

# A PERSPECTIVE EVALUATION OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN ESL CLASSROOM IN THE MALAYSIAN HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study was initiated to explore how pre-university students who enrolled in the Malaysian Higher School Certificate program perceived their experiences in learning ESL through Problem-Based Learning (PBL). This small scale study involved 35 pre-university students in an upper sixth form in a secondary school in Kelantan, Malaysia. Participants were given three sets of self-administered questionnaire with a 5 point Likert scale adapted from Fauziah et al. (2004). The questionnaires were aimed to explore the students' perspectives regarding the use of PBL in ESL, student-peer collaboration and student-facilitator collaboration involved in the learning process after they have gone through two PBL learning sessions. Descriptive statistic which involved frequency counts was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that majority of the students had positive views regarding the use of PBL, student-peer collaboration and student-facilitator collaboration in promoting language learning and enhancing their thinking skills. However, in comparison, student-peer collaboration is perceived as less positive than student-facilitator collaboration. This implies that problem-based learning, if carefully guided by the facilitator, could be an effective approach in developing critical thinking skills and fostering language learning among pre-university students.*

*Keywords: Problem-Based Learning, Language Learning, Student-Centered Learning, ESL Classroom.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the primary considerations of Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS) outlined by the Malaysian Ministry of Education since 1980s is the development of thinking abilities (Curriculum Development Center, 1989; Curriculum Development Center, 2000). The ministry emphasizes that teachers must employ teaching approaches and strategies which will stimulate, encourage and develop students' thinking skills in order to enhance their intellectual capacity. In ESL context, the ministry pointed out that teachers should be able to guide students in using their thinking skills so that they can successfully manipulate ideas and feelings when reading particular texts (Nagappan, 2001).

Despite the emphasis given by the ministry, it is observed that teachers tend to employ traditional teaching approaches which are argued to be ineffective in developing students' thinking skills. For instance, teachers are often observed to play the role of 'sage on the stage' by

providing all the answers and necessary facts to students (Radzuwan, 2011; Diana-Hwang & Amin Embi, 2007). In contrast, student-centered approach such as PBL is rarely employed in the classroom, especially in ESL context (Berhanuddin, personal communication, July 26, 2011). In fact, PBL has been proven to be effective in developing students thinking skills and promoting language learning (Radzuwan, 2011; Berhanuddin, 2008; Mathews-Aydinli, 2007).

Since students are often taught using a traditional approach which requires them to listen passively to the lectures given, students have little opportunity to develop their thinking and language skills. Ironically, these two skills are very crucial for them to 'survive' and succeed in tertiary education. Hence, it is important for the pre-university students to be taught using a student-centered approach such as the PBL so that they can develop their thinking and language skills thus successfully cope with the challenging learning environment in universities.

The present research was born out of concern to evaluate the perspective of pre-university students who enrolled in the Malaysian Higher School Certificate program regarding the use of PBL in ESL classroom as well as their perceptions of student-peer collaboration and student-facilitator collaboration involved in the learning process.

## **PBL in ESL Classroom**

Mathews-Aydinli (2007) argues that PBL shares the same characteristics with other approaches which require students to use the target language rather than being drilled with predetermined language structures. This is because PBL demands students to negotiate meaning by interacting with each others such as the peers, the facilitators and the texts they are working with. This interaction allows the students to express their opinion and look at things critically. At the same time, they can observe their peers' learning strategies and hear how the language is used by others. Advantages of incorporating the problem-based learning in ESL classroom are discussed below in detail.

### ***1. Promoting Content and Language Learning***

PBL is believed to promote both content and language learning. This is because students need to read various sources and interact with each other in order to gather, analyze and synthesize the information. Through this reading and interaction, they develop their vocabulary as well as reading and speaking skills. This is agreed by Mathews-Aydinli (2007) who has incorporated PBL into language learning and claimed that it engages the students in learning how to learn and at the same time learn the language and content. This is inline with what has been pointed out by Baden and Major (2004) that less proficient students develop their language proficiency when they speak and listen to better students in their group. Hence, when applied in an ESL classroom, PBL gives opportunities for the students to use the second language (L2) in an authentic learning environment as they are working on real life problems. Through the meaningful interaction and negotiation, they do not only build up their language skills such as speaking and listening but also improve their soft skills and develop their interpersonal intelligence.

### ***2. Developing Affective Domain***

Mathews-Aydinli (2007) pointed out that problem-based learning offers affective benefits in the form of raising learners' motivation and autonomy. McDonough & Shaw (2003) affirm that autonomy given in PBL has great positive impacts on ESL learners who face failure more than success in language learning. Thus problem-based learning could be considered as one of the platforms to develop students' motivation and autonomy that are needed in improving their language competence and performance.

### ***3. Promoting Holistic Development***

Besides raising learners' motivation and autonomy, PBL has other benefits to offer for the holistic development of the ESL learners as explained by Duch (1998) which are:

#### *Improved-Self Direction*

In PBL, students do not totally depend on the teachers to provide them knowledge but they work independently as a group to gain the knowledge. As they solve the problem given, they decide which resources to use such as articles, books, programs etcetera. This activity is performed more for PBL students than traditional approach students (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993). As a result, the students become more responsible in regulating their learning.

#### *Comprehensive understanding and better skill development*

PBL provides meaningful and applicable aspect of the classroom materials. In PBL, the teachers use real life problems and solving such problems requires comprehensive thinking. Students tend to develop complex thinking skills to solve higher level of problems (Aspy et al., 1993) such as working with group dynamics, peer evaluation or how to present and defend their plans (Delafuente et al., 1994).

#### *Interpersonal skills and collaborative teamwork*

Since students have to work collaboratively as a group, the PBL methodology promotes the students' interaction and teamwork, thereby enhancing their interpersonal skills (Bernstein et al., 1995). This is affirmed by Baden and Major (2004) who found that students who learn in team are far more superior to those who learn individually. This is

especially true in ESL classroom as students need to practice their language, listen to others and get feedback from their friends.

*Self motivated attitude increases as they progress in the learning process*

Thanasoulas (2002) affirms that the more student gain knowledge about the problem, the more satisfied and motivated they become. Thanasoulas further argues that the feeling of satisfaction is a significant factor in reinforcing achievement behaviour. This notion implies that PBL could be used as one of the approaches to motivate the students and maintain their excellent achievement. In contrast to traditional classroom setting, it totally depends on the teacher to motivate the students and sustain the motivation level (Dornyei, 2001). As a result, students often feel less motivated if the teacher does not possess the necessary skills to motivate them.

*Higher level of learning*

Higher level of learning takes place as students read, think, explore, discuss, analyze, and synthesize knowledge to find solutions to the real life problems. Through the higher level of learning, the students develop their reasoning skills and become more critical, analytical and matured in giving opinions and ideas thus enable them to face challenges in their daily life. This is inline with the aim of the ministry to enhance critical and creative thinking skills (CCTS) among students.

In short, it is through PBL that students are given more autonomy to plan and decide on their learning and gain benefits from shouldering the responsibility of regulating the learning. All these benefits are not offered in a teacher-centered traditional classroom where teachers use chalk and talk technique and avoid mutual interactions.

### **Teacher's roles in PBL**

In PBL, teachers become an active designer of curriculum and a facilitator of learning (Barrows, 2001). Barrows emphasizes that as a curriculum designer, teachers not only implement externally made curriculum decisions but also actively participate in the curriculum planning process. This is because the teachers have to select and structure problems so that they address both the important

content objectives of the curriculum and important real-world issues. Besides that, the teachers' main role changes from that of a disseminator of information to a facilitator of learning.

Boon (2004) affirms that teachers must act as a coach in PBL and they must know when to step in and guide the students to build and test strategies. He further argues that the coach should know how to guide students in receiving, sharing, and making sense of what they read, write, speak, and hear as well as gathering information and managing autonomous learning habits. This is agreed by Barrows (2001) who pointed out that the teachers' responsibility is to challenge, question, and stimulate the students in their thinking, problem solving and self-directed study. Apart from that, Baden and Major (2004) emphasize that the teachers must support and value students so that they do not fear of being ridiculed when contributing something to the team, suggest alternatives when the team is unable to decide, monitor the team progress, reflect back to seek understanding and clarification of what is occurring, and give clear, positive and specific feed back to help students improve their learning.

### **Students' roles in PBL**

While teachers act as coaches, students act as problem solvers who play active roles in PBL (Boon, 2004). This is affirmed by Barrows (2001) that in PBL, students will challenge each other and themselves as they work, think and learning. However, Tan (2004) argues that in order to succeed in PBL, students must be able to work together, seek information from various sources and share their knowledge with others.

Baden and Major (2004) listed seven team roles that need to be played by the team members in order to ensure that their team functions effectively. The first one is the role of a facilitator who moderates discussions, keeps the team on task and makes sure everyone participates and has equal opportunities to learn. The second role is the researcher who is responsible to find the necessary materials. The third role is the encourager who needs to encourage contribution from team members. The fourth role is the timekeeper who makes sure that the tasks are well planned and could be finished on time. The fifth role is the recorder

who takes notes of the team's discussion and prepares a written conclusion. The sixth role is the checker who checks team member's understanding and last but not least, the role of the wildcard who assumes the role of any missing member. Baden and Major suggest that these roles are rotated so that students have equal experiences besides encouraging interdependence among team members.

## **Background of the Malaysian Higher School Certificate program**

The Malaysian Higher School Certificate or also known as Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (*STPM*) is a pre-university examination taken by students in Malaysia. It is one of the pre-university systems for admission to Malaysian public universities which lasts for one and half year. The first half year is known as Lower Sixth Form and the other whole year is known as Upper Sixth Form. Candidates technically may apply for admission to degree-level courses. All those applying for universities, however, must have taken the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Since they have to take the MUET, six periods (30 or 40 minutes per period) are allocated for ESL subject each week.

## **Research objectives and questions**

This study explored students' perspectives regarding the incorporation of PBL in ESL classroom at pre university level and their perceptions of student-peer collaboration and student-facilitator collaboration involved in the learning process. The research questions were:

- What were the students' perceptions regarding the use of PBL in ESL classroom at pre-university level?
- What were the students' perceptions of student-peer collaboration in PBL?
- What were the students' perceptions of student-facilitator collaboration in PBL?

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

This study involved 35 humanities students in Upper Sixth Form in a school located in semi-urban area in Kelantan. Teacher A who was teaching in the school but had never taught the class was chosen to become the facilitator as she had done an ample research on PBL for her master degree. All the participants are chosen based on

purposive sampling. This is based on the suggestion by Singh et al. (2006) who assert that one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most. Based on Teacher A's experience, it is believed that she would be able to manage a problem-based learning class.

### **Course Design Using PBL Approach**

The two problems chosen were adapted from Mathews-Aydinli (2007) and ETE team (2005) and were sent to two professors in local universities for review in order to ensure its quality and suitability. The whole PBL sessions lasted for six weeks and were divided to two phases. Phase one (the first three weeks) involved solving the first problem while phase 2 involved solving the second problem. The first meeting for each phase involved dividing the students into five groups of seven. The tutor then explained the team roles needed in PBL and students were given autonomy to discuss in group and assigned the roles to each team member. The roles were adapted from Baden and Major (2004) which included the facilitator, the researcher, the encourager, the timekeeper, the recorder, the checker and the wildcard.

The students were then introduced to the problem followed by discussions among the group under the supervision of the facilitator. Students were given opportunities to investigate deeper using appropriate sources. The last session was the presentation where the students were to highlight several important points such as what they know about the problem, what they need to know to solve the problem, issues involved in solving the problem and possible solutions to the problem.

### **Instrument and Data Collection**

Three survey instruments were used to collect data in this study which were End of Session Evaluation, Student-Peer Collaboration Evaluation and Student-Facilitator Collaboration Evaluation. The three instruments were adapted from Fauziah et al. (2004).

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistic which involved frequency counts. In each frequency table, corresponding to each statement, the percentages of the responses for each of the various options or choices were given.

## Findings

### *Students' perceptions regarding the use of PBL in ESL classroom in the Malaysian Higher School Certificate program*

Clearly, the findings from the questionnaire (Table 1) reveal that the use of PBL in ESL classroom at pre-university level is perceived positively by the students. All 100% (n = 35) of the respondents chose Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A) for all the statements listed except for statement no. 5, no. 9 and no. 10 where 3% (n = 1) of the respondents chose No Opinion (NO). Statement no. 8 which is "I have gained new knowledge" has the highest percentage of SA (89 %, n = 31) followed by statement no. 2 that is "The learning was enjoyable" with the percentage of 77 % (n = 27). Majority of the respondents (66%) agreed with statement no. 1 that the learning was effective in developing their language skills. Besides that, 60% (n = 21) strongly agreed with statement no. 11 that they felt more confident to speak and write in English through PBL.

### *Students' perceptions of the student-peer collaboration in PBL*

The data gained from the questionnaire on student-peer collaboration (Table 2) also reveal that the students have positive perceptions of the collaboration involved in the

No	Statement	SA	A	NO	D	SD
1.	The learning was effective in developing my language skill is	34 % (n = 12)	66 % (n = 23)	-	-	-
2.	The learning was enjoyable	77 % (n = 27)	23 % (n=8)	-	-	-
3.	I was satisfied with the learning	51 % (n = 18)	49 % (n = 17)	-	-	-
4.	I learned with ease	60 % (n = 21)	40 % (n = 14)	-	-	-
5.	This type of learning is suitable for me	51 % (n = 18)	46 % (n = 16)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
6.	I could understand the learning materials	31 % (n = 11)	69 % (n = 24)	-	-	-
7.	I could grasp the presented facts	26 % (n = 9)	74 % (n = 26)	-	-	-
8.	I have gained new knowledge	89 % (n = 31)	11 % (n = 4)	-	-	-
9.	I could identify the critical issues	54 % (n = 19)	43 % (n = 15)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
10.	My ability to connect factual concepts has increased	51 % (n = 18)	46 % (n = 16)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
11.	I am more confident to speak and write in English through PBL	60 % (n = 21)	40 % (n = 14)	-	-	-

SA (Strongly agree) A (Agree) NO (No opinion) D (Disagree) SD (Strongly disagree)

Table 1. Frequency of Students' Responses on the Use of PBL in ESL

No	Statement	SA	A	NO	D	SD
1.	Interacting with other students helped me greatly in my learning	14 % (n = 5)	83 % (n = 29)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
2.	I had a chance to share knowledge with other students	11 % (n = 4)	89 % (n = 31)	-	-	-
3.	I had a chance to cooperate with other students	11 % (n = 4)	89 % (n = 31)	-	-	-
4.	Learning by interacting with other students enhanced my confidence	14 % (n = 5)	83 % (n = 29)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
5.	I experienced quality interaction with the other students in terms of learning	11 % (n = 4)	86 % (n = 30)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
6.	The interaction enhanced my communication skills	23 % (n = 8)	77 % (n = 27)	-	-	-
7.	The interaction enhanced my confidence to raise my own ideas	14 % (n = 5)	83 % (n = 29)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-
8.	The interaction enabled me to value the opinion of other students	3 % (n = 1)	97 % (n = 34)	-	-	-
9.	I managed to link up the different ideas raised in the interaction	3 % (n = 1)	94 % (n = 33)	3 % (n = 1)	-	-

SA (Strongly agree) A (Agree) NO (No opinion) D (Disagree) SD (Strongly disagree)

Table 2. Frequency of Students' Responses on Student-Peer Collaboration in PBL

learning process. Majority of the respondents chose SA and A for all the statements listed except for statement no. 1, no. 4, no. 5, no. 7, and no. 9 which has 3% (n=1) of NO. However, majority of the respondents preferred to choose A rather than SA for all the statements listed. The highest percentage of SA is only 23 % (n = 8) that is for Statement no. 6 which is "The interaction enhanced my communication skills". Statement no. 8, "The interaction enabled me to value the opinion of other students" has the highest percentage of A (97 %, n = 34), followed by statement no. 9, "I managed to link up the different ideas" with 94 % (n = 33).

### *Students' perceptions of the student-facilitator collaboration*

Clearly, the findings from the questionnaire (Table 3) reveal that student-facilitator collaboration is viewed very positively by the respondents. A significant of 100% respondents chose SA and A for all the statements listed. None of the respondent chose NO, D, or D. Statement no. 2, "It was easier to learn with the help of facilitator" and statement no. 7, "Facilitator provided guidance to the construction of new knowledge" has the highest percentage of SA (89 %, n = 31) followed by statement no. 1, "Interaction with facilitator established effective learning" (83 %, n = 29).

No	Statement	SA	A	NO	D	SD
1.	Interaction with facilitator established effective learning	83 % (n = 29)	17 % (n = 6)	-	-	-
2.	It was easier to learn with the help of facilitator	89 % (n = 31)	11 % (n = 4)	-	-	-
3.	Facilitator helped in my learning	71 % (n = 25)	29 % (n = 10)	-	-	-
4.	Facilitator encouraged my participation	77 % (n = 27)	23 % (n = 8)	-	-	-
5.	It was easy to contact facilitator	66 % (n = 23)	34 % (n = 12)	-	-	-
6.	Facilitator responded promptly on my query	77 % (n = 27)	23 % (n = 8)	-	-	-
7.	Facilitator provided guidance to the construction of new knowledge	89 % (n = 31)	11 % (n = 4)	-	-	-
8.	I experienced quality interaction with the facilitator in terms of learning	77 % (n = 27)	23 % (n = 8)	-	-	-

SA (Strongly agree) A (Agree) NO (No opinion) D (Disagree)  
SD (Strongly disagree)

**Table 3. Frequency of Students' Responses on Student-Facilitator Collaboration in PBL**

## Discussions and Implications

It is interesting to note that the use of PBL in ESL classroom has given positive impacts to the students and the learning of ESL. This is discernible where a significant percentage of students (100 %) claim that they have gained new knowledge through PBL. It proves what Tan (2004) has affirmed that one of the key characteristics of PBL is it allows students to explore things deeply in the search of the possible solution to the problem given. The success of the students to gain the new knowledge is an important indication that PBL is effective in developing students' thinking and language skills.

More importantly, the students also report that the learning of ESL through PBL is enjoyable thus enables them to develop their language skills as well as their level of confidence to speak and write. This is a very vital finding as it shows that PBL offers a pleasant environment for ESL learning. This finding supports Baden and Major (2004) who state that PBL provides a student-centered learning environment where students are given autonomy to handle, set pace for their own learning, and pursue and directing their own inquiry. To some extent, it can be argued that the autonomy given to the students makes them feel less stressful thus enable them to optimize their learning.

Another significant finding is that all the students report that they could understand the materials involved in the learning process. This is also an important finding which

shows that ESL students benefit from the incorporation of PBL. This is because in PBL students are allowed to use appropriate sources and choose materials which meet their proficiency level. As Krashen (1981) has proven in his Comprehensible Input theory, learners must first be able to comprehend the input in order for learning to take place. This shows that PBL, if planned carefully, could be employed to help less proficient students develop their language as they are free to choose materials that suit their current level of language proficiency before they move on to more challenging materials.

In terms of student-peer collaboration, the findings clearly show that students feel the collaboration contributes to the positive educational output where they manage to link-up different ideas raised in the discussion, share knowledge among collaborators and engage in a quality discussion. Baden and Major (2004) state that a problem based learning student shares prior or new knowledge with other students in the team and the team members acknowledge differences of opinion and other perspectives. The findings which reveal that the students are able to value the opinion of other students and become confident to raise their own ideas are significant indicators which prove that student-peer collaboration involved in PBL has enhanced students' communication skills.

However, a critical look at the questionnaire for student-peer collaboration reveals that it is viewed less positively compared to the questionnaires for the perspective evaluation on the use of PBL and the student-facilitator collaboration. This is discernible where for all the statements listed, students prefer to choose Agree (A) compared to Strongly Agree (SA) like in the other two questionnaires. This is perhaps due to the duration of this study that lasts for only six weeks which allows little opportunity for the students to better know their group members hence make them feel less comfortable when working in the group. Besides that, the students have not much experiences working in the group prior to the study as their teachers prefer to carry out whole class and pair work activities.

In terms of student-facilitator collaboration, it is no doubt that students perceive the collaboration as something that

produces positive educational output where they experience effective learning and quality interaction with the facilitator who has facilitated the learning by giving professional guidance and intervention where necessary. The finding which reveals that majority of the students (89%, n = 31) agree strongly that it is easier to learn with the help of the facilitator and the guidance given in construction of new knowledge implies that students acknowledge the important of the role of facilitator in broadening and facilitating their learning. This reflects that the facilitator in this study had played her roles well and managed to handle the conflict faced by many traditional teachers when conducting PBL. The implication is, teachers, if trained properly will be able to adopt the new roles involved in PBL.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, problem-based learning should be incorporated in ESL classroom in the pre-university program as it would help to prepare the students to face the challenging learning environment of tertiary education by developing their thinking and language skills. If teachers are still teaching using chalk and talk technique or spoon feed the students at pre-university level, it is feared that the students would not be able to cope with the student-centered learning environment at university level which more often than not, requires students to think critically and control their own learning. However, for PBL to be successful, the teacher who acts as the facilitator in PBL process must be trained properly so that he or she knows how to play their roles thus able to guide the students in regulating the self-directed learning.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research discussed in this section are based on the limitations and scopes of the present study. To begin with, future research should involve a larger sample size so that the findings could be generalized to the population. In addition, since the present research had already focused on the students' perceptions, it is recommended that the future research focuses on the teachers' perceptions of the incorporation of PBL in ESL classroom. Insights into the teachers' perceptions would be significant as it would reveal the challenges faced by the language teachers in their

attempts to be the curriculum designers and facilitators in PBL process. Besides that, future research should investigate the impact of PBL on each language skill. For instance, it is interesting to identify how and to what extent PBL can improve speaking, writing, listening and reading skills of ESL learners. The findings of the research would help to measure the effectiveness of PBL in improving students' language skills.

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