

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION FOR SUCCESSFUL SELF-STUDYING AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING - TOWARDS INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF ASEAN COMMUNITY AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION

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SUMMARY

How can EFL learners identify problems and find the right solutions? It all begins with asking the right questions. Since a good question well-asked is a question well-answered, it plays a significant role in helping learners define their language problems and determine ways to solve them. This paper introduces an approach to self-study strategies using problem-based learning projects (PBLPs) which has been piloted under National Foreign Language Project 2020 at Thai Nguyen University of Vietnam. A number of issues related to starting a good PBL project question will be discussed including definition, significance, criteria and steps to design a good PBLPs action learning question and is followed by a proposed model for asking the right question for self-studying projects. The purpose is to create capable and motivated life-long learners, so the article is for students and teachers at any level who want to learn how PBLPs can really help enhance their learners' English language competence, one of the important factors contributing to Vietnam's success in the demanding context of ASEAN community and global integration.

Key words: *Asking action learning questions, problem-based learning projects, self-studying and cooperative learning, Vietnam's National Foreign Language Project 2020.*

INTRODUCTION

The launch of the ASEAN Community 2015 is expected to bring about many opportunities for its member countries such as the free flow of commercial trade, tourism, educational exchange and regional cooperation of all fields following the liberalization. As stated in Charter Article 34 that "the working language of ASEAN shall be English"[1], the member states are required to step forward the use of the language to its people to make it easier for us to communicate as part of a community. These opportunities also put Vietnam under new challenges since English in Vietnam is considered a foreign language to be taught at schools of all levels, not a means of communication in daily conversations. Moreover, it is an unpleasant fact for us that "Vietnam is among the group of countries which have low proficiency in English" as reported in the 2014 EF English Proficiency Index [2].

However, it is a positive signal that Vietnam has made significant headway in English language education, and the government

intends to further that progress by passing the national policy on foreign languages through Decision 1400 which declared that by 2020, "foreign languages, particularly English, will be a comparative advantage of development for Vietnamese people in the cause of industrialization and modernization," [3, p.7]. In 2010, The National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFLP2020) was launched by the Ministry of Education and Training with the goal of thoroughly renovating the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within the national educational system [4]. Under this project, Thai Nguyen University (TNU) where the author is working has been officially chosen as one of five regional foreign language centers to carry out NFLP2020 with a specific focus of action research.

Due to the time constraints of learning English in classrooms which ranges from only 8 to 12 credits or 120 to 180 hours during any entire tertiary training programs at Thai Nguyen member universities, students here have not mastered the language to the required level of expectation. More specifically, a recent report of English proficiency results of eight TNU members has

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shown that in total two fifth of students failed to achieve level A2 in English (equivalent to level 2/6 in the Common European Framework of Reference) [5, p.5] which is one of the basic requirement for graduation for students as stated in the project on standardizing language skills for TNU academic staffs and students of the 2013-2015 and the 2016-2020 periods signed by Thai Nguyen University Director in 2014 [6, p.12].

Understanding the above challenges, as an English educator at TNU, the author has tried hard to rethink and renovate the English teaching methodology to her students. Of all the materials she and her colleagues have designed, a self-adopted term for action research project to avoid her students' confusions when translating the word "research" into their native language which frequently refers to a scientific, theoretical model of inquiry, Problem-based Learning Project (PBLP) was developed as a guiding principle for structured study strategies for lifelong learning at her university. In this reference, the author will discuss one of the important initial steps to decide the success of a self-studying learning project that is asking the right question to determine problems in learning English, the basic for the following phases of actualizing a successful self-studying or cooperative learning project.

PROBLEM BASED LEARNING PROJECTS

What is problem-based learning?

Problem based learning, also known as action learning, is defined as putting ourselves in the driving seat of our learning [7] or "*a dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world problems and challenges, simultaneously developing language learning and study skills while working individually or in small collaborative groups*" [8, p.3].

Simply speaking, problem based learning is the enhancement of language knowledge and skills through the process of solving specific problems in language learning. It is obvious that PBL projects require students to take responsibility for their learning by making choices about their priorities and fulfill action

learning plans to achieve their goals in learning. These projects are meant to be structured experiments in practical study strategies and collaborative learning. This is an unfamiliar approach to many Vietnamese English language teaching (ELT) instructors since the classrooms here are often teacher-centered where students rely heavily on teachers imparting the knowledge to them.

How do PBLP work?

PBL projects foster habits well-suited for lifelong learning by requiring participants through the process of selecting a specific issue related to language skill development, writing it in form of an action learning question, planning detailed action steps to follow through, implementing the planned steps to address the problem or concern, analyzing the results and finally reflecting on the outcome [9].



Figure 1. Process of an Action learning/ PBLP [10]

Following are the major steps extracted and summarized from a PBLP workbook [8] designed by the author and her colleagues to help English learners implement a successful project during English training programs under NFLP2020 at TNU.

The first step in doing an action learning project namely identifying your problem requires you to analyze your language learning needs and difficulties. This is an essential step in the process in which you identify real-life difficulties that limit your success in using the English language. If you find someone who shares the same problems with you, you can make a team to agree upon a project focus that will help you build your language skills in specific areas and work extensively both face-to-face and online to

solve it with your peers. This step also involves writing your project focused problem in the form of a question which should be specific and action oriented. Your work as a team is in fact a determined effort to find an answer to the question you create. This question should simultaneously describe the problem you face as a team or yourself alone as well as the strategies you will use to find solutions [8].

The second step is to make a plan about what you can DO to actively answer your question. Your plan should include actions steps and possible resources that will help you and your team carry out your project over a four to six week time period.

The third step involves carrying out the action steps as outlined in your plan. The majority of your time will be set aside for you or your team to work together on the project. This part also include time for you and your team to discuss the effectiveness of what you are doing to answer your question. If your teacher is available to help, he or she will serve as a consultant and coach during this time to ensure that your work is focused and effective. During your team discussions, you will analyze what is helpful about what you have been doing and what has been less helpful than expected. As a result, you may decide to make some changes to your original plan if you decide that doing something different would help you reach your project goal more quickly.

The fourth step is observing and analyzing your result after your trial projects to see whether you and your groups have improve your problems. Your goal, again, is to find answers to your original question by means of your effort and experience. Therefore, it is an opportunity for you and your team to summarize what you have learned from these projects.

The final step is reflecting on the outcome which is essential to an action learning activity. Since "reflection is the most important part of the learning process" [11], it provides opportunities for learners or the

groups to look back on the problem, ponder over it, learn from what they have done and then use the new knowledge to help solve their future similar situations. Furthermore, a sharing in classrooms or school newspapers will also provide invaluable advice and resources to peers who face problems similar to your own.

DESIGNING AN ACTION LEARNING QUESTION

What is a PBLP action learning question?

As stated in the previous part, designing an action learning question is essential in doing a self-studying and cooperative learning project. It is because questions serve many purposes for communication. On the one hand, they focus our attention by the simple fact that we are expected to find an answer. On the other hand, they create a basic level of curiosity that can motivate us forward.

A PBLP question should combine:

- (1) a DESCRIPTION of your PROBLEM with
- (2) the ACTION you believe will provide a SOLUTION.



Figure 2. Criteria an action learning question should meet revised Marie Boyd

What makes a good PBLP question?

The first criteria a good action learning question should meet is open-ended. The difference between an open-ended and directed question is that directed question is based on facts to support development of deeper understanding and has one correct response while open-ended is more appropriate for a self-studying project as it is based on concepts or ideas which require

students to research, investigate or reflect before responding. As a result, an open-ended has at least one correct answer. Specific examples of the two kinds of questions can be seen in the following: "what is the weather like in Thai Nguyen city of Vietnam today?" (directed question with easy-to-answer response) and "How do different types of weather affect students in learning English?" (open-ended question which requires you to do a research to answer).

Most often learners come up with project questions which are too general. General questions are nearly impossible to answer completely. One reason for this is the lack of understanding, in the learners' part, on the purpose of question. They do not understand that the question has to be something **specific** and most importantly something that they can act upon. Therefore, both Problems and Activities such as action tools, resources or strategies used must not be too general.

One basic way to explain an effective question is to say that it must be **measurable**. First, a measurable question is first something that can be completed by specific action steps. Second, a measurable question is something that produces specific results that are easy to identify and evaluate.

An action learning question should also be **achievable**, which is neither out of reach or below your performance. Like if you are at level B2 in CEFR, the question of "how can we write a simple sentence in English correctly" would be too easy for you.

Furthermore, a good question is the one which is related to your problems you want to solve while the action tools or resources used must be **relevant** to the skills you want to improve. For instance, the use of recording our conversations does not help us much in improving our writing skill, therefore, you should avoid using irrelevant tools to address certain skills.

Finally, it is worth considering the **time bound** you spend on doing a self-studying

project. More specifically, it answers the question of HOW LONG or HOW OFTEN you will do the project. For example, if you intend to improve your pronunciation of final "s" sounds, which is a typical lack of Vietnamese learners, and you use group's conversations for two hours every day, it will not be feasible because the time of speaking to practice a minor mistake like this is too long and not necessary.

To wrap up, a well-asked question by nature should be Open-ended and **S.M.A.R.T** which stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bounded.

How can we design a good PBLP action learning question?

Step 1: State the basic problem

When formulating an action learning question, it is best that we have some idea of what topic interests us or what language skills or aspect we are weak at. However, if it is difficult to identify a specific problem, then we can also start from something we already know and care about. For example, you and your group may have problems with writing. What arises in your head is "*I want to improve my writing skills.*"

Step 2: Choose ONE specific language skill

It is suggested that we use **MIND MAPPING** as a starting point to specify your project focus. Do a mind map of what are the components of the general language skills you are interested in step 1. If your problem is listening, by doing the mind map, we can choose at least **one** area of many components in listening that we really need to explore and is feasible to improve in a short 6-8 week project like "*How can we improve our ability to listen for main ideas?*"

Step 3: Choose specific actions to use

In addition to identify specific language skills, we also need to identify specific actions that can be used to practice those skills. PBL Projects are exploratory in nature and the act of looking for suitable tools, resources and strategies to use in itself is part

of what PBLP is all about. In the action learning model, language skills are referred to as “dependent variables” and actions (tools, resources and strategies) are referred to as “independent variables”. It means to say that whatever tools or methods we use should have a direct impact on the language problems we want to improve.

Step 4: Make it SMART

The final step in writing an action learning question is to consider the criteria of a good question we have mentioned in previous part. Remember that your question should be open-ended in nature and S.M.A.R.T.

What does a sample PBLP question in speaking look like?

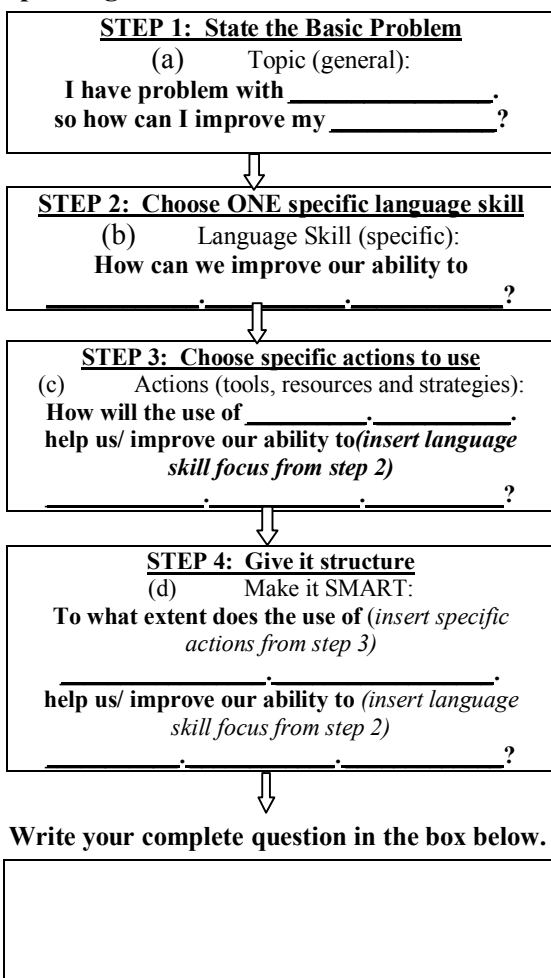


Figure 3. Proposed model of asking the question for self-studying and cooperative learning

Sample questions for Problem Based Learning Projects

To what extent does the use of songs for 20 minutes every day improve our ability to listen for key words?

To what extent does the practice of taking with foreigners on social media three times a week help us improve our pronunciation of “s” ending sounds?

How does peer-feedback for 15 minutes every day improve our ability to correct mistakes in writing essays?

To what extent does the use of brainstorming activities for 5 minutes every day help us develop ideas about an academic topics for longer sentences and paragraphs?

How does the use of online reading articles for 30 minutes every day improve our ability to answer main idea question in reading tests?

How will the use of recording our conversations everyday help us improve our pronunciation of word stress?

CONCLUSION

In the new trend of globalization and particularly in the context of ASEAN integration, it is essential for each member of the community to be fluent in one common language, i.e. English, to be able to communicate with each other easily. Due to the restricted time of learning the language in Vietnamese school setting, students need to equip themselves with self-studying strategies beside classroom learning. Problem based learning projects can be recommended for such a strategy which can be applied outside English classrooms for students to work on their own problems or with a group of friends who share the same difficulties. It is best if this kind of projects can receive the support and help from their teachers and the results of the project will be shared in public so that other people can learn from that experience. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should introduce this new method of learning English to her students so that they can make use of this project to solve problems towards building a community of practice with independent language learners.

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TÓM TẮT

**HỎI ĐÚNG ĐỀ TỰ HỌC VÀ HỌC TẬP CỘNG TÁC THÀNH CÔNG
– HƯỚNG TỚI XÂY DỰNG NGƯỜI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ ĐỘC LẬP
TRONG BỐI CẢNH HỘI NHẬP KHU VỰC VÀ QUỐC TẾ**

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Làm thế nào để người học ngoại ngữ nhận ra điểm yếu của mình và tìm ra giải pháp phù hợp? Tất cả đều bắt đầu bằng việc đặt ra câu hỏi đúng. Vì câu hỏi có đúng thì mới có câu trả lời thỏa đáng, do đó, việc đặt câu hỏi đúng đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc giúp người học xác định chính xác các vấn đề khó khăn khi học ngôn ngữ và cách giải quyết chúng một cách tối ưu. Bài viết này giới thiệu một đường hướng mới trong chiến lược tự học ngoại ngữ của học viên, sử dụng các dự án học tập dựa trên vấn đề đã được thử nghiệm giảng dạy cho giáo viên phổ thông các cấp tham gia chương trình bồi dưỡng lực tiếng Anh tại Đại học Thái Nguyên trong khuôn khổ Đề án Ngoại ngữ Quốc gia 2020. Cụ thể, một số vấn đề liên quan đến việc đặt một câu hỏi phù hợp khi bắt đầu bất cứ kế hoạch học tập nào sẽ được tác giả đưa ra thảo luận, bao gồm: định nghĩa, tầm quan trọng, tiêu chuẩn và các bước để thiết kế một câu hỏi học tập theo hướng hành động phù hợp và cuối cùng, tác giả đưa ra một mô hình gợi ý cách đặt câu hỏi đúng cho các dự án tự học hoặc học tập cộng tác theo nhóm. Với mục đích giúp người học có khả năng và động lực học tập suốt đời, bài viết này phù hợp với sinh viên và giáo viên ở bất kỳ cấp độ nào muốn tìm hiểu cách mà các dự án học tập dựa trên vấn đề có thể giúp nâng cao năng lực tiếng Anh cho người học – một trong những yếu tố quan trọng góp phần vào thành công của Việt Nam trong bối cảnh gia nhập cộng đồng kinh tế ASEAN và hội nhập toàn cầu.

Từ khóa: *Đặt câu hỏi đúng, đề án học tập dựa trên vấn đề, học tập cộng tác, tự học, Đề án Ngoại ngữ Quốc gia 2020, Đại học Thái Nguyên, Hội nhập cộng đồng ASEAN và thế giới.*

Ngày nhận bài: 02/5/2018; Ngày phản biện: 11/5/2018; Ngày duyệt đăng: 29/6/2018

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