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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the English language teachers' understanding of Project-Based Learning (PBL). It was carried out within the theoretical framework of social constructivism. I used narrative inquiry as a research method. I selected two English language teachers purposively as the participants for the study from two community schools of Rupandehi. I used in-depth interview as a major technique for the required information. The study revealed that the English language teachers had good understanding and positive views towards PBL. Moreover, it maximizes learning opportunities of students addressing mixed-ability learners, developing high level of confidence, critical thinking and social skills along with increased interaction. However, poor educational background of the students, lack of resourceful, skilled and professional teachers, lack of professional training and collaborative culture among them had been realized as challenges for effective implementation of PBL. This study may contribute to the quality improvement of the teachers and students providing some knowledge and insights for developing project-based learning such as developing students' life skills, communication skills, self-confidence, collective responsibility through collaboration and authentic meaningful language use.

Keywords: Collaborative learning - critical thinking - learner-centered teaching - life skills.

INTRODUCTION

Most English language teachers in Nepal teach English language giving one-way lectures in classroom teaching and students remain as passive listeners. They follow their

orders and instructions. Therefore, it has been a great challenge to engage students in teaching learning activities. Project-Based Learning (PBL) is one of the most prominent practical and research-oriented methods of teaching that organizes learning around projects. It involves inquiry, knowledge building, and resolution of the assigned task in which the learners are engaged in creating, building and testing what they have created in collaboration with other learners both inside and outside the classroom. Project-based learning develops social skill which empowers learners to pursue content knowledge on their own and demonstrate their new understandings through a variety of presentation modes where they take charge of their own learning (Stripling et al. 2009). In PBL, students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a design question, a problem, or a challenge that usually requires more than an individual effort to handle and overcome (Chua et al. 2014). In project based language learning, students do a project work themselves choosing a topic and carry out the solution of the problems and they learn life skills, “the abilities for adaptive and supportive behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (World Health Organization, 1994). PBL incorporates real-life challenges where the focus is on authentic problems and solutions have the potential to be implemented.

PBL helps students learn English language effectively and develop communicative competence. In this vein, Solomon (2003) stated, “PBL is a learning process where students work collaboratively to solve problems that are authentic, curriculum-based and often interdisciplinary” (as cited in Simpson, 2011, p.10). Nepalese classrooms have been designed to fit the traditional system of teaching learning activities, which are not suitable for classroom discussion, seminar and group work. PBL is considered as one of the effective approaches in EFL situation. Thus, it can promote student motivation and develop learner autonomy in a constructive investigation.

Though project work is a student-centered method of teaching in which the teacher plays a major role in offering support and providing guidance to the students throughout the process. PBL is an instructional method that focuses on the learners who are guided by a teacher during all the steps of the project (Bell, 2010). Students are engaged in collaborative learning in real life learning situations, they construct knowledge, develop communication and presentation skills, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and time

management skills. Grant (2002) contended PBL is a learner-centered approach that provides learners self-learning opportunity for in-depth investigations of worthy topics, where the learners are more independent. But in one way lecture, the teacher tries to teach the students without engaging them in hands on activities except listening to the boring lectures of their teachers. Thus, in project-based learning, students are involved in the activities and they come with a solution by themselves at the end but in traditional classroom practices, we cannot expect learning outcome. Due to teacher's more activeness and students' passive learning, the learning motivation is found to be low.

Our curriculum is based on rigid textbooks in which teachers must complete the course within the allocated time frame. So, while following those textbooks, they limit their classroom teaching in traditional method and teaching textbooks through lecture method in pin drop silence. Besides several challenges; lack of sufficient time, fix curriculum, lack of well trained and skilled teachers, in using PBL in Nepali classrooms, some schools have started using it as an integral part of their teaching learning practices. PBL has been regarded as an effective learning strategy as students get ample opportunities for investigating in-depth information, creating, designing and presenting content-related materials on their own. It maximizes not only their learning opportunity but also the life skills that are helpful in developing their professional career.

Nepalese education system has been still following the traditional teacher-centered and textbook limited teaching learning practices. In such a system, learners get rare opportunities to learn outside the classroom in collaboration with their co-learners in real life situations. In this context, Hedge (2008) argued that projects are essentially learner-centered and they are very helpful to promote learner-centered teaching, processing instruction, collaborative learning, learner autonomy and learning through the tasks. Therefore, it has been realized that change is necessary to transform the traditional teacher-centered approach into the student-centered one.

I learnt English language through textbook laden and teacher-centered method. The teachers and the textbooks were regarded as all sources of knowledge; teachers as authoritative persons and textbooks as only teaching materials found in the class. The teacher-centered one way lecture made the students the passive listeners. In the early days

of my teaching career, knowingly and unknowingly, I tried to follow my teachers' foot prints. I was unknowingly imposing my authority as a teacher on students. I did injustice to my learners as I did not provide them enough opportunity for learning. Besides, the content knowledge, today's learners need to develop other skills such as communication and presentation skills, creativity and critical thinking skills, collaboration and co-operation skills, technological skill, organization and management skills, research and inquiry skills, self-assessment and reflection skills, group participation and leadership skills. In this context, Grant (2002) mentioned, "project-based learning is centered on the learners, and affords them the opportunity for in-depth investigations of worthy topics. The learners are more autonomous and they construct personally-meaningful artifacts that are representations of their learning" (p. 1). Therefore, PBL is a student-centered teaching approach that provides opportunities for the learners to learn through in-depth investigation about the topic, based on research in real life situations.

Our present teaching learning activities are confined to one size fits all (Diaz, et al. 2010). In this context, knowingly and unknowingly, it is found to be implemented as an integral part of teaching learning practice in several schools in urban areas of Nepal. However, to my understanding, I did not find any research-based studies available in English language teaching context in Nepal. Therefore, realizing the necessity of conducting a study on PBL, I selected this issue as my research study so that it could bring some insightful findings and implications in order to improve English language teaching practices in Nepal.

Teaching and learning practice in Nepalis still dominated by traditional textbook laden, teacher-centered one-way lecture-based pedagogy of teaching. Learners have to depend on the readymade knowledge prescribed in the textbooks and teachers' lecture. In such a traditional method of teaching, teachers, throughout the forty-five minutes of period, remain active in providing continuous flow of information in a particular topic. Students have to listen to those lectures passively in the pin drop silence. The concept of 'One size fits all' (Diaz, et al. 2010) can not address the individual learning style of each learner. Actually, these 'one size fits all' concepts, pin-drop silence and textbook-limited classrooms have been the great challenges in Nepalese English language classroom contexts for long. In my opinion, students become active learners only when they get

engaged in teaching learning activities. Therefore, it is necessary to involve them in such activities so that they can develop critical thinking, creativity and collaboration skills. However, these skills are hardly practiced in the classroom situations. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce an innovative and research-based method of teaching. In such a background, PBL can be one of the student-centered methods of teaching.

The role of teacher is now changing from authoritative agent to a facilitator, collaborator, manager, role model and co-learner, who can create the pleasant learning environment, encouraging the learners to work on their own. Teachers' role is to advise and monitor the learners on the assigned tasks. In this vein, Bass (2001) asserted teachers need to give the choice to their voice, needs and interests, to work even outside the world to explore the complex issues and real-life problems so that they can construct the knowledge on their own. The role of teachers is mainly to facilitate the learners in the learning process. They assist students to understand the project problem, develop potential solutions and apply solutions to meet specifications and criteria, when possible to construct new knowledge (Chua, 2014). S/he is able to engage students in meaningful learning, where they can work collaboratively. Since PBL is a learner-centered teaching method, students are provided with ample opportunities to work on their own, interact with friends, where teacher facilitates their learning. They can construct the knowledge on their own based on their own experiences and interpretation of the world around them. Thus, in the PBL environment, learners are given freedom to express and learn in the learning process, where the learners interact with each other to promote their communicative skills using the target language.

A successful and meaningful learning can be possible only through active and prolonged engagement of the learners in teaching learning activities. The motivated learners can learn language successfully. For Ball (2012), motivation is the inner power or energy that pushes one towards performing a certain action. Therefore, learners' motivation is an essential factor in teaching learning activities in terms of what and how they are going to learn. Despite the wide acceptance of PBL for students, it remains under researched. I found very few research studies made in the field of English language teaching context in Nepal. Therefore, this study intends to fulfil the existing research gap of using PBL in English classroom. The main purpose of the study is to explore English

language teachers' understanding of PBL and its benefits and challenges in English language teaching context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to address the following research issues.

- a) How do the teachers understand about the PBL in English language teaching context?
- b) How do the teachers perceive the opportunities and challenges of implementing PBL in English language teaching context?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Constructivism is a theory of learning which was founded by Jean Piaget (1896-1980) which claims that learning takes place from real life experience. Constructivism is mainly related to how people construct knowledge from their own experiences. Moreover, as different people have different knowledge and perception on the same thing, they construct the knowledge differently. The knowledge is constructed by the learners with their active involvement in the real life learning situation.

The constructivists believe that learning takes place in a gradual process. Therefore, it is important to provide the learners about the problems related to their own individual ideas about the world where they need to think to accomplish the task. Knowledge is constructed with active involvement of the learners in interaction. In this respect, Taber (2006) stated although knowledge in one sense is personal and individual, the learners construct the knowledge through their interaction with the physical world, collaboratively in social settings and in a cultural and linguistic environment (p.3). PBL is a practical, student-centered teaching approach where students get prolonged engagement in the teaching learning activities beyond the classroom and textbook. They get opportunity for learning in group both working inside the classroom and with the community people. In this way, PBL is one of the effective ways for the learners to construct the new knowledge, working in the real-life situation. While designing the project work for the learners, it is necessary for the teachers to know the actual level of the learners and the

potential area of learning. Therefore, the knowledge of students' zone of proximal development is very helpful for designing the teaching learning activities for the particular level of the learners in the classroom so that suitable and effective project works can be designed for their meaningful learning. Learning is possible when individuals interact and get involved in the discussion (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, we need to consider a range of scaffolds from teachers, peers and technology that can support students in solving the problem collaboratively on the assigned task.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a small-scale qualitative study which places emphasis upon exploring and understanding lived experiences ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). For this purpose, I selected two English language teachers who have been implementing PBL in teaching English from two community secondary schools of Rupandehi district purposively as research participants to have the required information. In this regard, Cohen et al. (2007) argued that purposive sampling is used by the qualitative researchers to get in touch with people who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues. Like-wise, I used narrative inquiry as a research method to uncover the lived experiences of the participants on understanding of PBL in teaching English language. After getting their consent, I used semi- structured in-depth interview about their understanding of PBL as research tool until I received the saturated information from the research participants. I translated the recorded information into English from Nepali. Then I organized and categorized the information into different themes and analyzed and interpreted it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main purpose of the study was to explore the teachers' understanding on project-based learning in learning English language. The information collected from the participants was transcribed, coded and categorized for understanding the phenomenon in question. The data of the study were analyzed and interpreted in three main themes as follows:

Teachers' Understanding of PBL

Through analysis of the interview, I tried to learn how the participants understand project-based learning from their perspectives. They were found to have more or less the same understanding of it. They revealed good understanding and positive view towards it. In response to my question regarding the understanding towards PBL, Ramesh stated, "PBL is a useful, research-based and practical kind of learning, where students learn working in the real life situations". He clarified that PBL is a research-based learning, where students learn working in the real life situations. His view is in harmony with Grant (2002) who stated that project-based learning is student-centered as there is learners' active participation where they get prolonged engagement on the project works who are encouraged to the in-depth investigation.

Ramesh further added, "Students are provided with the topic related to real life issues, where they have to work in collaboration in the real field". They critically examined the situation and carefully analyze and interpret the collected data for finding the solution of the problems. Teachers perceive PBL as a team work approach which can boost students' engagement, provides students with the opportunity to work in groups, share ideas, help each other and learn from mistakes of peers (Tamim & Grant, 2013). Regarding the understanding of PBL, Rama, another participant claimed, "PBL supports students to develop communication and collaboration skills, creativity and critical thinking skills. Students are actively engaged in each and every activity and develop the level of confidence". The participant's narrative explored that PBL developed communication and collaboration, creativity and critical thinking skills in learners. Likewise, Grant (2002) regarded PBL as a learner-centered strategy which affords learners the opportunity for in-depth investigations of worthy topics, and the learners are more autonomous.

In this line, Ramesh shared his view on PBL thus, "Project-based learning is effective as it involves students in the real life issues based on their needs and desires and it makes learning student-centered". His positive responses indicated that PBL is one of the effective methods of teaching due to students' engagement in learning. This argument is supported by constructivists who believe learners discover knowledge by themselves

and wrestle with ideas (Marlinda, 2012). Therefore, teachers perceived PBL to have a better impact on the learning process and it also motivates the students, keeps them engaged, and give them a sense of ownership in learning process (Tamim, & Grant, 2013). They are actively engaged in the learning activities based on their needs, interest, and relevance to their topic. It can be concluded that project-based learning is effective and learner-centered as it is based on their needs and desires relevant to their topic.

Opportunities of Implementing PBL

PBL provides several opportunities for the learners to work in teams on real life issues, with the real experts rather than depending only on their teachers. PBL is in-depth learning in which learners take responsibility of their work and through which they have choices among alternatives (Chard, 2014). So, PBL encourages the learners to observe the every detail critically. The classroom content is connected with the real life issues and students have fun of learning while working in their own community in collaboration with other co-learners in new situations with new experiences.

Regarding this, Ramesh shared his opinion, "Project work is interdisciplinary in nature, and students get opportunity to develop in-depth investigation and various skills while going through various project works". From his comment on project work, it can be understood that students, working on project work, can develop in-depth information about the concerned topic of their study. Rama also shared similar view and experiences in the same line. She stated, "Group work is very essential part of PBL where students get opportunity to work in team that helps them develop the interactive, communicative and collaborative skills. It also increases students' motivation". Rama's narrative supported that PBL provides a favorable learning atmosphere to develop students' life skills in the language classroom that motivates them to work in groups, communicate with each other and respect each other and ultimately they develop social communication skill. Increased motivation is the main benefit of using PBL it increases students' engagement and motivation to learn (Baş, 2011; Bell, 2010). Both participants reported that PBL is effective in terms of getting learning opportunities exploring wide resource of information, collaboration among/between co-learners and the teachers, promoting the innovative ideas and developing various life skills. The participants' views are in harmony

with Ghosheh Wahbeh et al. (2021) who stated, “Project-based learning helps to improve students’ personal and cooperative skills through developing their communication skills between them and with their teacher and they concluded that PBL increases mutual respect, confidence and self-regulation of learning in learners” (p.1).

As there is active learning in PBL, the learners get encouraged for the variety of research- based activities that develop their problem-solving skills. Similarly, Ramesh insisted “It develops students’ level of confidence, critical thinking and social skills working inside and outside the classroom situation”. Ramesh’s experience of using PBL suggested that it provides learners an ample opportunity to work both inside and outside the classroom. The participant’s view is supported by Nicola and Allison (2014) who claimed PBL develops collaboration skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills (p. 14). The learners are engaged in varieties of works according to the nature of project works that enable them to develop the most essential skills like collaborative skills, critical thinking, research and social skills. Students who engage in project-based learning take responsibility of their own learning and become life-long learners (Sudadi, 2020). He further added, “In PBL, students are provided with the wide resources for exploring and recording information in the field, internet, and library”. His experience of using PBL revealed that students with the wide resources explore new information. Guven (2014) stated, “Project work is an extended process of inquiry through which students investigate a complex question, problem or challenge as an extension of what has already been learned in class” (p.3).

From the above statements, it can be stated that in traditional teaching, teacher remains active doing each and every activity on his/her own and the role of students is to passively listen to those lectures whereas in PBL, students are provided with wide resources and they are actively involved in exploring and identifying the necessary information relevant to their topic collaboratively. As a result, the learning achievement increases in terms of developing wide range of knowledge. In the same way, as they get opportunities to work outside the classroom in a team according to their needs and interests on the assigned task, they will achieve higher level of learning outcome.

In this line, Ramesh asserted, "PBL, improves students' academic achievement and provides the real-life situations for exploring the real information. So, students are exposed to the real-life situations and a lot of learning opportunities working together. "His narratives clarified that PBL could be regarded as one of the best approaches in terms of improving students' academic achievement engaging the learners in the real-life issues. Teachers actively engage students in conducting various activities in course of carrying out the project work cooperatively. The participants' views are in harmony with (Chua et al. 2014) who stated that PBL allows students learn to work together to solve the problems and promote innovative ideas. Shachar and Fisher (2004)'s study indicated that PBL increased students' academic achievement in Israel when it was used (as cited in Baumgartner & Zabin, 2008). Thus, it develops collective responsibility skills in the learners by transferring the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner. Constructivists also believe knowledge is socially and culturally constructed by means of interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

PBL enhances students' academic achievement and content knowledge relevant to course. It increases autonomy, important life skills, higher order of thinking and motivation (Simpson, 2011). Thus, PBL provides an opportunity to the students to seek the answers of different questions -what, why, how and when to satisfy their curiosity and expectations.

Challenges of Implementing PBL

In spite of its effectiveness in learning, teachers perceived some challenges for the successful implementation of PBL. It requires spacious rooms with adequate resources and modern technologies. Moreover, it requires experienced, skilled and trained teachers to guide and motivate the learners for in-depth investigation of the topic. In this respect, Pearlman (1993) also focused on spacious classroom, specialized discussion and seminar rooms for the successful application of project work.

Regarding the challenges, Ramesh stated, "PBL requires the skilled teachers and spacious rooms to conduct group work, and group presentation in the classroom in Nepalese context". He recollected his unpleasant experience of using PBL. His response indicated that he had hard time for conducting group work, and group presentation. For

successful implementation of PBL, it requires spacious rooms with adequate resources and modern technologies. Students have problems with working in groups and they may not have the abilities to equally contribute to the project work (Baysura et al. 2016).

Skilled and trained teachers with sufficient knowledge and skills can successfully implement PBL in English language classrooms. Ramesh further added “It is difficult to manage the available time and resources. Ramesh’s comment expressed his frustration in implementing PBL due to time and resource constraints. In other words, the management of necessary resources and time for learners is necessary for effective implementation of PBL. Participants’ responses showed that lack of time is considered as a problem for both teachers and students. The study of Baysura et al. (2016) indicated that some teachers refused to implement PBL because of lack of time and increased workload. Actually, using PBL lets students more time and autonomy for in-depth investigation than in traditional teaching learning practices. Therefore, both teachers and students need to be aware of those problems.

Regarding the challenges of implementing PBL in Nepalese context, Rama shared her opinion thus, “Nepalese teaching learning practice is based on fixed prescribed textbooks teaching, which teachers must complete within the allocated time frame. So, teachers cannot go beyond the textbook”. Her bitter experience explored that teachers faced difficulty to manage time and they lacked adequate knowledge and skills for its successful implementation. The participant’s view is in harmony with Tamim and Grant (2013) who claimed that it is not easy for the teacher to cover all the necessary materials and contents within the time frame. Teachers need to be constructivist teachers who create the learning environment for the learners, where they can independently consult and explore the wide resources and construct the knowledge on their own.

Regarding this issue, Ramesh stated, “It is also difficult to use it in rural area because it is difficult to find out professionals to provide the relevant information. Since PBL requires the skilled teacher with resources, it can be implemented in the schools of rural areas. Further, he stated, “There is also lack of resources and professional teachers to create such learning environment”. Ramesh’s argument reflected that the schools which do not have resources and professional teachers cannot implement PBL. His experience

indicated that in applying PBL, resources and professional teachers are required. Another burning challenge in implementation of PBL is the lack of resourceful and professional teachers to make the in-depth study of subject matter. In this vein, Rama expressed, "It is challenging in our context to find the professional and resourceful teachers who can successfully handle the project in teaching learning activities". His comments on PBL clarified that it is difficult having professional and resourceful teachers to handle it. Teachers perceive the lack of appropriate materials, resources, technologies and funds as the major obstacles in implementing PBL (Baysura et al. 2016). Similarly, On the other hand, trainees also do not bother of planning and implementing those knowledge and skills in the classroom since there is no mechanism to evaluate the effect of training programmes and teachers' performance in real teaching.

To sum up, from the above responses of the participants, it can be concluded that PBL is suitable for the 21st century learners. Therefore, it is necessary to address the aforementioned challenges providing adequate resources and training to the teachers in current trends and issues. Regular supervision and follow up activities by the team of experts has been realized while implementing it in English language teaching context.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explores English language teachers' positive understanding of project-based learning in English language teaching in the context of Nepal. The study indicates that project-based learning is a learner-centered, innovative, research-based and practical-based learning approach. PBL provides a favorable learning atmosphere where students develop life skills that motivate them to work in groups in their real-life situations. Moreover, it provides learners with an opportunity to actively construct their own knowledge through interaction as constructivists claim. The study confirms that learners learn better when they have prolonged engaged in real life situations. Therefore, their active and prolonged involvement is necessary for higher level of understanding of the contents. The congested classrooms, fixed sitting arrangement, little resources, rigid curriculum, domination of textbook-based traditional teaching learning practices, lack of sufficient knowledge and skills in the teachers have been realized as perceived challenges for effective implementation of PBL in Nepalese English language teaching context.

The study can contribute to develop communication and critical thinking, innovation and creativity, leadership and management skills of students in learning English. Moreover, PBL can contribute to develop students' life skills along with cooperative and communicative skills.

For the successful implementation on of PBL, it requires a resourceful library, sufficient time for extended engagement of the learners in project-based activities and internet facility for the access to wide resources. Moreover, PBL gives an insight for the school teachers to manage the resources and time for students' learning in their school. This study can be helpful for teachers to identify the relevant topics for the learners suitable to their needs and interests giving choice to their voice. The study has many limitations as there were only two participant teachers teaching in community schools in Rupandehi. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the entire population in Nepal. Further researchers in this area may explore rich information on teachers' understanding of PBL in English language teaching.

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