

# A ROAD NOT TAKEN: A BREAKTHROUGH IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES VIA PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Problem-based learning (PBL) is purported to empower learners by encouraging them to take a deep approach to learning and become more confident and self-directed in their learning. This paper explores lecturer and student experiences of a first year undergraduate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course that uses the PBL approach. The learning was grounded in genuine situations of practice in which high degree of team work and collaboration was eminent. In particular, this paper presents a PhD ethnographic case study that focuses on higher education student experiences of learning English in a PBL environment. A particular community was established in which lecturers and students interacted to negotiate and construct new understandings and develop life-long learning skills. Data on the lecturer and student experiences were gathered from classroom observations, a focus group, and student/lecturer interviews and access to student reflective journal entries. Students welcomed and valued the opportunity of the new found learning territory of taking more responsibility for their learning and the freedom of action and thought. During the course, participants achieved new insights into themselves as language learners despite finding it challenging, particularly in the initial phase when they were confronted with learning in a different mode. They became very involved in the course because they were genuinely enthused and interested in the learning process. This is seen as crucial and significant for developing the necessary competence in mastery of the English language in higher education. It is also useful in suggesting that PBL is viable as an (optional) subsequent teaching strategy in the Malaysian or similar context.*

**Keywords:** *Collaboration, English for Specific Purposes, group work, language development, language learning, Problem-Based Learning.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“I hear I forget, I see I remember, I do I understand”

– Confucius

Current trends in education demand that learners play an active role in the knowledge acquisition process. A strong sense of involvement is required for every learner to experience a variety of processes, ranging from independent self-directed learning to team-working. It is in this sense of engagement, action-oriented familiarity that an individual learns most, emphasizing the famous quotation of Confucius above.

In line with that, Problem-based learning (PBL) based on the notion of learning by doing which primarily began with the medical school curricula at the McMaster University over 30 years ago (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993) and taken its roots in several educational institutions is an up-and-coming teaching approach which has taken its fame in tertiary education in recent years. It is a change from the conventional instructive teaching where the core information finding process lies almost completely in the hands of the learner rather than the lecturer. The lecturer who used to be the content expert now guides, advises and empowers the learner to take charge of his/her learning process. In addition, learning is usually motivated by a real-life problem known as the trigger from which significant learning issues are identified, and latent resolutions are considered and explored. Independent and collaborative learning are the two key characteristics of PBL with self-reflection as a vital component in the learning process.

PBL might have begun in the medical education; however, it has been used in a wider spectrum of disciplines. The implementation of PBL does have implications on students' learning. Recent literature in the field of language learning has dedicated a fair amount of attention to considering the methods for applying PBL as an instructional strategy in the context of foreign language and adult learners (Abdullah, 1998; Mathews, 2007). These works have approached the application of PBL to formal instruction from a conceptual or theoretical standpoint, with little reporting on empirical research studying the effectiveness of this approach. A review of the existing research on PBL suggests that there have generally been (very) few studies that have been conducted on the effectiveness of PBL outside the context of medical education.

Besides that, (Tan, 2003) reported positively about using PBL in school settings as a powerful pedagogy to bring about important dispositions in pupils, such as collaborative learning, critical thinking and self-directed learning. Although there is a current shift towards PBL within higher education (Murray & Savin-Baden, 2000; Major & Palmer, 2001) studies were focused on the use of PBL as an innovative methodology (McPhee, 2000; MCPhee, 2002; Edwards, 2004). There are few studies concerning learners' experiences in using PBL as the sole approach to learning in an ESP undergraduate program, where the purpose is to prepare and empower them to be competent language users.

Thus, in the light of the conceptual backdrop, this paper, based on a PhD ethnographic case study, highlights an example from a higher learning institute in Malaysia. In particular, this

paper discusses the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) lecturers" and students" PBL experiences and explores several crucial and significant elements necessary for developing the competence in mastery of the English language.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)**

University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) is a very young higher learning institution with two campuses located in Batu Pahat, Johor, and the southern region of Malaysia. It aspires to lead in market oriented academic programs which are student- focused through experiential learning. The university is an engineering based institution and offers a range of courses from non-award courses to postgraduate degree courses. It has three engineering faculties, one faculty each for technology management, technical and vocational education, information technology and multimedia, science, technology and human development as well as numerous excellence centers. A majority of students studying at UTHM are home students and they are multi racial.

### **2.2 ESP in UTHM**

As UTHM is an engineering-based university, teaching of English here functions as ESP. Courses offered are Technical Communication I and Technical Communication II for the Diploma students; Effective Communication and Technical Writing for the degree students; and Academic Reading and Academic Writing for the postgraduates. However, the courses offered do not cater specifically for each engineering field. Rather, the general syllabus and the course outcome are the same across all faculties but the tasks and materials prepared differ as they become field specific. English language teaching in this context is aimed at developing English competence in the students" specialized fields. The focus of these courses thus, is to prepare the students for the job market so that they are able to perform accordingly.

### **2.3 PBL in UTHM**

UTHM embraced and implemented the PBL approach in stages beginning January 2005. The need for inclusion of PBL in UTHM has been the result of numerous feedback and complaints received from stakeholders of higher learning institutions especially the job industry (Ministry of Human Resource Malaysia, 2005). Unsatisfactory comments and criticisms of poor quality and performance of a significant number of Malaysian graduates became imminent and raised concern among the government, industry and parents. This consequently led to the gradual process of curriculum review at all levels including the tertiary education. The innovative PBL initiative project was entrusted to the Centre for Teaching and Learning, whose main role among others is to help UTHM upgrade its

academic performance through teaching and learning activities. In line with the UTHM education philosophy, "The education and training in this university is a continuous effort to lead in market oriented academic programs which are student-focused through experiential learning to produce well trained human resource and professionals who are catalysts for a sustainable development", this on-going mission was aimed at improving the teaching standard at the university but most importantly, produce graduates who are competent not only in the core disciplines or subject matters of expertise but also in the generic skills that was greatly lacking among the students.

### **3. PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING**

Seven ESP lecturers from University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) were involved in this study; one being Ben, the course tutor of the class observed and 6 other ESP lecturers who were only available to be interviewed. Their classes/lessons were not observed of the 7 lecturers, 4 (57%) were female and 5 (71%) were male with TESL background. Collectively, they had accumulated 113 years of experience teaching English. However, their backgrounds and exposure to the PBL approach differed and ranged from 1 – 4 years between them.

In addition, a class of 25 second semester year one students from the Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education registered for the English course, UMB 1052 Effective Communication took part in this study. After two weeks into the study, the participants were reduced to a focus group of 5 students. The members of this group comprised three females and two males of whom two (Mark and Mary) were moderate users of English while the other three (Laura, Larry and Lou Lou) were limited users of the English language.

The participants in the study are quoted extensively using pseudonyms in this paper concerning experiences, attitude to and perceptions of PBL to provide as faithful a rendition of their views as possible, reflecting the issue of whose „voice" is heard and to mitigate the effect of authorial selectiveness (Scott, 1996). The ethnographic nature of the study allowed me to look at the macro as well as the micro essence of the PBL practice through the participants lens with obvious consideration of the context.

### **4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Multiple sources and techniques of data collection methods to triangulate data were used to ensure rich description, as well as research credibility. In addition, as I bring into the study an ontological perspective which sees interactions, actions, and behaviors as central and am particularly interested in the ways in which these social phenomenon occur or are performed in the context of a PBL setting, I used classroom observations which is an established method for data collection in case study research (Miles, Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Twelve of the fourteen weeks of lessons were observed and video recorded and this provided me an emic perspective to excavate knowledge and data.

Besides that, unstructured interviews with open-ended questions (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002; Holliday, 2002) conducted with the students, course lecturer and other ESP lecturers as another option of data collection allowed freedom of expressions and spontaneous reflections from them. All eleven interviews were audio recorded with permission. Besides that, I used field notes, reflective journal entry data gathered from learners and my own reflective diary to provide additional depth and verification for the data gathered from the classroom observations and interviews with the participants (learners & lecturers).

The videos were examined and summarized via video mapping. Identified episodes of the classroom interaction and all interviews were transcribed in full and verbatim using the Transana program for video analysis (Fassnacht & Woods, 2005). In doing so, anonymity was upheld to comply with both data protection regulations and participants' identity on ethical grounds. Though the data are presented as objectively as possible, the findings of the investigation, like those of most qualitative studies, are open to multiple interpretations (Wolcott, 1994). Furthermore, the resulting conclusions are clearly limited to this particular „sending context" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In turn, the reader is invited to evaluate their „transferability" to his/her own „receiving context".

## 5. LECTURER EXPERIENCE

### 5.1 Implementation

Just as previous results have demonstrated, preparation for the PBL method had been insufficient (Savin-Baden, 2000; Duek, 2000). Lecturers in this study expressed a need for more instruction. According to them, they had in fact prepared themselves prior to the start of the course through a top-down group session where PBL was introduced and it was explained to them why PBL is being introduced, the potential benefits (and problems) of adopting PBL, the importance of facilitating student self-directed study rather than inhibiting the process, and how PBL sessions will operate.

“I was given a course mainly in 2006 when it started I guess and then PPKK 1 asked encouraged the staff to like practice PBL and I did use PBL in one of my subject ...but I need more I believe”

[Yvonne].

Besides that, the attitude towards the implementation was mainly positive, even though there seem to be some hesitation amongst some lecturers who were rather resistant towards change initially as identified by one lecturer in the following extract.

“I read about PBL... some lecturers they don't want to change to this kind of new things, they are very ... they have the passion to what they have done before ... so I think if we have something new ... technique or what so ever why not we try it out!”

[Jane]

Accordingly, in regards to the implementation, the intention to use PBL was discussed with students at the start of the course, and they were introduced to the idea that teaching and learning could be a legitimate area for collaboration; student-centered group work. Following which, the first two weeks of the course was aimed at introducing and training the students into their new roles of active participants of the learning process as observed in this context:

“Students are introduced to PBL via a “trigger” and FILA table; ... Facilitator distributes the trigger (a newspaper article) to students and guides/assists them to complete the FILA table as means of explaining how a PBL lesson would be carried out”.

(Field Note 1, January 7)

This shows that the students were not just thrown into the deep end but instead were provided with guidance on the change that was deliberated in terms of change in the teaching and learning approach. In other words, the implementation was never a drastic one but was more of a slow but sure measure to ensure that students are prepared and comfortable with it as evident in the subsequent extracts:

“... The first thing that we need to ... how we can help our students is that to make them comfortable with the learning experience ...”

[Jane].

“...they are beginning to accept it ...as you introduce it gradually...”

[Ben].

By the course tutor’s own accounting, implementation of PBL in his lessons involved students working in small groups. The tutorial sessions, comprised of between five and six students and this was evident during my classroom observation too;

“Group formation by the lecturer – 5 students per group. Random by assigning numbers 1 –5”

(Lesson 1, 7 January)

They then identified what they know, and more importantly, what they did not know and must learn; learning issues to solve a problem. The basic idea behind these tutorials he said was to make learning and the problem-solving processes public, as opposed to traditional studies where learning; to a very large extent, is preserved as a private activity.

“I think it’s the basic of learning. You learn because there is a purpose. There is something that you need to improve on. When you mention PBL we have triggers and a trigger can be a real problem, a trigger can be something that you want to improve upon, a trigger can be something that you want to eh ... discover about. So people will do you know they will focus their mind and effort if they have a purpose. The trigger will provide our students a purpose for learning”.

(Ben)

“We prepare and give them a problem. Then the first step, I ask them to do the FILA Table. That’s the basic. When they have completed the table, then they start discussing and will do *presentation and continue discussing after that*”.

(Jane)

Engaging in the above procedures allowed the students to learn in a highly relevant and exciting manner to problem-solve and develop self-directed study skills along the way that build towards the skills and knowledge that one will need in the real world.

<sup>1</sup> Pusat Pengajian Kemanusiaan dan Komunikasi – Centre of Humanities and Communication Studies (Currently known as the Faculty of Science, Technology and Human Development)

## 5.2 Facilitation

Facilitation here refers to the lecturers’ new role in teaching and learning in the current context under study. It encompasses issues like what they do in class or how do they function in the classroom in the teaching and learning process. In reference to PBL, the lecturers that I had talked to during this study acknowledged that the primary role of the lecturer was to facilitate group process and learning, not to provide easy answers. They were aware that the shift from lecturing to facilitating may involve problems which have no ready-made answers. To them it was a matter of trial and error. It was a small part of a wider commitment towards establishing a more equal and open relationship with students that would ultimately support them in taking responsibility for their own learning experiences.

Consequently, these posed as the greatest challenge that they had to endeavor as the lecturers claimed that it was contrary to their years of habitual practice; teacher-centered classes. They even felt a little guilty initially when they were no longer imparting knowledge but just guiding and supporting the students in the learning process. The guilty feeling was indeed related to the question of authority in the classroom I believe:

“... People were not giving us that much support in the beginning because they will have to change their old way of delivery approach. They will have to change from just pure lecture ...”

(Ben).

“...at the beginning I felt a bit guilty because all this while I’ve been so used to the conventional way of teaching and learning process where I will impart everything and suddenly now ...however I realized it doesn’t affect my authority in class ... although it’s a facilitator students will still regard you as you know a person who has authority to say things ...”

(Nancy)

In reference to the above extract, the classroom authority pointed out earlier, did seem the issues when it came down to the facilitation. Nonetheless, according to the above lecturer's observation, students still regarded the facilitator as being in charge in the classroom despite the major change of role. This was quite apparent initially in Ben's class, the one I observed but tend to gradually fade:

"Groups that have completed their FILA Table call the facilitator to their group and seek affirmation before they proceed to the next level"

(Field Notes 3, 24 January).

This could probably be due to the element of students' cultural influence in terms of teacher and student roles in the current study context. As the result of that, the lecturers seem to gain a certain level of comfort in taking up the new role. It was found that it did not deter the lecturers' determination to explore and use PBL in the language classes as claimed by one of them, Troy;

"No, no problem ...the most important thing is convey the information and I believe that the information seek by the students are more valued than given hundred percent by the lecturer ... I just guide and help if needed"

(Troy).

In addition, I discovered that as the facilitator, at the start of the course, they needed to guide students in directions that they regarded as acceptable, but as they stood back, the peer group progressively assumed authority to negotiate their own learning on more equal terms via self-directed learning, one of the significant intended features of PBL. This was what was observed and stated by Ben and echoed by Jane and Troy too:

"... it took them about something like three weeks before they felt comfortable learning English using this new setting ... on their own"

(Ben).

"After some time ... usually about two or three weeks, the students sort of knew what to do, I need not tell them much ..."

(Troy).

"In the first few lessons, my students tend to wait for me to direct them or rather ensure them that they are doing it correctly but later they just did it on their own"

(Jane).

It seems rather noticeable that as facilitators, the lecturers did not rush or intervene immediately but rather stayed back and let students work according to their own pace. Nothing seemed imposed on the students drastically but rather students were allowed ample

time to get better of it. Affording students the time to settle in to the student-centered learning system is seen as part of the facilitation process in the sense that the lecturers not taking authority into their hands again but letting go the power and treating students to gather knowledge independently.

However, during the course of the unit, the lecturers experienced uncertainty and difficulties regarding the way the course was preceding, and their own attitudes towards the students. The uncertainty pertained primarily to whether important areas were satisfactorily covered and whether they were permitted to respond to the students' demands for teaching in a more traditional way. There was the sense of whether they are doing enough to facilitate and guide the students in terms of learning. The thought of are they doing the right thing too did seem to creep into the lecturers:

"I sometimes do wonder if ... if I should kind of sum up the lesson ... you know to make sure they have learnt all that is needed but ..."

(Irene).

"I am not sure really okay ... normally the classes are conducted in the lab so often when there is problem/query ... go to the computer you know ... just Google it ..."

(Yvonne).

On another note, a need for more discussion and collaboration between the lecturers was felt crucial and necessary especially in developing the triggers as a process of facilitating the learning;

"...because here we cater for students from all faculties, it's good that we develop it (triggers) with our panel ... a group consisting numerous lecturers ... every semester we would revise them ..."

(Nancy).

"...I prefer to basically sit with two or three other colleagues and find the triggers for the course ..."

(Troy).

"...I like to work as a team ..."

(Jane).

It was also revealed that, the lecturers' attitudes towards continuation of the PBL approach were, however, altogether positive, and no lecturer expressed a desire to return to the traditional ways of teaching; lecturing instead of facilitating though, despite the extra work load as quoted by a couple of them. According to them although PBL calls for lots of initial preparation to produce relevant triggers which requires plenty of time especially as it was something very new to them, they admit that it was rather a challenging and enjoyable experience.

“Initially quite a lot of work load because we have to prepare the trigger and we don’t have the experience on that but later on we already get the experience ... so I think it becomes so easy”

(Jane).

“In fact probably more enjoyable than the other approaches that we have used”

(Nick).

“The panel decided to apply or to adopt this approach so of course I have to say yes and I had to do it but at the later stage I found it is very beneficial especially to the students. So I think it’s okay ... why not just going on does that”

(Nancy).

### 5.3 STUDENT LEARNING

According to the lecturers further, the coming together of students to deal with the triggers is where most of the interaction and communication come into play; everyone gets updated on latest events and progress and eventually this ensured maximum student involvement and responsibility. This scenario was the reverse of the traditional class where our students are extremely passive and very little interaction takes place. The only little possible communication that takes place would be short answers to lecturers’ questions:

“Brainstorm for pool of ideas as usual – quite used to this cooperative mode now. They are adjusted to this element now and like it really ... this is great to see – the flexibility and self-directed learning component in action”

(Field Notes 7, 3 March)

Therefore, in terms of language lessons, students rarely utilized lesson time to use the target language what more beyond the language classes. In this perspective, I noticed that it was an eye-opener for the students as some did feel the pressure of this student-centered approach in reference to Jane’s own words;

“I can see the interaction between ... among the students compared to the traditional teacher-centered method where only we, the lecturers do the talking”. She adds on that, “My good students think that PBL is quite good because they can sit in groups and get to speak in class, express their opinion, but those who are ... weak students they feel very tensed because they are forced to speak to solve the problem”.

The mention of students learning through the opportunity created by PBL which provided ample of space for interaction in the language classroom further suggested that it opened up prospect for language use in this context. Lecturers interviewed also said that

PBL required students to communicate and discuss the trigger with other students on a regular basis. This feature of PBL, which required students to talk English throughout the teaching term, was particularly seen as attractive, as at UTHM, either one is more often than not faced w

“... Where else can they get the chance to use the language ...?”

(Troy).

“Yeah, I see changes. As time pass I could see that eh ... when the semester started they speak in their *mother- tongue but towards the end I could see that they start to change into the second language; English*”

(Yvonne).

“Previously opportunity for them to use the language was limited especially outside the class but with PBL students become active participants of activities in the classroom”

(Nick).

This significant change was very noticeable as I have highlighted it in my field notes too, on numerous occasions;

“From where I am seated, I can see that all group members are actively involved in the task ... besides that I can hear active and loud conversations in English”

(Field Notes 7, 3 march).

“At this point, I am happy to see students” involvement and contributions. Obvious attempts are made to speak ... this particular male student was very passive in the initial group discussion but today he seems so confident and free to speak in English ... this is positive”

(Field Notes 8, 10 march).

Subsequently, to the question of does PBL contribute towards language proficiency in English, Ben, the facilitator said that;

“Yes, yes. I think it helps them to become more confident and to be a bit more fluent ... like yesterday you know those short presentations on the community project proposal. I think you could also see that they were comfortable and everyone wanted to share their ideas. I didn’t have to call names. Everyone wanted to contribute and share ideas ... you could see on their faces that they were not afraid to explain ... to voice out their opinion and they look forward to more of that kind of sessions ...

Another lecturer, Nancy, had the following to say;

“Not only do they discover what you want them to discover but in the process it involves a lot of communication ... creates plenty of communication opportunity between ... among the students themselves and between the lecturers and students too. So in that way they have a lot of language production ... speaking and writing. So of course there will be like development in proficiency”

Whereas Troy mentioned that

“The use of language is there compared to the traditional class ... you just sit and listen ... practice makes perfect”.

Based on the above claims and revelation from the course facilitator and lecturers, it suggests that PBL implementation and facilitation in the ESP language learning contexts though challenging the lecturer's role and status to a certain extent, it continues to be favored by them as they see the interesting element of the PBL which they believe could be of advantage to the students in terms of active learning.

## **6. STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

### **6.1 Attitude**

By and large it was quite clear that the students who had taken this course had not experienced the type of delivery involved with PBL. Although many found this a change to begin with, the delivery of the course was perceived to be more enjoyable and effective. Their enjoyment contributed to their engagement in class activities and the engagement further contributed to their motivation.

“In general we worked well. We did not lose motivation”.

(Final Interview; Mark & Larry)

Overall, the students' attitudes were positive. They spoke positively about the class in general, the group work, the tasks, and their lecturer. Their contentment was revealed during class (my field notes), the interviews and in their reflective journal entries.

Do not see any sign of confusion, stress, lost, etc. They seem to like the idea of working in a group independently with minimal guidance.

(Field Notes, January 7)

Students do not look bored or frustrated with the task. They seem to like it as they are given responsibility to lead and be involved.

Rather than passively sitting while lecturer is busy with his lectures.

(Field Notes, January 17)

“Long time ago, my feeling to English is very bad. I very dislike with English. That a long story but now, English is my other one favorite subject.”

(Reflective Journal, January 17)

“We enjoy the class ... its interesting ... helpful. So I think this better compared to the traditional method.”

(Lou Lou)

“It’s more enjoyable ... when I attend English classes before it’s so bored but then when I am going for *Effective Communication* I think English is not so bad.”

(Laura)

“Not burdening at all. PBL is interesting [lah].”

2 (Mary)

“Actually I really hate I learning English. This subject make me become sleepy and bored but, when attend Dr. Ben class, I’m become loving this subject. He makes a new technique for teaching the language. It’s different then the other class that I have attend before. The learning method makes my English become improve.”

(Reflective Journal, January 20)

During the final interview, when asked, “Given an option to choose between a lecture-driven *Effective Communication* class and a PBL *Effective Communication* class, which one would you go for?” all five students said that they would opt for the PBL class and when asked “Why?”, they had these to say:

Because I think it’s more interesting than the traditional where the lecturer will talk, talk, talk and I will do nothing but here students will be active communicating with each other.

(Larry)

I will choose PBL because PBL can give students chance to talk and they can be involved to do tasks ... not just the lecturer talk.

(Mark)

Because the traditional class is focused on teacher and lessons quite boring ... sometimes what the lecturer talk I don't understand ... so PBL is interesting[ lah] ... maybe we ... more talk ...

discussion ... so ... the other thing is I will choose the ... and it interesting. Through the discussion ... maybe I don't like to read but now I have to read and this has given me some knowledge and improved my English.

(Laura)

Besides that, students developed lateral thinking particularly related to the use of resources. They obviously took more initiative and became more active in information search or in discussion. One student revealed her change in attitude in information search through PBL:

2 A common Malay suffix.

"I am more eh ... active to learn in PBL. Last time and in the other subjects that I am taking now, I ... I seldom search for information and reading materials ... even if I don't understand the lecture. I just forget about it but ... I am not like this in PBL ... I search information according to the ... the learning issues."

(Lou Lou)

## 6.2 Motivation

Subsequent study data suggested students' motivation was fairly constant throughout the course. In general, as in previous semesters, they began the term with mere „instrumental motivation" or practical purposes, for learning English but gradually students increased their motivation of learning and commented that the PBL process was rewarding, interesting and enjoyable. The students noted that PBL delivery allowed them more autonomy to explore the problems and develop skills that might be useful later in their course or in their future employment and this inspired them to keep going. For example, Mary noted:

"Its taught me how to do my own project and things like planning and how to research ... find information in different ideas, you are out on your own and you have to do it rather than being in a class and just listening."

(Mary)

Apparently, the social environments created by PBL seem to be favored by the students as that was the motivating factor. What this social environment benefited students most were skills of group work and friendship. All felt the PBL situation nurtured their ability to work collaboratively with group members through sharing of resources, ideas, experiences and responsibility. This feeling can be illustrated by one student's comment:

"I think what I like most is the opportunity to work with my friends not like in my ... my other classes. This is chance for me to work with others and ... and learn from them who have different

learning level and character ... attitude ... I can learn from other weakness and ... and good.”

(Laura)

In addition, students were also intrinsically motivated. Their curiosity was rekindled and they seem to have positive feelings about the PBL learning environment. The PBL classroom conditions were conducive to learning and probably contributed to student enjoyment. The classes were held in either a well-equipped computer laboratory or the PBL rooms which can be regarded as a state-of-an-art classroom with new furnishings and all necessary facilities. Most importantly, the students were comfortable with and enjoyed working with their lecturer/facilitator and his student-centered approach; PBL. The triggers used were found to be relevant to students' current lives and future needs. Thus, these class conditions and the knowledge/skills experienced contributed to and sustained learner motivation during and after the study:

“First time I entered this class at „ Makmal Bahasa Multimedia”, I think that the lesson will be interesting because there have facilities and technology that very sophisticated ... here I feel energetic to learn more English because the technique that Dr. Ben use was very interesting.”

(Reflective Journal; January 20)

Unlike before in normal classes, the students now appeared motivated even when unsupervised or self-regulated. They seem to get on well with working among themselves on given triggers and they frequently volunteered to play a part, take turns and tried hard to follow along. Despite limited English abilities, they participated widely and voluntarily in discussions. The motivation in them also appeared to have developed their desire to work hard on their projects and determined to learn English:

“I really enjoy and get more input ... if before, I hate English but now I interest to learn more English ... “

(Reflective Journal, February 11)

In a nut shell, students were highly motivated by the PBL lessons and this supported their learning and language acquisition, particularly because the motivational factors were largely intrinsic (Gibbs, 1992; Duek, 2000) especially motivation towards learning English. Despite some initial frustrations, learner motivations did not appear to drop in any way during the course. In fact, students displayed motivation by attending class regularly without fail, working hard to participate including initiating in class tasks and home work. The students relatively truly wanted to learn. At the end of the course, students reported strong motivation to continue speaking in English and hoped PBL would be used by their other subject lecturers too. Combined data of the study all suggest that student motivation increased during the study and peaked towards the end of term.

### 6.3 Confidence

In the beginning, during the first interview, all five students claimed that they lacked confidence in regard to their English;

*Larry:* I understand what the meaning but I can't ...can't .speak. I mean the confidence to speak.

*Lou Lou:* Ya, I not too good in speaking in English but then I think English actually not difficult but the problem is I don't have confident ...can't try to speak.

*Mary:* I and my housemate we try to speak in English but not all the time lack of confident.

*Laura:* First class I am really ashamed to speak in English because ... my English is not so good ... my friend also same like me ... our confidence.

*Mark:* before this I was shy to communicate with others but after this I more confident to communicate with friend in English although sometimes spoke „rojak"3.

Mary, one of the most advanced students in the group, gave herself low assessments overall. In the initial group interview, Lou Lou self-rated her English language proficiency fairly low; „2" on a 5 point scale; 0 being very weak and 5 being excellent. Her buddy, Laura rated herself „1" and was very painfully shy. She spoke little and with a soft hesitant voice during the interview and the first few weeks of class. The other three students; Mark, Lou Lou and Larry rated themselves „2" too. In my opinion this was a very humble rating.

However, all five students demonstrated some changes in confidence along this study period. Cross reference with other data; classroom video and my field notes indicated some increases in the student confidence levels in regard to oral communication; speaking and presentation tasks. In fact when asked to self-rate their English proficiency again at the end of the semester during their last individual interview they had these to proclaim confidently:

*I:* Okay, I will ask you to rate your English now between 1 and 5. 1 being very weak, poor. 5 being excellent. Where will you put yourself at this point?

*Lou Lou:* Maybe eh ... eh... between 2 and 3 maybe 2.5

*I:* 2.5 Do you remember what you said earlier, the first time?

*Lou Lou:* 2

*Larry:* Maybe 4

*I:* 4? That's good. Do you remember where you put yourself during the first interview?

*Larry: 2*

3 Literally it refers to a local desert comprising mixture of tropical fruits eaten with spicy peanut and soy paste but contextually it means code-mixing

*Mark: 4*

*Mary: Eh ... maybe 3*

*Laura: 3*

Consequently, the data suggested that all students increased their ratings as a result of increase in their confidence level; the average section increase is 1.5 points. On the one hand, these result need to be interpreted with caution given the level of the students in the beginning; limited language users or moderate language users. On the other hand, the individual student responses are meaningful when we look at their responses in relation to other data from the study. Combined data suggest that the moderate language users; Mark and Mary as well as the limited language users in particular, Larry and Laura increased their confidence in relation to specific English skills.

In addition to that, it looked like the student-centered PBL approach had ignited the confidence which was lacking in the students when the emphasis was on teacher-centered approaches. It had in fact further enabled or encouraged them to speak up in the classroom and in the process helped them improve their English language, they said:

I think it makes us to be more ... more confident when we in the class because I think the confidence is important to pronounce the words ... like me now ... heh ... heh ...

(Laura)

I feel a lot of confidence then before to speak in English to my friends and I can even joke in English now.

(Larry)

I can speak English with the public ... it makes me confident to go to the tourist and ask them what they want.

(Mark)

Hence, the results of the initial group interview and final individual interview combined with other data (field notes, classroom transcript and reflective journal entries) indicated some increases in students' confidence levels in regard to specific tasks and skills. This confidence boost claimed by the students in the study further led to their active participation, commitment and engagement in the classroom tasks and activities as detailed in the next section.

## 6.4 Engagement

Besides attitude, motivation and confidence, students' perception towards PBL also included the engagement factor. They said PBL had them engaged in the class work for the most part, unlike the previous conventional setting lessons where they just sit, listen and not do much. They claimed they participated widely in discussions about the trigger/problem and commented:

"If you have lectures first you like don't know what going on sometimes you can switch off ... but having the problems first you ... you sometimes don't know what going on too but then you have to do it yourself so you have to think ... think more about it ... you cannot switch off."

(Larry)

Students were visibly involved in their group work and in the PBL problems. The connection between real life and what students already knew was engaging. Although unsupervised by lecturer/facilitator, their work as a team was pre-dominantly on task they believed. This claim is supported by my field notes as well as snaps shots [see Appendix 3]:

Based on the brief walk around the class it is obvious that the students are involved in the discussion/lesson. The one's on the PC are either handling the FILA table or seeking information on the net. No personal correspondence/assignment.

(Field Notes, January 24)

Related to the student engagement was the amount of fun they were having with the class, the English language and their group work. This was most apparent in the observed group where there was a considerable amount of playfulness:

*Larry:* Later, later, lah (a common local suffix) okay relax

*Mary:* (Smiles) maybe it's (seen counting using her fingers) five

*Mark:* Five Proton cars? eh brain-stormer what are your opinions about the Proton car?

*Laura:* What brain-stormer?

*Mary:* Maybe the quality of the Proton car

*Mark:* Looking from what factor? *Larry:* Can you all surf the internet? *Mark:* Pointing at *Laura*) Surfer surf the internet.

*Laura:* (Seen gazing at the computer and scrolling the page)

This playfulness reflected a level of comfort learners had in the class, with their facilitator and with the English language. Students and facilitator joked frequently and they also laughed their way through major problems. In and outside of group, students were playful with the content as well as English language. They could sometimes be heard repeating words for the fun of it playfully.

So, beyond a shadow of a doubt the students' experience of the PBL approach is positive based on the shared opinions highlighted and discussed in the above sections.

## 7. CONCLUSION

With regard to the lecturers' perceptions and experiences, opinions obtained suggest that the PBL approach was well received by the ESP lecturers in the study context despite the obvious change in the classroom culture and it was adopted as an interesting way of designing a curriculum that appeared to offer potential for student learning. It illustrated the unique opportunity the lecturers created when they had to relinquish their control or power of the classroom learning which in turn created ample of space for students to interact amongst themselves. This then ultimately resulted in frequent use of English within the classroom context which later progressed through outside classroom context as well as students had attained the confidence within them due to the change of power relation in class where the lecturer was no longer in full control of them. The PBL student-centered approach in contrast to the lecturer-centered environment had steered students' direction and function in terms of English use in and outside the classroom.

Relating to the students' perceptions and experiences on the other hand, the use of PBL approach in the ESP field appeared to offer advantages in terms of student motivation, attitude, confidence, engagement and enjoyment compared to the traditional, lecture-led or lecturer-centered delivery. Students' perceptions suggest and point to promising PBL contribution towards their language learning too. In reference to the PBL learning process, the ESP students learn English and content knowledge via the process of problem-solving which is consolidated by independent self-directed learning to a certain extent and team-working. As for the impact PBL has on language use and development, it has been brought to light that the PBL environment in this study context had increased the English usage among the students unlike in the case of previous traditional approaches where students hardly had time to use the language in the classroom as it was very much teacher talk scenario.

In consequence, the findings of the study have exposed that the participants of this study, the ESP students did use the English language on a regular basis in their daily routine. In fact, usage of the language among the participants on the whole had extended beyond the classroom unlike during the conventional classroom setting lessons.

Subsequently, what this paper has found is that PBL does work and has significant impact on the ESP learning context as it has potential to bring about change in the way lecturers teach, the way students learn and consequently has potential in changing the classroom culture too.

However, by its very nature, a case study cannot provide generalizations. Thus, the present paper does not claim that what occurred in this classroom is necessarily typical. Nonetheless, it is hoped that what has been illustrated here might serve to illuminate similar contexts, and thus resonate with other educators. Readers may well of course have different

interpretations of these experiences. Those which have been presented here are, as noted, merely a fraction of the data which were collected and analyzed.

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