

Action research on PBL in college English viewing, listening, and speaking teaching

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Abstract: Introducing the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model into college English viewing, listening, and speaking instruction, this study conducted three rounds of action research focusing on problem scenarios, learning methods and evaluation systems, as well as the roles of teachers and students. The results indicate that although the practical application of the PBL model in viewing, listening, and speaking instruction is merely a small-scale attempt with some unresolved issues, it is worthy of exploration and promotion in terms of innovating classroom teaching methods and fostering students' language skills, autonomous learning abilities, and critical thinking.

Keywords: PBL teaching method, college English viewing, listening and speaking, teaching practice

1. Introduction

The development of today's global economy and society has placed higher demands on college students' English proficiency and College English teaching. Although various reforms in College English Viewing, Listening, and Speaking courses have contributed significantly to improving students' language expression, they have not completely broken the bottleneck in English listening and speaking. The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model aligns well with the current trend of College English teaching reform in China, providing new ideas and methods for this transformation.

2. Overview of PBL

The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model originated in the medical education reform in the West during the 1960s. As a new learning approach, PBL was quickly and widely adopted in modern medical education. Subsequently, universities in countries such as Canada began to apply PBL to various other disciplines, including psychology.

The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model has evolved alongside the development of constructivism. According to constructivist learning theory, language learners must engage in authentic language activities to truly understand and use the language. Similarly, the PBL model emphasizes that learners acquire both linguistic and subject knowledge through real-world language activities. From this perspective, the core principles of constructivism are consistent with the main features of PBL. Since the 1990s, research on PBL has attracted attention and exploration within Chinese educational circles. However, most studies have focused on theoretical introductions or clinical medical education, with very few empirical application studies conducted in foreign language courses.

3. Action research on PBL in English audio-visual-oral instruction

Action research is a mode of educational research that integrates theory with practice. It serves as a methodological approach capable of combining educational theories with practical applications in an organic manner. During the process of action research, researchers are guided by advanced educational theories to formulate relatively flexible action plans. These plans are then implemented, observed, and reflected upon in a cyclical manner, with the ultimate goal of improving actual teaching practices.

3.1. The PBL instructional procedure

The instructional procedure of the PBL model generally consists of several components (see Figure 1): forming groups, posing problems, presenting problems, group collaboration/self-directed learning, solving problems iteratively, summarizing, and evaluation and reflection. Among these, problem posing, group collaboration/self-directed learning, and evaluation and reflection constitute the essential stages of PBL. Crucially, well-designed problem posing serves as the core and starting point of PBL, representing the key factor in ensuring its success.

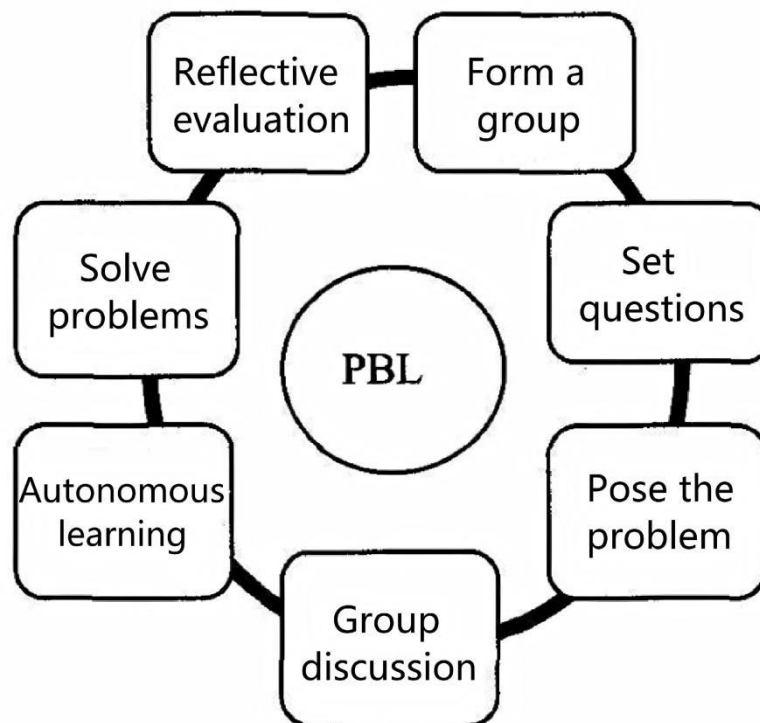


Figure 1. Flowchart of the PBL Instructional Model

3.2. Problem design and action plans in PBL

3.2.1. Problem design in PBL

The PBL model comprises three basic elements: the problem scenario, the students, and the teacher. In PBL, the problem remains at the core, and the teaching process is essentially a process of exploring and solving problems. Based on the characteristics of the PBL model, problem design should possess the following features: First, the design of the problem scenario should originate from the linguistic points, language skills, and cultural backgrounds that students need to master according to the textbook, aligning with the objectives outlined in the curriculum standards. Second, problems should be proposed based on authentic texts, pictures, videos, and audio materials. Third, the problem design should enable students to effectively access a large amount of comprehensible, natural, and authentic language information during the problem-solving process—information that stimulates learning motivation, activates thinking and analysis, and promotes the cultivation of autonomous learning abilities. Fourth, solving the problem requires collaboration among students. Finally, problem design must consider students' existing knowledge structures, cognitive levels, and professional needs. It should trigger cognitive conflict, stimulate the desire for inquiry, yet remain within the boundaries of their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), thereby facilitating the formulation of specific sub-problems.

3.2.2. *Action plan*

Guided by the core principles of the PBL model and utilizing modern information technology as a cognitive tool, this study conducted an initial exploration through three rounds of action research in the Viewing, Listening, and Speaking courses of two experimental classes for undergraduates at our university. The research focused on problem scenarios, learning and assessment methods, and teacher-student role relationships. The primary objective is to explore effective teaching methods for College English instruction. Ultimately, the aim is to gradually cultivate and enhance students' comprehensive language proficiency and innovative thinking skills through the process of analyzing and solving problems in English, thereby fostering their self-directed learning abilities.

3.3. Cycle 1: problem scenario

3.3.1. *Implementation of action research*

Since the PBL model emphasizes that students need to engage in meaningful knowledge construction within authentic problem scenarios, the top priority of this cycle was to explore how to reasonably transform the content of the Viewing, Listening, and Speaking textbooks into authentic problems that motivate students to conduct inquiry-based and self-directed learning.

3.3.2. *Observation*

As students previewed the textbook content and gathered relevant materials beforehand, the number of students volunteering to speak in class increased, along with their overall talk time. Most students were able to express their views using richer vocabulary and language, demonstrating deeper thinking and inquiry into the problems and their causes. Certain hotly debated topics raised by students—such as cultural background, cultural differences, and culture shock—stimulated further thought, debate, and inquiry among their peers. The more these issues were debated, the clearer they became, and the classroom atmosphere grew increasingly active. However, a minority of students lacked interest or were insufficiently prepared, resulting in low participation in class discussions; some even exhibited a tendency to be mere spectators.

3.3.3. *Reflection*

Through the implementation of this cycle and subsequent observations, we realized that while improving oral skills is essential, equal emphasis must be placed on cultivating students' critical thinking abilities. Only by enhancing critical thinking can students express themselves with breadth, depth, and creativity, ensuring their speech is logical and substantive. Without it, language expression becomes a "source without roots."

It is worth mentioning that although PBL appears to delegate all learning tasks—such as searching, collecting, and filtering information—to the students, the successful completion of the project relies heavily on the teacher's guidance before, during, and after class. This raises the requirements for teachers. Teachers must possess strong organizational, coordination, and instructional guidance skills, as well as the adaptability to handle unknown knowledge domains. In the long run, this dynamic is beneficial for both teacher development and student cultivation.

3.4. Cycle 2: learning methods and assessment models

3.4.1. *Implementation of action research*

Under the guidance of the PBL pedagogy, the teaching objectives, procedures, difficult points, and assessment criteria for each unit in the textbook were established, along with the tasks required of the students. First, student groups were formed prior to class. Students were allowed to form groups freely based on shared interests, with each group consisting of 6 to 8 members. A group leader was appointed to oversee task division, coordination, collaboration, and discussion among members. Subsequently, each project team was required to discuss the main content, framework, and potential challenges of their task, based on the teacher's requirements regarding the deliverables and presentation format, as well as the interests and strengths of the team members. Responsibilities were then assigned in detail. Finally, the groups finalized their solutions and selected one representative to deliver a presentation.

The Presentation Stage. After conducting inquiry-based learning through multiple channels both in and out of class, each project team presented their findings and accepted evaluation from both the teacher and

peers. The teacher graded each group's project performance on-site. Combining self-assessment, intra-group assessment, and inter-group peer assessment, the teacher conducted a quantitative evaluation of various aspects, including the students' self-directed learning process, collaboration and communication, participation level, and final presentation. This assessment constituted an appropriate proportion of the final course grade. Both teacher and student evaluations strived to be objective, fair, and comprehensive, aiming to reflect student learning accurately. These evaluations provided feedback and references to guide reflection for both teachers and students, laying the foundation for subsequent teaching practice and research.

3.4.2. Observation

The series of viewing, listening, and speaking activities in class were centered around the project theme. These activities aimed to stimulate students' interest in exploring new knowledge based on their existing background knowledge and relevant experiences related to the topic. For the students, the in-class listening and viewing materials served as preparation for project completion. While listening, speaking, and watching in English, students typically paid special attention to vocabulary, sentence patterns, and other knowledge points relevant to their projects. They continuously refined their project content, gradually accumulating and applying what they had learned. With shared learning tasks and collective outcomes, coupled with the incentive of multiple assessment mechanisms, the motivation and cooperative spirit of the majority of students improved significantly.

3.4.3. Reflection

The group collaboration model assigns distinct tasks to each member, balancing interdependence with individual accountability. This approach is highly conducive to cultivating students' communication skills and teamwork spirit. Furthermore, the diverse assessment methods have effectively stimulated students' enthusiasm for both autonomous and collaborative learning.

However, practical observations revealed that some students remained passive in terms of self-directed learning, class discussions, or cooperation with peers. Such passivity negatively impacted the overall performance of the group. Addressing this issue requires timely guidance and assistance from both group leaders and teachers.

3.5. Cycle 3: teacher and student roles

3.5.1. Implementation of action research

The core of the PBL model lies in emphasizing the student-centered position and the teacher's role as a facilitator in the learning process. Therefore, during the PBL implementation, we first arranged for students, under the teacher's guidance, to utilize information technology and online resources to search for materials, express their ideas, expand their language skills, and solve problems through collaboration. For instance, the teacher attended the discussions of each project group in turn, encouraging every student to participate at the appropriate time. The teacher also guided students to think about problems from multiple perspectives, absorb the strengths of others, and reflect on their own learning gains and shortcomings, ensuring that every student benefited from the experience.

3.5.2. Observation

Under the teacher's guidance and supervision, student participation and enthusiasm for group collaboration improved significantly, while the number of passive learners gradually decreased. In this context, it became necessary for the teacher to invest more effort in areas such as problem design and the provision of reference resources. The teacher offered more suggestions, encouraging students to broaden their reading scope and increase their reading volume for further exploration. Students were encouraged to firmly believe that language skills and critical thinking abilities are precisely what improve progressively through the continuous cycle of raising and solving problems.

3.5.3. Reflection

During the process of students collecting and organizing materials for their projects, teachers must play an active guiding role. On one hand, teachers should screen and categorize teaching materials related to the

topic and design corresponding classroom activities. On the other hand, teachers should provide students with various channels and methods for finding relevant materials outside of class, gradually cultivating their ability to independently locate, collect, and filter information. The term "materials" here refers not only to listening and video resources but also to reading materials and beyond.

4. Conclusion

The advantages of the PBL model in enhancing students' language proficiency, autonomous learning abilities, communication and collaboration skills, and critical and innovative thinking open a new window for foreign language teaching and research, meriting attention and exploration by educators. However, through the practice of PBL in Viewing, Listening, and Speaking courses, we also recognize certain limitations. Constrained by factors such as the researcher's experience level and the sample size, this study faces specific constraints. Currently, implementing PBL on a large scale in China encounters many inhibiting factors that require further efforts from researchers to overcome and investigate.

5. References

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