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## Revitalizing Foreign Language Learning in Higher Education Using a PBL Curriculum

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### Abstract

Higher education is frequently criticized for inadequate preparation of students so that they could become successful in their studies, future lives and careers. Students tend to lack higher-order thinking skills, in particular problem solving skills. What the new face of a university foreign language course might be is not simply learning languages but also integrating the development of the most important skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – higher-order thinking, problem-solving, self-directed learning, communication and collaboration with the ability to demonstrate these skills using a foreign language. Problem-based learning (PBL) is a unique approach that allows achieving this and therefore needs to be more increasingly implemented even in the field of foreign language education. There is much literature that explains curricular change in the field of PBL demonstrating the value of this approach to students, educators and institutions; however, there is little research to date that has explored PBL in foreign language education. Based on the scientific literature review method, this article addresses the issue of why PBL is a relevant approach to be implemented in foreign language education and suggests ways of its implementation. PBL can help revitalize foreign language learning in higher education as it can create meaningful and authentic communication central to the learning process, where language learning is coupled with learning how to solve ill-structured problems. Students move from reproductive to creative and meaningful language use, which undoubtedly contributes to meaningful learning and increased motivation.

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## 1. Introduction

Though change is constant in our lives, the world seems to be moving quicker than usual. It is evident that life is becoming more complex and unpredictable and we are learning in times of rapid and even chaotic changes. The changes are mostly driven by an increasingly complex society, new workplace demands, the demands of new generational cohorts of students, exponential growth of information and quick technological progress. The most important tendencies in education to be mentioned are related to moving from individual to collaborative learning, from passive to active learning, from broadcast-oriented to discussion-oriented education, from approaching learners as consumers of knowledge to viewing them as producers thereof, from switching from virtual learning environments with dominating broadcast, teacher-centered view to learner-centered environments, from the content offered by educators to the content created by learners themselves, switching from the focus on teaching, outcomes, content and transmission to the focus on learning, experience and process, from control to creativity, from excessive standardization to rich and engaging educational environments. All of the aforementioned tendencies can be viewed through problem-based learning (PBL) environments, which serve the main purpose – “a learning-centered environment” (Bueno et al., 2015, p. 213).

In order to improve the overall teaching and learning quality, a considerable number of educational innovations have emerged; however, as stated by Jonassen (2011), PBL “is the most significant curricular innovation in the history of education” (p. 153). In higher education (HE), as stated by Savin-Baden (2000), PBL “is something to get excited about, it is an approach that does matter, because through its implementation it is possible to provide many rich and innovative opportunities, which help improve student learning” (p. 5). PBL is an approach to make students learn in complexity with no direct answers or portions of information prepared by educators. The traditional lecture-based educational approach is criticized for “suppressing student learning motivation and subjectivity, overemphasizing knowledge retention, ignoring skill development” (Li, 2013, p. xi). Conversely, PBL is claimed to increase students’ motivation and cultivating their soft skills by additionally representing a new way of perceiving knowledge and learning (Li, 2013). “Instead of an instructor-centered, content-oriented, decontextualized teaching and learning mode, PBL uses student-led, problem-driven, problem-solving, and contextualized learning approach to prepare students for real world challenges” (Cho et al., 2015, p. 75). Traditionally, the focus of instructions is on subject content acquisition; however, focusing only on it does not develop learners into good problem solvers ready to cope with the challenges of today’s world. PBL additionally aims at helping students to develop the most important 21st century skills - problem-solving, self-directed learning, and collaboration, while traditional instructions are ineffective for this (Cho et al., 2015). Thus, it is an approach that allows students to become qualitatively different persons.

In foreign language (FL) education, there are many fundamental questions unanswered, such as: Is explicit language instruction more efficient than an implicit one when learners simply absorb language through meaningful activities? What does it take to ensure that FL learning is successful? Which approach, method, procedure or technique is the one and serves learner’s needs? As stated by an EFL legend Harmer (2015a), “it would be extremely useful if we could simply read some research and know, as a result of it, how to teach and what methods would be most useful” (p. 41). Unfortunately, questions of the kind tend to be controversial and fail to provide direct answers. To quote Richards and Renandya (2002), “research into second language acquisition and pedagogy almost always yields findings that are subject to interpretation rather than giving conclusive evidence” (p. 11). Accordingly, when research provides different accounts of learning success, there are two possible ways for practitioners: either persisting teaching in the same way as before or trying something new (Harmer, 2015a). The first option should be rejected because “that would be unfair, not only on the students, who might not always respond to ‘as before’ teaching, but also on the teachers themselves, who benefit hugely from constant questioning and investigation about what they do” (Harmer, 2015a, p. 41). The second option is worth taking because PBL may be used as an innovative approach (Anthony, 2010; Boothe & Vaughn, 2011; Perumal, 2015) in HE, including FL learning.

For HE, researchers and educators highlight the importance of cultivating critical thinking and problem solving skills, which are the most important competencies for students to be successful in their studies, future lives and careers. Both competencies are overlapping because they always come together. Critical thinking is necessary in the situations in which we need to solve problems, make decisions and decide in a reasonable way what to believe or what to do. Advance of such skills can contribute to making learners to be able to “evaluate the arguments of others

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