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ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

Budas Iuliia. Assessment of Foreign Language Proficiency in Problem-based Learning.

Abstract. This paper discusses the most common ways of foreign language proficiency assessment in PBL and their efficiency. It also offers suitable modes or rubrics for evaluating. To increase the level of knowledge about foreign language proficiency assessment and achieve the aim of the investigation, observation, questionnaire and opinion-based research was carried out. First and second year students majoring in psychology and primary education were interviewed concerning their experience in peer and self-assessment. PBL usually relies on the evaluation by tutors, peers and self-assessment. However, most of the studies found in the literature and the results of our survey on peer assessment prove that students often feel uncomfortable to provide and receive feedback. Nevertheless, giving students the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on their own learning is a key element in PBL.

Keywords. *Problem-based learning, foreign language proficiency, assessment.*

Будас Юлія. Оцінювання іншомовної компетентності студентів у проблемно-орієнтованому навчанні.

Анотація. У статті простежується ефективність засобів оцінювання іншомовної компетентності студентів у проблемно-орієнтовному навчанні (ПОН) та пропонуються певні критерії для її здійснення. Для поглиблення знань щодо оцінювання іншомовної компетентності та досягнення мети дослідження, автором було використано метод спостереження, анкетування і опитування. Було опитано студентів першого й другого курсу зі спеціальності психологія та початкова освіта щодо їх досвіду оцінювання одногрупників і самооцінки. Проблемно-орієнтоване навчання зазвичай покладається на оцінку викладача-наставника, одногрупників і самооцінки. Проте, дослідження науковців та результати нашого опитування підтверджують, що студентам часто незручно оцінювати одногрупників та отримувати зворотний зв'язок. Водночас, можливість оцінити і осмислити власне навчання є ключовим елементом у проблемно-орієнтовному навчанні.

Ключові слова. *Проблемно-орієнтоване навчання (ПОН), іншомовна компетентність, оцінювання.*

Будас Юлія. Оценивание иноязычной компетентности студентов в проблемно-ориентированом обучении.

Аннотация. В статье изучается эффективность средств оценивания иноязычной компетентности студентов в проблемно-ориентированом обучении (ПОН) и предлагаются определенные критерии для ее осуществления. Для углубления знаний по оценке иноязычной компетентности и достижения цели исследования, автором был использован метод наблюдения, анкетирование и опрос. Студенты первого и второго курса специальности психология и начальное образование были опрошены относительно их опыта оценки однокурсников и самооценки. Проблемно-ориентированное обучение обычно полагается на оценку преподавателя-наставника, однокурсников и самооценки. Однако, исследования ученых и результаты нашего опроса подтверждают, что студентам часто неудобно оценивать однокурсников и получать обратную связь. В то же время,

ВОЗМОЖНОСТЬ ОЦЕНИТЬ И ОСМЫСЛИТЬ СОБСТВЕННОЕ ОБУЧЕНИЕ ЯВЛЯЕТСЯ КЛЮЧЕВЫМ ЭЛЕМЕНТОМ В ПРОБЛЕМНО-ОРИЕНТИРОВАННОЕ ОБУЧЕНИЕ.

Ключевые слова. Проблемно-ориентированное обучение, иноязычная компетентность, оценивание.

1. Introduction.

The implementation of problem-based learning (PBL) faces many challenges. Among the most important which need to be discussed and solved is the question of students' assessment. Being frequently a shock to students faced with its unusual procedure, it is often the same ordeal for educators who take the first steps with this technique. Besides the fundamental challenge of creating a good problem, educators are faced with the task of deciding how to evaluate the technique's effectiveness and how to assess whether students have met the overall learning objectives for the course. Traditional assessment techniques are not effective and adequate to measure students' learning experience. It requires more complex techniques or approaches. Being the integral part of the whole process, the assessment is not easy to perform as tutors and students are often inexperienced and don't know what and how to do it. It is particularly true when it concerns assessment of foreign language proficiency. There are still few publications trying to provide a conceptual and theoretical material of the problem.

This paper aims to discuss the most common ways of foreign language proficiency assessment in PBL and their efficiency, and offer suitable criteria for evaluating.

2. Methods.

To increase the level of knowledge about foreign language proficiency assessment and achieve the above-mentioned aim, observation, questionnaire and opinion-based research was carried out. First and second year students majoring in psychology and primary education were interviewed concerning their experience in peer and self-assessment. So, a triangulation method has helped to obtain more accurate picture of students' foreign language proficiency assessment in PBL.

3. The study.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an approach of teaching students through analyzing and solving real-life problems related to the course. It has proved to be an active-learning and a learner-centred approach where problems are used as the starting point for examining the given information and finding the possible solution or explanation. However, PBL is not just about problem-solving processes. Realistic problems are used as a starting point for learning “where inquiry activities, self-directed learning, information mining, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving are incorporated”[11]. Tutors rather facilitate the process of learning than merely teach. This approach stimulates students to play an active role in the learning process as compared to the passive information transmission, typical of traditional teaching methods [10].

The increasing demand of multidisciplinary learning has triggered the development of PBL which is thought to be the link between theory and practice. PBL emphasizes real-life competencies. Students learn to ask question and draw their own conclusions. PBL also helps promote critical thinking. To solve the problem students collect data, read available online materials, scan the information, discuss problems in groups and try to figure out the possible ways of solving problems.

One of the major challenges PBL has to meet is an appropriate assessment strategy. PBL implementation may not succeed if assessment methods rely solely on tests results, facts recollection and mistakes correction. Student learning here is influenced greatly by the assessment methods used.

PBL usually relies on the evaluation by tutors, peers and self-assessment. A key educational concern is how to assess students comprehensively and fairly using self assessment, peer assessment and tutor assessment, as these new practices often make tutors and students anxious [4,5]. This complex process is affected by personal and interpersonal perceptions, which produces and results from a shared view of reality [10].

Unfortunately, assessment of foreign language proficiency in PBL is poorly addressed in the research literature. F.Reynolds stressed that it is common to use the language as a tool for learning. In PBL a given problem should be solved with the help of gaining information and discussing it with others. The results are important and students are evaluated for their engagement in the process. Dealing with PBL for language acquisition a foreign language becomes the actual subject of evaluation. This difference has several implications from the point of view of PBL. Though it has been said that the concepts of PBL can be applied to any academic discipline, languages obviously constitute a large challenge [7]. Especially it is true about assessing students' foreign language proficiency.

According to our survey foreign language proficiency is a complex phenomenon which is an integrated part of specialists' professional competence. English is treated as a means of specialists' training. The knowledge of the language is not a goal but also a way to succeed in growing into an expert in a person's field of interest. At the same time the ambition to become a well-educated specialist helps students learn English. To be effective, assessment of foreign language proficiency must recognize the diversity of learners and allow for differences in styles and rates of learning. To accurately assess English language learners, variations in students' English language skills, along with the other growth and development variations based on their age, must be considered [1].

There exist different definitions of what assessment is. The most obvious ones are the following [13]:

- The process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences. (Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: shifting the focus from teaching to learning by Huba and Freed 2000).
- The systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students. It is the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students'

learning and development. (Assessing Student Learning and Development: A Guide to the Principles, Goals, and Methods of Determining College Outcomes by Erwin 1991).

From the above mentioned statements we see that assessment is used mostly to monitor the students' progress in learning and state its development. The National Research Council (NRC) contends that there are 3 guiding principles to assessment [8]:

- content: assessment reflects what is most important for students to learn;
- learning: assessment enhances learning and supports instructional practice;
- equity: assessment supports every student's opportunity to learn [11].

Earl [3] has identified three methods of learning through assessment: *assessment for*, *assessment of*, and *assessment as* learning.

– *Assessment for* learning is formative: through feedback the student is able to identify their current level of knowledge, understanding and skills to enable identification of additional learning needs.

– *Assessment of* learning is summative and is generally viewed as the traditional approach to assessment: it is used to allocate a grade to individual student work.

– *Assessment as* learning is the learning achieved whilst undertaking the activities required when completing the assessment.

It should be also stressed that assessment demonstrates the benefits and drawbacks of PBL, promotes its implementation. Evaluation is crucial for both the maintenance of standards and in developing curricula. It is a source of the information that

- helps identify problems students experience in foreign language acquisition;
- fosters adjustment of the curricula;
- demonstrates the benefits and drawbacks of PBL;
- contributes to solving existing problems.

4. Results and discussion.

The purpose of foreign language proficiency assessment has undergone significant changes over the past years. Previously the primary goal of assessment was to measure student performance in order to assign grades and make judgmental decisions. This was often done at the expense of recognizing the individual and the collective potential of students [10]. Nowadays, teachers recognize assessment as a tool to facilitate learning. Indeed, the stressful ritual of end-of-course examinations has been losing ground in favour of continual assessment and its role as part of the learning process [10]. The same happens here in Ukraine where the recently implemented system of modules allows summing up students' score during the term. It is viewed as having positive effect on students' attitude towards learning process, as not only final interaction with the teacher during the exam really matters but previous educational experiences also do.

Though PBL is considered to be an efficient method of teaching English for specific or professional needs, it is used only occasionally by some enthusiasts in Ukraine. What is more, teachers prefer to use problems for vivid discussions and do not bother their heads about the evaluation. So, according to our survey, only some teachers are trying to implement PBL as a teaching approach in higher educational institutions for teaching English. They admit coming across the problem of students' evaluation as it is challenging to create assessment techniques for PBL. Also they regard assessment of foreign language proficiency in PBL as confusing and often discouraging for students.

Researchers point out that assessment in PBL should continue the learning process. It is believed that not only the results of solving a problem should be evaluated. Many other things are expected to be taken into consideration. Tutors' assessment of only the results can cause students' frustration and induce them to memorization and their passive participation in the educational process. "Whatever assessment technique is used, it must be viewed by students as an active part of the learning process, not some ancillary activity. The idealistic goal of the learning principle is to make it indistinguishable to a visitor as to whether instruction or

assessment is occurring in the classroom [8]. A blend of formative and summative assessment is viewed as the most preferable to achieve the balance in evaluation students' foreign language proficiency nowadays.

It is reasonable to evaluate students' activities in their PBL groups. Assessment of the group as a whole may be considered useful. Feedback is often regarded better than a mark or a grade though grades are desirable for students and can't be avoided. "The group should be encouraged to reflect on its PBL performance including its adherence to the process, communication skills, respect for others, and individual contributions. Peer pressure in the group reduces the likelihood of students failing to keep up with workload, and the award of a group mark—added to each individual's assessment schedule— encourages students to achieve the generic goals associated with PBL" [14].

Most researchers look upon assessment in PBL as a feedback given by tutors, peers and students themselves. They believe that evaluation needs to fit the philosophy of active learning rather than passive reproductive learning. It may be preferable, and more rigorous, for assessments to follow the PBL philosophy and to require the individual to analyze a problem, search for and then apply relevant information [9].

But we agree with R.Waters who noted that "whether or not we consider "grades" as important, the requirement to report on student's progress will be around for quite some time. An effective assessment tool must also provide the ability to report on student progress in a fair and objective manner" [12]. So, grade system is widely used to assess students' perseverance and level of the language proficiency even if it doesn't satisfy those who are involved in the process. Grades for students are very important because they are regarded as a reward for the work, and they are taken into account before the exam. Students are more motivated to learn the language and use it because they see that their regular work and contribution to the solution of the problem is properly assessed.

In traditional form of teaching, the teacher as the most important figure has the power to check and evaluate students' knowledge. PBL as student-centered

approach does not only rely on the feedback from the tutor, but peer-assessment and self-assessment are considered to be important and are treated as the integral part of the assessment. It is supposed to be the factor that prevents unfair judgement and stimulates students to learn from their mistakes. Peer assessment enables students to consider their own work more closely, highlights what they need to know in the subject, helps them make a realistic assessment of their own abilities, and provides them with skills that would be valuable in the future. Furthermore, the peer assessment process also encourages students to compare and reflect on their own work, which in turn is an important element of self-directed learning [6].

Still, assessment in PBL causes some anxiety as evaluating students can be affected by personal and interpersonal impressions. “Although assessment in PBL tutorials is aimed at making students think freely about their own learning process, it can be noticed that they still perceived the assessment process as a ranking tool. This created fear and anxiety despite repeated attempts to stress the long term commitment to learning rather than an exclusive focus on grades. As far as critical feedback is concerned, students tended to refer to the attitude of the tutor during tutorial sessions and the lack of criteria when grades were assigned” [10].

Most of the studies found in the literature on peer assessment demonstrate that students often feel uncomfortable to provide and receive feedback. The reasons for it are different. People usually perceive feedback as criticism and avoid using it. At the same time students try to protect each other against poor grades [14].

Nevertheless, giving students the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on their own learning is a key element in PBL. Peer and self-assessment in PBL allows the students to compare their achievements with the goals which they set for themselves before the problem started. It allows them to develop the skills to monitor their own learning outside the academic environment and helps them to move towards the elusive goal of becoming life-long learners. The ability of PBL

to foster reflection in students is largely a function of the facilitator's ability to introduce opportunities for reflection into the PBL experience [11].

The most frequent problem tutors face while implementing PBL in ESP is students' communication with each other in their native language. In such a case the main aim of teaching the language while solving a problem won't be achieved. It should be stressed for the students from the very beginning that communicating in English is the central idea of PBL-based language education, and failing to fulfill that demand would greatly decrease, if not entirely eliminate, the profits of using PBL at all [7].

Students should be provided with the criteria by which they evaluate their fellow students and themselves. According to our observation it is better if not individual members of the group are assessed by peers but the group as a whole. It prevents the behavior when students try to protect each other from poor grades. They feel more relaxed and comfortable evaluating the group's work than each member individually. Students will benefit from PBL more if they are presented with learning objectives and assessment criteria before implementing PBL and before the assessment phase. It should be clear from the very beginning what they are assessed for and how.

When assessing English language learners we should note the type of language the student is using instead of emphasizing the mistakes. Many English language learners use general vocabulary and simple sentences to communicate. However, more academic and specialized vocabulary and more complex sentences are preferable in the classroom setting. Students should be asked to evaluate their fellow-students according to their attendance, perseverance, listening and communication skills, ability to gain and scan information, involvement into the problem-solving.

Here we present a list of criteria which we consider important for students' foreign language proficiency assessment in PBL:

- 1) Language used during the discussion (native, foreign, both)
- 2) Involvement into the discussion (active, unenthusiastic, passive)

- 3) Collaboration (conscious and freewill participation, guided participation, reluctant to participate)
- 4) Speaking (fluent, prompted, limited)
- 5) Listening comprehension (communicating with ease, having some difficulties in understanding, having extensive difficulties in understanding)
- 6) Vocabulary used (professional, mostly general, basic)
- 7) Ways of obtaining the information (specialized articles in a foreign language, specialized articles in a native language, hasn't obtained any appropriate information)
- 8) Presentation of the information (clear, understandable, ambiguous)
- 9) Selected problem-solving strategy (effective, appropriate, inappropriate)

The lower the language proficiency, the more important it is to use appropriate assessment techniques. These criteria for the assessment of foreign language proficiency provide opportunities for students to show that not their mistakes are evaluated. It gives them the feeling of safety and gives them adequate ideas for reflection and self-assessment. In such a way the philosophy of PBL is preserved. The environment allows taking risks associated with learning and helps identify a student's areas of achievement and weakness. This is assessment *as learning*, because it occurs during and at the end of each unit of work.

5. Conclusions.

According to the investigation peer assessment is important for students' and helps them grow as life-long learners and fosters their reflection though we have to admit that for students it is often confusing to assess their fellow-students. If only start implementing PBL, it proves to be better if not individual members of the group are assessed by peers but the group as a whole. Students will benefit from PBL more if they are presented with learning objectives and assessment criteria before implementing PBL and before the assessment phase. In this article we tried to present some criteria which can help teachers meet challenges of assessment of foreign language proficiency in PBL.

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