



APPLYING THE DEEP APPROACH TO IMPROVE STUDENT'S ENGLISH LEARNING

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Received: 06/9/2016; Revised: 25/12/2016; Accepted: 27/4/2017

ABSTRACT

Innovative pedagogy in language education has always been concerned and addressed by numerous researchers as well as educators. First, in the literature review, the paper will provide a synthesis of previous findings about the deep approach and the project-based learning as a deep approach. Finally, the paper will discuss the application of the aforementioned approaches in the context of Vietnam, draw a conclusion and give some relevant suggestions for future projects.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, communication skill, deep approach, project-based learning.

TÓM TẮT

Áp dụng phương pháp học sâu nhằm cải thiện việc học tiếng Anh của sinh viên

Phương pháp sư phạm tiên tiến trong giáo dục ngôn ngữ luôn là mối quan tâm và được đề cập bởi nhiều nhà nghiên cứu cũng như các nhà giáo dục. Bài viết này tổng hợp các thông tin trước đó về phương pháp học sâu qua các đề án và bài thực hành thực tế, sau đó thảo luận về việc áp dụng các phương pháp đã đề cập trong bối cảnh của Việt Nam và rút ra kết luận cho các dự án trong tương lai.

Từ khóa: giảng dạy ngôn ngữ giao tiếp, kỹ năng giao tiếp, phương pháp học sâu, phương pháp học tập qua đề án thực hành.

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, education is suffering from the consequences of overusing the out-of-date perspective on learning and teaching which believes that classrooms should be operated under teacher-centered approaches. Therefore, educators are seeking for innovative pedagogies in order to turn the situation around for a better education in the future. One of the innovative pedagogies tends to be appropriate in Vietnam contexts is the deep approach by Tochon (2015). Generally, the deep approach is a student-centered approach in which knowledge is gained explicitly through a flexible, reflective and effective learning (Tochon, 2015). For its overweighed strengths for learning development, the deep approach worths being considered in the current education context of Vietnamese universities.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Deep approach as a part of innovative pedagogy

Along with the development of education, more innovative pedagogies have been searched by numerous of researchers, educators, and teachers. Innovative pedagogy, as simply understood by the name, is a combination of different new ways of teaching and learning, activating more learning opportunities for students to create innovations (Kettunen, 2011). Therefore, innovative pedagogy is expected to bring more successful outcomes to education.

In the sense of the definition, some approaches have been suggested as a part of innovative pedagogy, including the problem-based learning (Pennell, & Miles, 2009), the deep approach (Tochon, 2015), and etc. Since these approaches have been applied, they have brought some significant benefits to learners and teachers. Particularly, innovative pedagogy helps create the improvement of students' professional knowledge as well as the learning motivation and the social behaviors (Schneller, 2008). Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that innovative approaches create the development of students both socially and educationally.

As a part of innovative pedagogy, deep approach is suggested as a new approach to foreign language teaching (Tochon, 2015). Tochon (2015) has developed the deep approach as part of innovative pedagogies which is different from the traditional teaching methodologies. As a student-centered approach, the deep approach is believed to be more flexible and reflective, helping learners develop not only the language competence, but also other social knowledge. By making these changes in language teaching philosophy and learning, the deep approach allows both teachers and students to transform into their higher selves (Tochon, 2015).

In the deep approach, Tochon (2015) suggested an effective model curriculum: an integrated taxonomy of curricula intentions in terms of discipline, interdiscipline, and transdiscipline. This model has an emphasis on the cognitive development and social factors of learners. In such a model, the role of teachers changes from the dominant to the stimulator and facilitator to encourage the learning through tasks and projects (Tochon, 2015). In other words, the new role of teachers is created by the project-based approach, leading to a deep teaching and learning (Xiao, 2015). Therefore, the essential elements of the deep approach are tasks and projects. In addition, relating to the teaching and learning contents, besides the language, cultural and social values should also be taken into consideration (Tochon, 2015, Xiao, 2015).

As a result of the deep teaching, students can develop their knowledge more deeply and dimensionally (Tochon, 2015, Xiao, 2015). The deep teaching allows students to build their sense of learning autonomy in order to complete tasks and projects (Tochon, 2015).

Furthermore, when cultural and social factors are included, learners' communicative competence and language proficiency are also developed (Xiao, 2015).

However, the application of the deep approach faces some challenges and difficulties. First of all, although integrated curricula are believed to be effective, to design appropriate curricula for various levels of knowledge is very challenging (Tochon, 2015). Second, the teaching quality or teacher's abilities are also the concerns of the application of the deep approach (Geoghegan, O'Neill, & Peterson, 2013, Walsh, 2012). In addition, the incompatible collaboration between different stakeholders such as teachers and school leaders may negatively affect the application of the deep approach (O'Neill, 2013).

2.2. Project-based learning (PBL) as a deep approach in language teaching and learning

As an essential part of the deep approach, tasks and projects have made the project-based learning a potentially effective method for teaching and learning languages. PBL is perceived as a student-driven approach which the learning process is initiated and stimulated by student's curiosity or questions. Therefore, the teacher's role in PBL, consistent with the teacher role required by the deep approach, is to guide and facilitates learners to gain knowledge explicitly (Bell, 2010, Thomas, 2000).

In terms of learner's development, PBL is believed to be so practical and student-driven that it motivates students to learn and develop their skills. Particularly, when it is designed appropriately to the context, PBL allows students to apply what they have learned to complete the project (Prince, & Felder, 2007, Thomas, 2000). In other words, PBL helps students consolidate and review their knowledge. Moreover, in teaching and learning speaking, not only does PBL help improve language skills, but it also builds the thinking skill (Larmer, & Mergendoller, 2013).

However, there are existing doubts about the applicability of PBL in language teaching and learning. First, in a group project or task, some group members may be reluctant participants, leading to the uneven contributions of students in completing the project (Kerr, 1986). As a result, the uneven participations of students in projects create difficulties and the worries in the assessment when applying PBL (Gülbahar, & Tinmaz, 2006).

3. Discussion

3.1. The effects of applying project-based learning as a deep approach

In Vietnam, the most common difficulty of learning English is oral communication skill. There are several reasons behind this difficulty in learning a language, one of which is the effects of traditional teacher-centered methods and some issues in language education policy. To solve this difficulty, it is considerable to apply the deep approach in the context of Vietnam, especially in learning speaking. In the current context, project-based learning seems to be the most appropriate deep approach to apply.

In the Vietnam context, particularly in Van Hien University where new students are used to the passive learning style, which was resulted from their high school learning habits, they tend to accept the knowledge that the teacher conveys, making them passive, lack of learning autonomy, and weak at critical thinking. In such a situation, the project-based learning can be used as a deep approach to improve the current learning because it provides students opportunities to explore the depth of their own knowledge through different alternative learning tools, projects and tasks. When applying appropriately, the PBL model can have positive effects in the learning progress of students. First, since it requires students to participate in projects in order to gain knowledge and skills from the activities in the project, PBL is helpful for Vietnamese students to gain their knowledge and skills explicitly. In other words, through projects which are designed accordingly to the ability of the student and the appropriate topic, students can learn how to use language in similar situations in real life. Furthermore, to Van Hien University, in particular, where numerous students are still passive in learning languages, PBL is potentially effective in improving their learning autonomy.

3.2. The challenges of applying project-based learning as a deep approach

However, in order to apply the project-based learning effectively, there are some factors that should be thoroughly considered. First, because the university curriculum including the English language curriculum in Vietnam is strictly administrated by the government (MOET, 2013, 2014), projects have to be carefully designed in connection with the language education policy. Moreover, since Vietnam is on the road of becoming an international member of the world's developed economy and cultures, the topic selected should consider Vietnamese and other cultures to equip students with adaptability.

Secondly, one of the considerable factors is the activities and projects are given to students under the forms of both in-class activities and homework tasks. Thus, there are two terms need to be clearly understood when applying the PBL: the in-class tasks and projects. The first term is referred to the activities that are performed in even groups or pairs during class periods. On the other hand, the latter term indicates larger group-work tasks which require longer time of preparation in self-learning session (e.g. at home) before the presentation day. Therefore, the projects should be designed with the aim to provide students with opportunities to familiarize with speaking naturally in a more complicated professional working environment.

In terms of in-class tasks or activities, the teacher can design the activities while the student can modify them to match the classroom situations. However, the design as well as the modification needs to be based on the theme of the lesson, the overall objectives of the course, and the level of students. In addition, the main aim of the in-class activities is to support the process of inductive learning, so the activities have to be relevant and meaningful. Furthermore, interaction between students or group of students needs to be

considered in order to create a practical and natural learning context. For example, in an English class for business students at intermediate level, role-plays about negotiation in a formal sale meeting may be used in class to provide situations for language practice in forms of oral communication. In such activity, students are expected to be able to explicitly acquire the language as well as some strategies or tactics used in negotiations. In other words, the activity should be a relevant aspect of the central theme of the lesson.

Thirdly, in Vietnam, the traditional perspective on educational assessment is through tests and exams. Thus, the application the integration of PBL and thematic teaching which requires a different assessment method, the process-based method, tends to face some issues in terms of assessment. The issues include possible problems in the quality and method of the assessments.

As most of the project requires group work activities and time consuming, the difficulty may be in the aspect of how to define the criteria for assessment. Furthermore, in Vietnam learning culture, group-work activities are not usually assigned because of the time constraint. Therefore, projects with group-work requirement may become less effective when only a certain student do all the tasks in the reputation of the whole group. In such issue, the criteria should be built and modified carefully and exactly. In addition, using a project as an assessment tool sometimes face the disagreement from the policy makers and leaders of the university because of the time consuming and facility issues. As a result, projects are not considered seriously as a total learning and teaching support. Therefore, a more open-minded perspective should be established in order to apply the integration of PBL and thematic learning effectively.

In summary, the most noticeable issues if implementing the deep approach is the assessment methods. In other words, teachers should create clear and appropriate principles and process of assessment in order to successfully achieve the objectives and the positive effects.

4. Conclusion

It is not easy to design and operate a plan to apply the integration of project-based learning and thematic teaching as a deep approach to deepen the language learning in Vietnamese universities, particularly. However, projects can be designed and embedded carefully in the language curriculum with considerations of the curriculum, cultural, and the assessment issues. Then, there is a hope to change the current language education situation, especially English language teaching learning, creating a brighter future of language education.

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