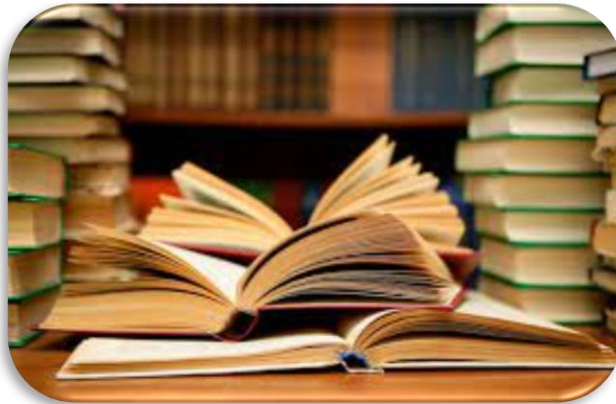


Research Paper



On Iranian EFL Learners' Perceptions of Problem-Based Writing

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ABSTRACT

Since writing is characterized with a cognitive nature, one practical approach to improve EFL learners' writing skill is to resort to inquiry-based learning approaches such as problem-based learning (PBL) which is characterized with a high cognitive demand and often contribute to high retention of knowledge. This study aimed at exploring Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of problem-based learning. In so doing, a content analysis design was used within the qualitative paradigm. The participants consisted of 15 (8 females and 7 males) advanced EFL learners who participated in the study through purposive sampling from different language institutes in Tehran. The data were gathered through a semi-structured interview. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. Based on the interview data, the following themes were extracted: Engagement, collaboration, personal preferences, sharing knowledge, novelty, less supportive teachers, joyful learning process, and use of adequate technologies, time requirements, affecting vocabulary learning, changing students' perception about the learning process and the teachers' role. The results have some implications for EFL teachers and learners, and curriculum planners.

Keywords: Collaboration, Engagement, Writing, Problem-based Learning

رویکردهای عملی برای بهبود مهارت نوشتاری زبان آموزان انگلیسی

از آنجایی که نوشتن با ماهیت شناختی مشخص می شود، یکی از رویکردهای عملی برای بهبود مهارت نوشتاری زبان آموزان انگلیسی، توسل به رویکردهای یادگیری مبتنی بر پرسش مانند یادگیری مبتنی بر مسئله (PBL) است که با نیاز شناختی بالا مشخص می شود و اغلب به حفظ دانش کمک می کند. این مطالعه با هدف بررسی ادراک زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی از یادگیری مبتنی بر مسئله انجام شد. برای انجام این کار، از طرح تحلیل محتوا در پارادایم کیفی استفاده شد. شرکت کنندگان شامل ۱۵ نفر (۸ زن و ۷ مرد) زبان آموز پیشرفته زبان انگلیسی بودند که از طریق نمونه گیری هدفمند از موسسات زبان مختلف در تهران در مطالعه شرکت کردند. داده ها از طریق مصاحبه نیمه ساختاریافته جمع آوری شد. تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها از طریق تحلیل موضوعی انجام شد. بر اساس داده های مصاحبه، مضامین زیر استخراج شد: تعامل، همکاری، ترجیحات شخصی، اشتراک دانش، تازگی، معلمان کم حمایت، فرآیند یادگیری شاد و استفاده از فناوری های کافی، زمان مورد نیاز، تأثیرگذاری بر یادگیری واژگان، تغییر درک دانش آموزان در مورد فرآیند یادگیری و نقش معلمان. نتایج کاربردهایی برای معلمان و فراگیران زبان انگلیسی و برنامه ریزان برنامه درسی دارد.

کلمات کلیدی: همکاری، مشارکت، نوشتن، یادگیری مبتنی بر مسئله.

INTRODUCTION

Writing, as a means of professionalism, helps learners in EFL learning, communicating in English, and sharing the findings of academic endeavors (Graham & Perrin, 2007). However, the fact is that writing is a learnable skill that needs education to be developed. More complicatedly, it is intermingled with different dimensions of language including spelling, grammar, discourse and pragmatics (Stevenson, 2016). English writing is a complex act for EFL learners since it simultaneously requires writing skill and knowledge of such aspects of language including syntax, semantics, and discourse (Storch, 2005). Accordingly, selecting the most appropriate approach of learning English writing is not an easy task. What complicates the matters more is that most of the existing methods of learning have proved to be ineffective as supported by the extant literature (Fonseca- Martínez, 2017).

Since writing is characterized with a cognitive nature (Frear & Bitchener, 2015), one practical approach to improve EFL learners' writing skill is to resort to inquiry-based learning approaches such as problem-based learning (PBL) which is characterized with a high cognitive demand and often contribute to high retention of knowledge (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Theoretical underpinnings of PBL, as an interdisciplinary and collaborative leaning approach (Hayashi, Tsunekawa, Inoue, & Fukuzawa, 2013) confirm its impact on writing skill. PBL is concerned with practical dimensions of knowledge rather than theoretical ones. Knowingly, writing is a practical and productive skill which demonstrates the authors' skill in practice. PBL, as stated by Johnson and Johnson (2009), is a form of collaborative learning that is replete with discussions and negotiations, while group dynamics such as cooperation and mutual engagement also occur in classes. On the other hand, recent studies by Nassaji and Tian (2010) and Storch (2005) have revealed that features such as collaboration can foster learning to write. They concluded that completing the tasks collaboratively (in pairs) leads to greater accuracy of task completion than completing them individually. In addition, PBL provides the learners with the opportunity to use language to learn instead of learning the language to use (Larsson, 2001). It, indeed, may solve one of the long lasting problems of students in EFL contexts- using language in the context. Moreover, a number of studies by Deane, Odendahl, Quinlan, Fowles, Welsh, and Bivens-Tatum (2008), and Martínez-Fernández, Corcelles, Bañales, Castelló, and Gutiérrez-Braojos (2016) support the positive effect of making use of students' cognition in writing instruction and assessment. In the same vein, PBL provides the students with the opportunity to truly use their cognitive and metacognitive abilities, as problem-solving is the most dominant skill used by the students in PBL approach (Savery, 2006).

As mentioned above, writing is a difficult skill for many EFL learners. As documented by the previous research, PBL is a good choice to solve writing problems (Alsmari, 2019; Ezza et al., 2019; Gagalang, 2020; Kashi, et al., 2022). However, this cannot be missed that learners are of a pivotal role in learning EFL writing and their perceptions could be very enlightening for top-level authorities in planning appropriate measures aimed at solving EFL learners' problems with the writing skill. But although PBL, as related to writing or other language skills, has been addressed in the literature, EFL learners' perceptions of problem-based writing as a research domain suffers from research scarcity, to the best knowledge of the researchers. In order to bridge this gap, the present research sought to explore Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of problem-based writing. To do so, the following research question was formulated:

What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of problem-based writing?



LITERATURE REVIEW

PBL has been implemented in many disciplines and almost in each field there are meta-analyses on PBL. The advent of problem-based learning in the area of language education is rather new and most studies dealing with PBL have been conducted between 2007 and 2020. Ansarian (2019) presented a comprehensive model on PBL and claimed that the model can be used in language classes; especially with regards to the speaking skill. The model was based on Hmelo-Silver's (2004) and Hung's (2006) PBL model. Ansarian and Shir (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the studies on PBL. They claimed that the 29 studies discussed in their meta-analysis cover most studies conducted on problem-based language learning. Some studies have been conducted on PBL in recent months. Lin (2017) measured the effects of PBL on reading Comprehension through a web-based English course of 60 Taiwanese students. A reading test, and an Instructional questionnaire were used in a Mixed-Methods study. The findings revealed that the participants enjoyed their active role in learning and that PBL synthesized their cognitive processing. Aliyu (2017) worked on Writing and metacognition. He benefited from 18 Nigerian undergraduate learners and adopted a PBL questionnaire from Tan (2004) on metacognitive thinking. He collected Writing samples, Audio-video recording, Semi-structured interview, and reflective journals in a mixed-methods study. He found out that PBL has positive effects on writing and metacognition of ESL learners in Nigeria. Fonseca- Martínez (2017) studied the effects of PBL in a basic-level language class. The focus of her study was on talking time. Using 47 students in Peru and by benefiting from a systematic observation form Lessons' video-recordings, lesson transcripts Independent Group Design (Control vs. Experimental), it was found that PBL can positively affect language learners' talking-time. In another study, Mohammadi (2017) delved into vocabulary learning by 60 Iranian EFL learners in a pretest and posttest experimental design and found that PBL can positively affect both recall and retention of vocabulary. One of the considerations in conducting this study was to only focus on the vocabulary items that were unknown to the participants. Ansarian, et al. (2016) conducted a study in the EFL context of Iran and attempted to see the effects on PBL on Speaking Proficiency of 95 Iran IELTS test takers. Using a Quasi-Experimental design and by taking IELTS speaking test part 2 and 3 as pretest and posttest before and after a PBL has a positive effect on pronunciation, vocabulary learning and use of grammatical structures among EFL English speakers. In the same year, Bejarano, et al. (2016) Used PBL to teach Social Values (disrespect) and tried to see the impact of PBL on Vocabulary learning of 20 Colombian students using an observation field notes. The findings of this mixed-methods study revealed that both social values and vocabulary items can be taught using PBL.

METHOD

Design

This study used a qualitative content analysis design. More specifically, the content of a semi-structured interview was thematically analyzed to uncover the interviewees' perceptions of problem-based writing. According to Ary, et al. (2019), this type of design is the best choice to explore qualitative data.



Participants

As the participants, 15 (8 females and 7 males) advanced EFL learners participated in the study. The criterion for this sample size was data saturation. The participants were picked up from different language institutes in Tehran through purposive sampling. Indeed, the learners were selected purposefully from among those with learning experience in writing courses. The age range of the participants was 26-35. To avoid violence of ethics, the consent of the participants to participate in the study was taken. Moreover, they were promised about anonymity and confidentiality of their identity information.

Instrument

The following instrument was used to collect the data:

Semi-structured Interview

A semi-structured interview was implemented with the EFL learners to explore their views about problem-based language learning in a writing course. With this in mind, seven interview questions were developed based on the main characteristics of PBL, as extracted from the models proposed by Hmelo-Silver (2004) and Hung (2006). To ensure about credibility of the interview questions, the questions and an evaluation form were sent to 4 experts in the field of problem-based learning to receive their feedback. Based on their feedback, the questions were revised and used as interview questions. To ensure about the dependability of interview data, low inference descriptors were employed.

Data Collection Procedure

This study was run in three stages. In the first stage, a consent form was sent to the participants to observe the rules of ethical research. The main aim of the study was clarified to the participants and the anonymity of their privacy was ensured. In the second stage, a briefing session was held by the researcher for the participants to make them familiar with PBL tutorship so that more credible results could be attained from the interviews. It started by presentation of a PBLL tutorship to teach the writing skill and was ended with a question-and-answer session. The whole session took about 95 minutes. In the third stage, the semi-structured interview questions were designed for the student-respondents. The participants were interviewed and the main themes in their speech were extracted after content analysis through thematic analysis approach.

RESULTS

Through interviewing the students, 30 different themes were extracted in seven categories. The extracted themes along with a sample quotation relevant to each theme are presented below. Five themes were identified in the first interview question (the Interestingness of the Topics): Affecting fluency, relevance to real-life, vocabulary knowledge, difference from previous topics, and easiness. The themes and a sample quotation for each theme can be seen below:

1. Affecting Fluency

"Yes, they were practical and I could use the knowledge in my daily life. I feel in this way I can speak more fluently".



2. Relevance to Real-life

"I feel the topics are related to my life. What is the use of learning something that is only in the books. This is what we usually do. I favor this approach if the topics are for example about my room, my dog, my friends."

3. Vocabulary Knowledge

"I could use the topics and vocabularies in my daily conversations. I think vocabulary is very important. Our teacher said once that without vocabulary you cannot talk. Although without grammar you can say some. That is why I like learning vocabulary in this way."

4. Difference from Previous Topics

"The topics are interesting but different from other writing topics. The concepts are not abstract. You can feel in. The topic doesn't tell you what to write. You should decide on what to write".

5. Easiness

"These topics seem to be easier to me because I have more control over my writing. If the teacher also accepts y ideas as a writer and not ask for a specific essay I can say the topics were easy".

Three main themes were gained in the second interview question (the Level of the Topics): Level of writing vs. level of the topic, the quality of one's writing, and more thinking. The themes have been provided below with a sample quotation:

1. Level or writing vs. level of the topic

"I think the way we write determines our level not the topics. If we write enough and open our ideas suitably, then we can say the level of the writing is acceptable. It is not dependent on the topic, in my opinion".

2. The quality of one's writing

"I did not struggle to write so I think the topics were suitable. The method increases our quality of writing because we read more, research more, and think more. Of course, in this way we do a better writing ".

3. More Thinking

"Some topics were more suitable than others because they required more thinking. I like thinking. I like to make a list of my ideas and write about them. What happens if the topic tells you what to write? Then you only follow that".

In the third interview question (Collaboration in PBL Writing Classes), five themes were extracted: More engagement, hierarchal order in the group, easier collaboration, personal preferences, and shared knowledge. For more clarity, the quotations related to each theme are presented below:



1. More Engagement

"I like it because everyone is busy. Every individual should search for data, it is good. We won't be idle and sitting while doing nothing. This happens a lot in regular classes".

2. Hierarchal Order in the Group

"The group leader made decisions about what to be included in the essay. This makes it easy to make decisions. In this way the students have more rapport. Doesn't matter if you are opinionated or not. The final decision is made by the group leader".

3. Easier Collaboration

"This method makes collaboration easier. We all do the same task rather than breaking it into pieces. It means we all can help each other in writing each paragraph".

4. Personal Preferences

"I sometimes prefer deciding on the final essay on my own. Not because I don't agree with others. Because I want to have more share in writing the essay. But the decision is made in the group, not personally. The teacher says this is how writing should be done".

5. Shared Knowledge

"Because everyone decides on the essay and brings some knowledge, the essays are more interesting. The essays are richer with different ideas. This is of course very good".

Five themes were the outcomes of the fourth interview question (The Role of the Teacher): The supplementary role of the teacher, teacher as a guide, learning from groupmates vs. the teacher, giving more learning chances to the learners, and being passive. The themes along with a sample quotation are demonstrated below:

1. Supplementary role of the teacher

"The teacher helped us but did not force us to accept his words. It is us, the students, who do the writing".

2. Teacher as a guide

"The teacher gives suggestions when we finished the essay, this was good. The teachers' help comes at the end. The teacher guides more than teaching. Teaching is when the teacher tells you what to do or how to write".

3. Learning from groupmates vs. the teacher

"I learned from the group members more than the teacher. Students spend most of their time with each other. The teacher walks around and checks and rarely talks".



4. Giving more learning chances to the learners

"The teacher was present but his presence was not a problem because he lets us write and decide on our own".

5. Passive Role of the Teacher

I think the teacher could help more but she says it is our duty to write well.

The fifth interview question (Finding Information in PBL Approach) led to the extraction of four themes (i.e., Time requirement, different levels of difficulty, limited access to websites, sharing useful information) which are indicated with a sample quotation below:

1. Time requirement

"During the first sessions, searching for data was hard but it got easier little by little."

2. Different levels of difficulty

"Finding vocabulary items was easier than learning the writing structures."

3. Limited access to some websites

"Some websites such as YouTube have very good information but we have limited access to them in Iran."

4. Sharing useful information

"I think if students inform each other about the useful websites that they find, searching gets easier."

The sixth semi-structured question (Comparison to Other Methods) was associated with identification of four themes including more engagement, being learner-centered, more joyful classes, and less support from the teacher. A sample quotation from each theme is presented below:

1. More Engagement

"I like it because I was more engaged than previous method. I was busy and helpful in the group."

2. Being learner-centered

"In this method, the students are the center and the core of the learning method. That is why I liked it. Students learn from what they do."

3. More joyful classes

"I did not feel how the class time passes because I was so involved in writing. I like these classes more. I feel happier at the end of the class".



4. Less support from the teacher

"I think it is a good method but the teacher could help more. Sometimes we were really stuck. It took us some time to find our way. Maybe it is because this method is new to us".

Finally, the main achievement of the last interview question (Use of Technology in PBL) was extraction of the four themes: Sufficient equipment, suitable type of technology, need for the internet, and success in using technology. A sample quotation for each theme is presented below:

1. Sufficient equipment

"Mobile phone is easy to use but we should all have head phones too to listen to audio files and not disturb others. Not all students have these things. It is good if the institute gives us the equipment. Whatever is necessary".

2. Suitable type of technology

"The screen size is small, I mean the cell phones. I think Tablets are easier to use. Even Laptops can be better".

3. Need for the internet

"It is good to use the mobile phones but the class should have fast-speed internet. I usually use my cell phones internet. It is not fast and disconnects a lot".

4. Success in Using Technology

"I could find information and share it with others using WhatsApp. This was the best feature of the mobile phones. I mean WhatsApp, Telegram and similar programs. I can share my findings with my classmates easier".

Table 1 shows the themes extracted from the student-respondents.

Table 1

Themes Extracted from the Interviewees

Interview questions	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme4	Theme 5
1: Are The Topics Interesting?	affecting fluency	relevance to real-life	vocabulary knowledge	difference from previous topics	easiness
2: Are the Topics at Your Level?	level of writing vs. level of the topic	The quality of one's writing	More thinking was required	Different from ordinary topics	
3: What Do you Think of the Collaboration in PBL?	more engagement	Hierarchal order in the group	easier collaboration	personal preferences	and shared knowledge



4: What Do You Think About the Role of the Teacher?	the supplementary role of the teacher	teacher as a guide	learning from groupmates vs. the teacher	giving more learning chances to the learners	More passive teachers
5: What Do You Think About Finding Information in This Method?	Time requirement	different levels of difficulty	limited access to websites	sharing useful information	
6: Is This Method a Suitable Substitute For Other Methods That You Know?	More engagement	being learner-centered	More joyful classes	Less support from the teacher	
7: How Did You Find the Use of Mobile Phones and Other Devices in This Method?	sufficient equipment	suitable type of technology	need for the internet	Success in using technology	

DISCUSSION

This study sought to uncover Iranian advanced EFL learners' perceptions of problem-based writing. Based on the interview data, the following themes were extracted: Engagement, collaboration, personal preferences, sharing knowledge, novelty, less supportive teachers, joyful learning process, and use of adequate technologies, time requirements, affecting vocabulary learning, changing students' perception about the learning process and the teachers' role. These themes are discussed here in light of similar studies.

Engagement is a pivotal notion in both language learning processes and problem-based learning. As noted by Bédard et al. (2012), engagement and persistence are two interrelated items in problem-based learning. This is why, as emphasized by Hmelo-Silver (2004), the learners should be provided with a suitable learning space. The novelty inherent in the PBL space was well admitted by the learners in this study, as they acknowledged that PBL is different from the previous classes they know. Meanwhile, they liked this difference and stated to being more engaged in PBL classes.

Scholars in the realm of problem-based learning suggest that the ill-structured problems in PBL classes are of an important role in holding effective classes (Aliyu et al., 2016; Ansarian & Mohammadi, 2018; Teoh et al., 2019). In this regard, PBL and task-based learning is distinguished by the presence of ill-structured problems (Ansarian & Mohammadi, 2018). Hmelo-Silver (2013) proposes that the ill-structured problems attach the learning content to the students' real-life, and in this way, they contribute to deeper learning.

The monotonous nature of some language classes has always been a point of complaint for the learners (Basal, 2015). Andujar et al. (2020) believe that the monotonous characteristic of some language classes is the rationale behind designing some innovative methods such as flipped classrooms. As put by



cognitive psychologists such as Butler et al. (2020), creativity has correlations with higher order thinking. The main cause of this interplay, as pointed by Butler et al. (2020) and Lloyd (2020), is that setting out the learning process by evaluation of the learning problems makes learning more meticulous and contributes to more learner creativity. The participants of the present study also admitted a higher level of creativity in a PBL class.

This is consistent with the results of the studies by Handoyo, Rosbiono, and Sopandi (2021) and Adamura (2021) who have considered PBL to creativity. They state that comprehending concepts is more complex in PBL classes than traditional classes, and this stimulates criticality and creativity. As recognized by Tan (2021), creativity is a means in PBL without the learning problems cannot be solved.

Collaboration was among the concepts pointed out by the interviewees in the present study. Collaboration can be taken as a main component of problem-based learning as long as a definite theory (ZPD) is employed in PBL to signify collaboration. The previous models of PBL have not enumerated collaboration as a learning stage, but all have consensus on the significance of solving the learning problems in a collaborative manner. As argued by Shimizu et al. (2021), meaning and experience are conveyed in PBL classes through collaboration. This can contribute to social interdependence which is useful in students' growth.

In the present study, the learners were of the belief that learning was made easier via collaboration and their collaborative ideas could lead to effective essays. Similar arguments have been recognized by Shimizu et al. (2021) in PBL classes. They assert that 'academic inquisition' and 'work efficiency' are the direct outcomes of collaboration in PBL classes.

Last but not least, regarding using suitable technologies, the findings are consistent with the previous studies. In this regard, in research by Fard and Vakili (2018) reported the effectiveness of technology-mediated PBL on vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Teoh et al. (2019) believed that PBL calls for a wide use of mobile phones and related devices to find information. In addition to language learning research, studies in other fields have also recognized technology as a main component of PBL. For instance, as noted by Jin and Bridge (2016) in conducting a meta-analysis of PBL in medical education, technology is of significance in PBL.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

With a view to the findings of the present study, it is concluded that as the main components of problem-based writing, engagement, similarity of the ill-structured problems to real-life issues, creativity, well-planned collaboration based on hierarchies, using suitable technologies, personal preferences, sharing knowledge, novelty, less supportive teachers, joyful learning process, and use of adequate technologies can be enumerated. It can also be concluded that such themes should be taken into consideration in English writing courses at the level of curriculum planning and conducting writing classes. However, these themes are needed to be validated so that the robustness of the findings is enhanced. As the last concluding point, PBL gives the learners more chance and time to practice the writing skill, as the whole process has high engagement and requires writing essays.

Regarding the implications of the study, the extracted themes can be utilized by language teachers to improve the writing skill of EFL learners. Moreover, the identified themes can be employed by EFL learners as a self-study program aimed at upgrading writing skill. Finally, if the content of writing



textbooks is developed based on PBL by curriculum planners, the writing learning process can be more facilitated.

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