Tutors' Experiences and Perceptions of a Problem-based Learning Approach in an ESL Writing Classroom

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Abstract:

> *This study investigated tutors' experiences and perceptions of using a problem-based learning approach (PBL) in an ESL writing classroom. The participants of the study are two Nigerian tutors who facilitated an intact class of 18 second-year students in an English composition course which lasted for 12 weeks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The tutors were interviewed after the implementation of the PBL process. The overall findings of the study show that the tutors have positive perceptions of the use of PBL in a writing classroom. Specifically, the findings reveal the tutors' positive experiences and perception of the workshop conducted prior to the PBL process, the ill-structured problems presented to the students, tutor facilitation and students' group activities. Finally, the paper gives some pedagogical implications which would give insight for better implementation of the PBL approach.*

Keywords: ESL, problem-based learning approach, tutor experiences

1. Introduction

Problem-based learning approach (PBL) is one of the student-centred instructional approaches motivated and developed due to the failure of the traditional methods to enhance learning. Students' performance under the traditional methods were not found satisfactory and relevant to professional practice. Most of the students lacked reasoning ability, which would allow them to apply the theories learnt at universities

to the solution of problems in the future workplaces. Instead, they resort to cramming and storing information (Barrows, 1996). Thus, PBL contextualises learning in a real-life situation in order to develop students' learning output alongside other skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving skills through collaborative work to solve a real-life problem (Mardziah H. Abdullah & Tan, 2008). Students are grouped into smaller groups to interact and work in order to decide and discover for themselves what and how they will learn. Through the group learning, they propose viable solutions to an ill-structured problem which related to their real-life situation and does not have a straight-forward answer (Jonassen, 1997). The ill-structured problem given to the student triggers their inquiry leads them to the discovery of relevant knowledge and skills required to solve or understand the problem.

On the other hand, tutors guide the students in the process mainly through open-ended questioning (Mardzia H. Abdullah, 1998) unlike in the traditional teacher-centred approach where tutors dispense the content of the curriculum (Wilkerson & Gijselaers, 1996). The tutors play an important role in determining the success of the PBL process which includes providing non-threatening environments, support for students' acquisition of content knowledge and skills of critical thinking. Researchers emphasize the roles of tutors in the implementation of PBL, that despite the effectiveness of the approach, the students may be confused when there is poor facilitation by the tutors (Tan, 2004). For instance, in an ESL classroom, it is stressed that tutors should ensure that communication is mainly in English (Mardziah & Tan, 2008).

The PBL approach has been adopted in various fields of studies in recent years and in many countries. The approach has been proven effective in developing leaners various skills such as problem-solving (Bigelow, 2004) critical thinking skills (Yuan et. al, 2008) and language skills (Mardziah H. Abdullah & Tan, 2008; Norzaini Azman & Shin, 2012; Othman & Ismail Ahmad Shah, 2013). It also helps students in the acquisition of subject content/knowledge (Hande, Mohammed & Komattil, 2014), life-long learning (Hosseini & Assareh, 2011).

Many studies have investigated the students' experiences and perceptions of PBL as it is believed that students' experiences influence their performance (Gustilo, 2013). In language learning, students' attitudes which involve their feelings and beliefs play a significant role in determining their success (Ansarimoghaddam & Tan, 2014). It is found that students have positive perceptions and attitude towards the PBL approach. However, tutors' perceptions have not been investigated.

For instance, in Nigeria where English is used as a second language (L2) many undergraduates display various problems in their writing in English (Bodunde & Sotiloye, 2013; Olusoji, 2013; Theodore, 2013) mainly due to the use of traditional teaching method which is found not suitable considering some factors such large classes (Muodumogu & Unwaha, 2013). On the other hand, teachers are little or not aware of other approaches that have been proven effective in improving the students' writing skills (Babalola, 2012). Thus, this study proposing PBL as an alternative method for teaching writing in the Nigeria context. To achieve that, there

is a need to know the tutors' perceptions towards it such as the challenges they face, advantages and some drawbacks of the approach. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the tutors' experiences and perceptions of PBL as a new approach to the teaching of writing in Nigeria. Accessing their experiences and perceptions of PBL would allow the researcher to make recommendations for the better implementation of the approach not only in a writing classroom but also in other aspects of language.

2. Research Questions

To guide the study the, following research questions were formulated.
1. What is the tutors' experience of the PBL process?
2. What is the tutors' experience of their roles in the PBL process?
3. What is the tutors' experience of the students' roles in the PBL process?

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a case study research design which allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system through extensive data collection by a researcher (Creswell, 2012). This research design was adopted for the study in order to explore, understand and fully explain tutors' experiences of the PBL process. The setting of the study is a local university in the north-eastern part of Nigeria.

An intact class of Advanced English Composition was selected for the study. There were 18 second-year students taking the course. They are of mixed gender and aged ranges from 24 and 38 years old. The participants were grouped into three groups of six participants each. In addition, two tutors participated in the study. Each of the tutors has more than ten years' experience of teaching English for Nigerian undergraduates.

3.2 Instruments

The main instrument used to collect the data of the study is semi-structured interview. The tutors were interviewed before and after the PBL process in order to elicit their experiences and perceptions of the using the PBL approach in an ESL writing classroom. Open-ended questioning was employed for the interview to elicit information regarding the participants' experiences of the PBL approach. Specifically, the tutors' experiences of the workshop, ill-structured problem, peer collaboration, facilitation, and the impact of PBL on the students' writing process. The collected data were coded and categorized into emerging themes to answer the research questions.

3.3 Research Procedures

Prior to the implementation of the PBL approach for the study, a workshop was conducted by the researcher to train the tutors and equip them with knowledge and skills required for effective implementation of the approach and facilitation of the students' learning in the process. During the workshop, the researcher explained the the concept of PBL and procedures for its implementation. The procedures for

designing ill-structured problems that would stimulate students' creativity, critical thinking, independent learning and teamwork were also explained. The tutors were also trained on how to effectively facilitate the students' learning through open-ended questioning.

After that, the PBL treatment was given to the students in two cycles, each for three weeks. In the first cycle, the students were grouped into smaller and given an ill-structured problem to propose viable solutions through collaboration. Specifically, the students were asked to brainstormed, identified available information related to the problem and then generated viable solutions to the problem. They also identified learning issues which are things they needed to find out more information about and resources to look up or consult. The learning issues were shared among the students for self-directed learning. Throughout the group discussions, the tutors went round the groups to facilitate the students' learning through open-ended questioning. After the cycle, a debriefing session was conducted by the researcher where unclear writing and PBL-related issues were discussed with the tutors and the students. The same procedures were repeated for the second cycle.

4. Findings and Discussion

To find out tutors' experiences and perceptions of the use of the PBL approach in an ESL writing classroom, the tutors were interviewed before and after the implementation of the PBL approach of the study. The findings of the interview are presented in the following themes to answer the research questions. The findings are substantiated with the actual data from the tutors' responses.

4.1 Tutors' Experiences of the PBL Process

This section provides answers to the first research question of the study: What is the tutors' experience of the PBL process? The PBL process includes all the steps followed and activities involved in proposing viable solutions to the ill-structured problems. From the semi-structured interview, the tutors revealed their positive experiences of the PBL process. For instance, their prior experiences of PBL, their experiences with the workshops and other preparatory activities.

4.2 Prior Experiences Enhance Tutors' Understanding of PBL

At the beginning of the study, the tutors were interviewed if they had any knowledge of the PBL approach or they had implemented it in their classrooms before the current study. This is because prior knowledge of the PBL approach might help the tutors to easily understand their roles to effectively implement the approach. Both the tutors revealed having prior knowledge of PBL. For instance, one of the tutors clarified that he even participated in a PBL classroom in his postgraduate classes. Since then he has a positive experience and perception of the approach.

> During my master's programme, I participated in a PBL classroom.
> And from the time I develop an interest in PBL and wanted to use it
> in my classroom.

The other tutor had no prior experience of the approach either as a student or a tutor but he was aware of it. He heard and read about its benefits in developing students' learning skills.

> I learned about PBL through reading and colleagues that it is a student-centred approach. I have not participated in it; I have not used it in my class.

At the end of the study, the tutors were also interviewed on the role of their prior knowledge on the performance in the present study. From the response of the semi-structured interviews, the tutors that their prior knowledge of PBL helped them implement the approach in this study.

On the contrary, none of the students had prior knowledge or experience of the PBL approach. They revealed that the approach is not used in their school, even group activities are hardly practised in their classrooms as obtain in many schools in Nigeria. They added that even group learning is hardly practised in the presence of their lecturers in the school. They only organise their group discussion but lecturers are not involved in the process.

The tutors' prior knowledge played an important role in helping the implementation of the approach. This is in line with the findings of Dion (1996) which revealed that proper understanding of a PBL approach by teachers helps with preparation for their PBL classes. It also concurs with the findings of Nguyen (2009) which showed that the tutors' prior knowledge of PBL helped them to engage in preparatory activities prior to implementing PBL, such as preparing the learning facilities such as a conducive classroom and finding available spaces for group work and other facilities.

4.3 Workshops and other Preparatory Activities Help in Proper Implementation PBL

At the end of the PBL process of the current study, the tutors were interviewed to say their views on whether the workshop and other preparatory activities helped them to effectively implement PBL in the writing classroom or otherwise. Overall, they expressed their positive attitude and experiences of the workshop and the preparatory activities. They disclosed that the workshop helped them to properly understand the concept of PBL and its steps for effective implementation in the writing classroom such as giving feedback and asking open-ended questions.

> The workshop helps me to get some clarifications on some issues in PBL, like how to coach the students in the process. Particularly, I learned how to use the open-ended question to push the students to generate many ideas related to the given topics. There are other advantages to the workshop.

Furthermore, they explained that after the workshop they became more enlighten on some of the disadvantages of PBL, like time-consumption, and its tendency for students to engage in unfocused learning if they are not properly guided. One of the tutors explained:

> I learned that PBL is not like a normal class, it consumes time. The usual 2-3 hours given for lectures may not be enough for PBL. Tutors should be able to control the discussion within the time given.

In addition, the tutors disclosed that explaining the preparatory activities of PBL to the students made the implemention of the approach easier. For example, one of the tutors explained that in their first meeting with the students, the tutors explained the concepts and procedures of PBL, the students' and tutors' roles to the students. The explanations helped the students to grasp the concept because PBL is a new teaching and learning approach to them which could be more demanding than the traditional approaches they have been familiar with.

The other tutor added that to enable the students to understand the concept of PBL better, he compared it with the traditional approach which is familiar to the students. The tutor, finally, explained that the preparatory activities of the PBL process are very important because it is where the students will get to know the process.

> I think the first class is the most important because I introduced to students the teaching and learning approach. Specifically, I explained their new role in PBL class so that they would be prepared for their learning. I explained to them the objectives of the course and the benefits of PBL.

Finally, the tutors' responses showed the usefulness of the workshops in assisting them to understand and effectively implement the PBL approach in the writing classroom. This implies that if the workshop would be given for a longer time, the tutors' may be more informed and skilful in to effectively implement the approach. It could be concluded that organizing workshops for tutors are a necessary requirement for effective implementation of PBL. It could also be better if the workshop can be conducted for other teachers to help them for effective teaching delivery.

4.4 Tutors' and Students' Roles Help to Identify Students' Potentials

This section answers the second and third research questions: tutors' experiences of their roles and students' roles in the PBL process. The roles of the tutors in the PBL approach is to coach the student to acquire knowledge and skills learning mainly through open-ended questioning. Thus, effective learning in PBL, its success or otherwise is generally determined by good facilitation. Therefore, at the end of the PBL process, the tutors were interviewed to reveal their experiences and perceptions of the facilitation process as well as the peer collaboration among the students. From their responses, the tutors expressed their positive experiences and perceptions of the facilitation process. They added that the facilitation and the peer collaboration helped the students to identify some of their potentials. For instance, the students develop other skills such as speaking skills.

> Initially, some of the students could not speak because they are shy or nervous. But after sometimes, mainly due to the encouragement from the tutors they were able to overcome it.

The tutors further commented that their positive experiences and perceptions of PBL are because it enhances the students' language skills especially speaking. This could be attributed to the ill-structured problems given to them which were related to their real-life situations. They all have personal experience or opinion on the problems. Thus, the students were motivated to speak and share ideas.

> In my view, implementing the PBL helped the students to improve because they were eager to learn something new. They did have opportunities to work collaboratively before. The problems are related to their everyday lives so easy for them to discuss and become active learners.

These findings are in line with the findings of previous studies which discovered that learning through a PBL approach enhances students' problem-solving (Bigelow, 2004) critical thinking skills (Yuan et. al, 2008) and language skills (Mardziah H. Abdullah & Tan, 2008; Norzaini Azman & Shin, 2012; Othman & Ismail Ahmad Shah, 2013), team working and self-directed learning skills (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980), interactive communication, and self-reflection (Hearn & Hopper, 2008). The findings also concur with the assertions of Savin-Baden and Major (2004) that timely constructive comments of teachers and their support possibly helped students improve their learning.

4.5 Tutors' Roles Help in Class Control

The tutors also highlighted that their positive experiences and perceptions of the PBL approach are due to other benefits of the approach to them such as it allowed for effective class management and control. It enabled them to give feedback easily, identify students' learning styles like fast/slow or reluctant learners in order to provide them with proper help.

> The approach really helps me to effectively deliver my lessons. Learners have opportunities to develop a variety of learning skills that could not be possible developed using the traditional method.

Although the tutors have positive perception and experiences of the PBL approach, there are some challenging issues. They described PBL as a time-consuming approach because it was difficult to conduct it in one to two hours. This is in line with the assertions of Prince and Felder (2007) who assert that problem-based learning is arguably the most difficult to implement because of even the construction of authentic open-ended problems time-consuming. In addition, because some students were slow and passive learners, it was difficult for the tutors to carry every one alone at a time. As a result, it was difficult to asses the students' performance. For instance, one tutor commented.

> I observed that some students did not finish their discussions within the allocated time. They also complained that they needed more time for self-directed learning and the class presentations.

Other disadvantages of PBL according to the tutors, difficulty for some students to understand their roles because the approach was new to them as they were used to the traditional methods of teaching. Therefore, there is a need for tutors to clearly explain every step of PBL to students for effective participation in the process.

The tutors also pointed out at other challenges of the approach which include lack of enough facilities or resources such as round-table classrooms where students can sit facing one another, as it is difficult to implement problem-based learning in larger classes of over 50 students like a lecture-based approach. Finally, PBL needs more tutors staff to work as facilitators. Some of the challenges of PBL identified in this study such as lack of time, are in line with those discovered by Szabó, Harangi, Nylander, Theodorsson, & Davidson (2014). They added that number of students per group (group size), group dynamics and tutor competence also hindered students' effective learning in PBL.

The tutors also observed some disagreements and conflicts among the students while assigning responsibilities such as chair or scribe for a group, and in discussing issues related to the given ill-structured. To address the issues of disagreement, conflict or domination among students during group interactions, tutors should allow the students to self-select their group members, to select people they are more comfortable working with. This might also motivate the students and make them free to interact and share their ideas, thus, achieving one of the aims of the PBL approach. As discovered by Cui, (2016) that students tend to have stronger self-efficacy and positive attitudes in English learning when they learn through the PBL approach.

The implication of these findings is that investigating tutors' experiences and perceptions of PBL helps in its proper designing and implementation. As suggested by Turan, Elcin, Odabas, Ward, & Sayek, (2009) that Periodic evaluation of tutors' professional behavior helps to determine need for faculty development of the PBL approach. Another implication of the findings is that tutors should pay particular attention to the students during the PBL interactions, set some rules, and monitor every group activities and ensure the smooth running of the process without domination conflict among group members. This concurs with Dion's (1996) suggestions that tutors or facilitators should set clear guidelines for working in groups when preparing students for the PBL process. He added that students should be guided by the tutors to form their own groups. Tutors should pay the particular attention to the students' learning especially that the students work within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and their learning moves to the next level through additional support from the teachers (Vygotsky, 1978).

6. Conclusion

The principal objective of the current study is to investigate the tutors' perceptions of PBL in an ESL writing classroom. The findings revealed that the tutors have

positive experiences and perceptions of the approach which reflects its usefulness in language instruction. Despite the positive findings revealed by the present study, some challenges and drawbacks of the approach have been identified. Practitioners should pay attention to time, facilities and students' interest when designing and implementing a PBL curriculum. In addition, there are some limitations which could be addressed in future studies. The present study involves only two tutors in an ESL writing classroom and does not consider other factors such as gender, level or language proficiency of the students. Therefore, further studies may investigate the perception of many tutors in different fields of studies with a different background, gender and proficiency levels.

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