of Human Resource cited in *The Star*, 2005).

The two main priorities of most schools are to disseminate knowledge and prepare students for the numerous examinations they have to encounter before leaving school. In this country, English is taught as a second language. While English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers have materials and resources from which to help their students, they are still teaching them within the moulds of teacher as dispenser of knowledge. It is generally believed that the conventional approach to learning, with its emphasis on teacher-directed learning, passive student participation, and rote memorisation of massive amounts of information, is increasingly inefficient and outmoded. Hence there is a definite need to make communicative competence a goal of language teaching and develop techniques for the teaching of the four skills that recognise the interdependence of language and communication (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Many anecdotes from teachers and parents as well as letters to the newspapers from concerned members of the public have highlighted the point that Malaysian students who leave schools and even universities are unable to either communicate their ideas and opinions in English, think critically before commenting on issues, or refute others' opinions with intelligent justifications. Their lack of ability

to critically think and synthesise their responses has become a major criticism of university coursework. While secondary schools are responsible for preparing students with knowledge to pass examinations that would in turn enable them to enter universities, higher learning institutes undertake the ensuing responsibility of making sure that students become self-directed learners who are able to find their way in the establishment as well as in the real world once they have graduated.

To overcome this decline, there is a constant need to find ways to improve the learning and teaching approaches in English language classrooms. This research aims to examine the feasibility of using problem-based learning, an approach to deductive learning, in an ESP classroom in Malaysia that focuses on Business English as the subject matter. As a new approach, particularly in the human sciences, problem-based learning requires a comprehensive understanding before it can be considered a viable learning and teaching approach adaptable to the Malaysian education system and supported by local conditions. Therefore, to ensure its feasibility, this research tries to study the implications, the advantages and disadvantages of using problem-based approach as a learning tool for ESP learners and a teaching approach for ESP teachers, as well as analyse potential problems that might arise within the language classroom. In addition, this research explores the extent to which learners can improve their second language proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing skills and their ability to think critically, the latter a necessary component when interacting with other people, searching for information, analysing accuracy of information and making judgments once all information has been received, among other things. Before looking at the research problem and its objectives, there is a need to understand what problem-based learning approach stands for and how it is executed in classrooms.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH

Problem-based learning (PBL) and other forms of cooperative or active learning such as Task-Based, Participatory and Communicative Language Teaching share some common features. PBL is an instructional strategy that allows students to be active learners responsible for their own learning process. It begins with the assumption that learning is an active, integrated and constructive process (Barrows, 1996; Gijsselaers, 1996) that, according to Barrows (1996), is influenced by social and contextual factors. Wilkerson and Gijsselaers (1996) assert that PBL is mainly characterised by a student-centred approach whereby students are responsible for their own learning in terms of how information is researched and presented; teachers are no longer disseminators of knowledge but facilitators, while open-ended problems are designed to serve as the initial stimulus and framework for learning. Teachers also attempt to develop intrinsic interest in the subject matter in their students by using group work and cooperation among students. Students are also encouraged to identify their learning needs, help with the planning of the lessons, lead class discussions and assess their own work and that of their classmates' (Gallagher, 1997; Reynolds, 1997). There is a sense of ownership of the skills and contents that are being learned in class.

An essential element of PBL is that content is introduced in the context of complex "real-life" problems. The problem comes first (Boud and Feletti, 1994). In contrast, most traditional and current teaching approaches present concepts and rules, usually in a lecture format. As mentioned earlier, this is the standard technique of teaching in many contemporary classrooms in Malaysia as teachers have to prepare learners for examinations.

In classes that use PBL, students work with each other to solve complicated and authentic problems that not only increase their content knowledge but

simultaneously help to develop in students the ability to communicate, reason, assess the problem(s) at hand and solve them. These problems also sustain students' interest in the subject matter once they have been made to realise that learning the skills is essential to their success in the future. Watson (2001: 1) explains that in PBL, "students work with classmates to solve complex and authentic problems that help develop content knowledge as well as problem-solving, reasoning, communication, and self-assessment skills." Thus, in a problem-based classroom, the process is very important as that is where real learning actually takes place. The outcome is important too, and as learners acquire and develop the skills mentioned above, there will be opportunities for these learners to apply those skills across the disciplines in the long term.

While there are various definitions for PBL, this study will hold the view suggested by Boud (1985: 13) that, "the starting point for learning (in problem-based learning) is a problem, a query, or a puzzle that challenges learners" which consequently, creates in them the need to solve it. The teacher is no longer the primary dispenser of information but one who facilitates and allows students to explore various resources to engage in solving real-life problems. The problems help to maintain the students' interest as they use various skills to increase their proficiency and skills. Students take charge of their education as the strategy emphasises critical thinking skills, understanding, learning how to learn and working cooperatively with others (White, 1996). These skills are not overtly developed or used in classrooms and as a result, students do not become self-directed in their learning and rely too much on being fed information by others.

One of the objectives in using PBL is to produce individuals who are proficient critical thinkers. Rational thinking to discover the meaning of a matter is something