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USING PROBLEM-BASED APPROACH
IN TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH

The article deals with the issues of teaching business English using the problem-based approach. Analyzed are the conditions, possibilities and advantages of using a problematic situation in business English classes, and identified are potential problems of working with this methodology. Suggested are specific examples of using of the problem-based approach in business English classes.

Keywords: *problem-based learning, problematic situation, problem-based approach, teaching methods, business English*

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ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ПРОБЛЕМНОГО МЕТОДА
В ОБУЧЕНИИ ДЕЛОВОМУ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

В статье рассматриваются вопросы обучения деловому английскому языку с использованием проблемного метода. Проанализированы условия, возможности и преимущества применения проблемной ситуации на занятиях по деловому английскому языку, а также выявлены потенциальные проблемы работы по данной методике. Предложены конкретные примеры использования проблемного метода в рамках занятий деловым английским языком.

Ключевые слова: *проблемный метод обучения, проблемная ситуация, проблемный подход, методики преподавания, деловой английский язык*

«Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and when the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results». This statement of John Dewey, a prominent American scientist and educational reformer, is the best summary of what problem-based learning (hereinafter referred to as «PBL») is about [1]. What he was keen to stress is that a person learns much easier and more firmly not when a piece of information comes to them in a ready-made form, but when they make an effort to derive knowledge by themselves in the course of practical activities.

In traditional learning students are first told what they need to know, next they memorize the new concepts and finally solve a problem assigned to illustrate how to apply the new knowledge. In problem-based learning a problem is assigned to students at the first stage. This way they are faced with the need to identify what they need to know. With some guidance from a teacher students learn new concepts and apply them to solve the problem [2].

Thus, the psychological mechanism behind PBL is as follows. First, when faced with a never-before-seen contradictory problem (i. e. an intellectual difficulty), a person experiences genuine bewilderment and surprise. Most problem-based situations draw from the lack or excess of theoretical or factual information. Having analyzed the problematic situation, the learner transforms it into an interest-generating task: «How to resolve this contradiction?» At the next stage, the learner's mental process goes according to the following scheme: putting forward hypotheses, justifying hypotheses, and verifying hypotheses. Thus, the original task is transformed into a solution-searching model, where

various ways, means and methods of solution are considered. This is followed by the stages of problem-solving, verification of the obtained results, comparison with the initial hypothesis, systematization and generalization of the acquired knowledge and skills [3]. To sum up, an important distinguishing feature of problem-based method of teaching is that the problem makes students aware of the insufficiency of their knowledge, which encourages them to search for new knowledge and skills. And searching is one of the most important conditions for the development of creative thinking.

The challenge behind PBL for a teacher is to be able to assign the right cognitive problem. In this context, a problem is a complex theoretical or practical issue that contains a hidden contradiction and causes different (often opposite) opinions on its solution. The main conditions that must be met for the effective application of this pedagogical technique are that the problem must be age-appropriate, unusual and non-standard, contain a contradiction and encourage the search for new knowledge, i. e. it mustn't be solved with the help of previously acquired knowledge and skills.

An educator can state a problem in a PBL lesson in a few ways. Depending on the feelings that students experience when faced with a problem, the methodology distinguishes problematic situations evoking surprise and ones evoking difficulty [4].

The options for creating a problematic situation evoking surprise are as follows:

1. Students are given *contradictory facts or theories* on a particular topic. For example, when studying the topic «Global Issues of the 21st Century», a teacher can arrange debates on the topic «Plastic: good or bad?». The group is divided into two teams: pro-plastic and against-plastic. For a start, the students are given 10 minutes to carry out individual research of the topic on the Internet. Next, the teams are given another 10 minutes to discuss their findings as a group and create a final list of their claims and supporting details. Then, the whole class brainstorm useful words and phrases that would help them successfully debate in English. Finally, the sides take turns to state their claims, supporting details and rebuttals. Such a problem-based task helps to engage students into argumentative discussions, provides students with an opportunity to see that it is OK to disagree with their peers, and, most importantly, it gives them a chance to understand different perspectives and points of view on a variety of topics [5]. In this particular case, it's important for leaners to understand that the benefits of plastic extend into far reaching areas of our lives and it can't be a scapegoat for all that's wrong with the world. On the other hand, it's vital to elaborate the scale and consequences of plastic pollution.

2. Students are offered a question or task, the solution of which reveals *conflicting opinions of learners*. One of the best business English topics for applying this technique is «Advertising». As a part of this topic, a popular business English textbook «Market Leader» suggests that learners comment on a number of statements about advertising, like whether it is acceptable or offensive to use subliminal techniques, shocking tactics or children in advertising [6, p. 45]. Among that, the students need to comment on using nudity in ads. While many may say that it's beautiful and aesthetical, some might argue it leads to objectification of human body. After a short debate, the teacher displays an advertisement of a mosquito killer spray that depicts an overweight human figure lying on a dish in the pose of a roasted chicken sided with some vegetables. The slogan goes as «Don't be their feast». While being creative and non-standard, this shocking ad prompts students to look at the initial question from a different angle (nudity is not necessarily attractive) and steer the debates into a different direction.

3. Students are offered a task or an example containing *an error*, *insufficient information*, *excessive or conflicting data.* The author of the article uses a YouTube video «How to Speak about Money in English» by New Model for Learning English when teaching the topic «Money and Finance» [7]. Despite featuring a great portion of useful vocabulary on the topic and presenting it in an entertaining visual way, the video contains a mistake in one of the slides. Being a non-native speaker of English,

its creator erroneously spelled the number «five thousand dollars» as «5000$». While it looks totally OK in many countries around the world, English speakers would notice as many as two mistakes: a missing comma after number five and a currency symbol placed after the amount instead of being put before the digits. Pausing the video, the teacher announces the presence of an error in the slide and elicits possible answers from students. As a rule, at this point the problem remains unresolved and the correct answer is not revealed to the learners. Later in the same class, the students learn how to write numbers in English correctly. After some theory and practice, the teacher suddenly goes back to the unresolved problem. Now, students can apply the new skills to give the correct answer. Having faced the lack of knowledge at the initial stage of the problem-solving task, the students get a rewarding feeling of being able to resolve a riddle that seemed too challenging just an hour before. This facilitates memorizing and boosts students' level of confidence.

4. Students are proposed to *consider a phenomenon or a situation from different points of view*. In business English classes there are a lot of ways to practise this method. For example, when studying the topic of downsizing and redundancies, students are asked to look at the problem from both an employer's and an employee's perspective. When practicing negotiation skills, learners can try their hand at playing both roles (for example, a seller that is eager to sell more expensive, and a buyer determined to buy cheaper). Also, when writing CV samples, students can be asked to assess their own resumes from the perspective of a recruiter. This kind of self-assessment can be really helpful in figuring out what might be the strengths and weaknesses on their application.

A problematic situation evoking difficulty can be posed as follows:

1. Students are given a task that is *different from those already known to them.* For instance, when getting down to the topic «Presentations» a teacher can start the class by playing a short video clip of a real presentation in which the speaker demonstrates some slides and talks about them. The sound is off, and except perceiving the information on the slides, the students have no clue what the speaker is saying. After watching, the class is divided into teams and given a task to voice the video. At this point the students face the intellectual difficulty of having no sufficient vocabulary for giving presentations. At the same time, they are bound to realize that there's supposed to be some introductory part, the main part, and a conclusion. After listening to all the suggestions, the trainer comments on the vocabulary used and finally teaches some useful phrases for giving presentations. A similar approach can be applied to studying customer service situations, like dealing with a difficult customer or standard exchanges between the client and the service provider in a bank, hotel, shop and other contexts.

2. Students are faced with *a practical life situation*, *for the solution of which they do not have sufficient knowledge*. When the topic «Company Finance» is on the agenda, it's a good idea to help students form the idea of a personal budget, and only then move on to the procedure of corporate budget creation. With PBL in mind, instead of giving students step-by-step instructions on creating a budget, the teacher hands out a ready-made budget of an imaginary person named Tanya [8]. At this point, students get to know the concepts of occasional, variable and fixed expenses, figure out the relationship between the total income and receipts and the total expenses and savings, and finally imagine themselves to be finance counsellors advising Tanya to adjust her expenses so that they don't exceed income and receipts while covering basic living expenses and financial obligations. At the second stage of the class, learners are given a text «Luis's Finances» about another person's money management to read. After reading, the class use the information from the reading (and their experience) to complete Luis's budget. At this point, learners face a number of intellectual difficulties: they figure out that major occasional expenses must be planned ahead, search for gasoline, movie ticket and mass-market clothes prices in the US to count Luis's costs, etc. Finally, as a home assignment they complete their own personal budgets, which in turn urges most of them (especially

those living with parents) to figure out the cost of their living, their share in utility bills, groceries, and etc. This task always causes positive feedback as relevant to daily life and raising money management awareness.

Problem-based learning can be implemented through a variety of methods. The most popular classification in the CIS countries so far is the one introduced by I. Lerner and M. Skatkin in 1965 [4]. They proposed to label the PBL methods by the degree of independence and creativity given to learners as follows:

1. *Partial search*, *or heuristic method.* The teacher formulates the problem and, by asking probing questions, involves the students in the discussion. The teacher also helps organize the search for a solution to the problem. In this approach the independence of students is limited, so they participate only partially. For instance, instead of teaching verbs of change a teacher displays a picture of a particular trend with a multiple choice quiz. The idea is to help learners figure out the names of verbs of change using a variety of methods. For example, by elimination students can guess that the right verb for a decreasing trend is «to decline» because the other two verbs are either known («to rise») or guessable («to rocket»). In the following slides «decline» and other new words re-appear among possible options, which facilitates their memorization.

2. *Reproductive method.* Lessons are built by analogy with samples. For example, when posing a problematic situation, the teacher first gives examples of problematic situations and indicates, how to find contradictions. One of the popular activities based on the reproductive method is *analogies*. A teacher's role is to explain that an analogy is a relationship between two words and provide a couple of examples. For instance, in a sequence «red : stop :: green : ?» students guess that the relationship is «color of the traffic lights : action expected». Likewise, in an analogy «tall : short :: big : ?» it's easy to guess that the nature of a relationship is the opposite meanings. Given that an analogy is simply a pattern established by the nature of a relationship between two things, it makes the number of kinds of analogies literally infinite. Here's where the problem-based approach sets in: students are given a number of more complicated analogies and thus stimulated to look for new vocabulary. For example, when discussing environmental pollution as part of the topic «Global Issues of the 21st Century» or «Business Ethics», learners have to find solutions for the following analogies «wounded : dead = ? : extinct», «labor rights : trade unions = ecology : ?», «hazardous waste : water pollution = ? : air pollution», which urges them to search for new vocabulary such as «endangered», «green parties», «environmentalists», «car exhaust fumes», «factory smoke» and etc.

3. *Problem presentation.* This is the most passive learning method. The main role belongs to the teacher: they pose the problem, point out the contradiction, organize the search for the solution and prove its correctness. The students' role is limited to observation. This method can be used when explaining complex topics in order to demonstrate the course of reasoning to learners, teach them the logic of material presentation, and the course of analysis. The author of the article uses this method when explaining a fill-in-the-gap task on the topic «Money». A short text that features such concepts as dividends, earnings per share, pre-tax profits, and profit margin traditionally appears to be confusing for first-year students. Therefore, the teacher demonstrates how the hints in the text can be used to complete this assignment: for example, the biggest number in the text is bound to be connected with pre-tax profits, earnings per share are supposed to refer to quite a humble figure, and a profit margin is the only concept that is expressed in percent.

4. *Research method.* This PBL method is the most challenging one. Here a trainer just sets a problem, and it's up to students to see a contradiction, formulate a problem, and find a way to solve it. For instance, when finishing the topic «Modals of Deduction in the Past» students are fairly confident when it comes to expressing the idea that we are sure that something happened in the past. However, when asked to express the idea that it's impossible that somebody didn't do something in the

past, students face the challenge of having to avoid double negations and lacking the sufficient grammatical construction. In the research method, they are free to use dictionaries, articles, or forums to discover such constructions as «can't have failed to do sth» (using the verb «to fail») or «can't have misunderstood» (using «negative» prefixes).

Basically, a problem in a foreign language lesson can be created in various ways. It can be as small as a picture or a video that leads to the topic of the lesson. For instance, by playing a viral video on animal testing «Save Ralph» a teacher can hint on the topic of «Business Ethics» [9]. By demonstrating a few more pictures depicting other ethical business problems the teacher tries to elicit their names. At that stage, learners realize the lack of vocabulary for speaking on the topic, which makes them far more motivated to learn and more involved in the lesson.

Elements of PBL are successfully incorporated in many English textbooks. For example, in «MyGrammarLab» series of books every module begins with a short diagnostic test where one has to choose between two options [10, p. 13]. After a self-check, students are referred to studying specific units of the module depending on what errors they have made. Besides, PBL is actively used in modern online courses and such English-learning platforms as Coursera, edX and Udemy.

Like any other teaching method, the PBL approach has some shortcomings. Most of them are associated with selecting the right educational material. Not every subject can serve as the basis for creating problematic situations. In particular, all specific information with digital and quantitative data, dates, names, or problems solved according to a familiar algorithm are non-problematic. Basically, PBL lessons are only possible when the material allows for ambiguous decisions, opinions, and judgments. Consequently, planning a PBL class is more complicated and time-consuming than traditional teaching.

Despite these flaws, the PBL technology has firmly established itself in modern pedagogy as one of the most effective ones. Instead of simply passing on knowledge, a teacher sets tasks for students to solve using their knowledge and skills. By presenting problematic situations, students are challenged to use their language abilities in practical and meaningful ways, which can help them develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills while also improving their English proficiency, which sounds like a perfect formula for a good modern specialist.

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