

## PROPOSED SEVEN-STEP ACTION PLANS IN IMPLEMENTING PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING PROJECTS FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS IN NFLP 2020 TRAINING PROGRAMS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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### SUMMARY

What kinds of research does Vietnam need to build in order to foster its English teachers' proficiency competence and teaching capacity? This article introduces a new approach in teacher action research, a key component of the NFL2020 Project vision. At Thai Nguyen University, this approach is named Problem-based learning (PBL) projects which have been experimented with initial success for the past two years. In this paper, we will briefly look at what PBL is, how a PBL project is carried out and why it is important in English language learning and teaching. After that, we will walk through the major steps to successfully implement a PBL project with proposed seven-step action plans. Our purpose is to create capable and motivated life-long learners, so the paper is for teachers at any level who want to learn how PBLP projects can improve their language proficiency. It is also hoped to encourage teachers of English to implement the use of self-study and cooperative learning strategies in PBLPs to solve problems in their classroom language teaching.

**Key words:** *Teacher action research, problem-based learning projects, seven-step action plans, improving language proficiency, National Foreign Language Project 2020, Thai Nguyen University*

### INTRODUCTION

For years in Vietnam, the quality of English teaching and learning at all levels of education has become a question for debate and teachers' weaknesses in English proficiency and teaching methodologies were blamed for students' failure to communicate or use English in their study and work after 9 years at school and college [2].

The above challenge served as a driving force to put forward Decision 1400 issued by Vietnam Government in 2008, with the goal of thoroughly renovating the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within the national educational system [5]. Two years later, in 2010, The National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFLP2020) was set up by Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam to implement this decision at national level.

Under this project, Thai Nguyen University (TNU) has been officially chosen as one of

five regional foreign language centers of the whole country to carry out NFLP2020 with a specific focus of action research. In 2012, the Center for Human Resource Development for Foreign Language Studies (CFORD) was founded to shoulder responsibilities given by NFLP2020 at TNU. Since its establishment, TNU English educators and foreign experts at CFORD have tried hard to develop a training program in which Problem-based Learning Project (PBLP) was integrated as a compulsory component. During two years of training, more than 400 PLB projects have been executed by over 1.500 primary, secondary and high school English teachers of 8 Northern provinces of Vietnam and helped those teachers solve their problems in English language proficiency.

### PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

#### What

Problem based learning, also known as action learning, is defined as "*putting ourselves in the driving seat of our learning*" [1] or "*a dynamic approach to teaching in which*

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students explore real-world problems and challenges, simultaneously developing language teaching and study skills while working in small collaborative groups” [3].



Graph 1. Action learning [3].

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 ELT instructors and the whole class will typically struggle at the beginning to grasp the idea if they are not clearly instructed.

**Why**

Because problem based learning is filled with active and engaged discoveries, it inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they are studying. Research also indicates that students are more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional teacher-centered learning. In addition, students develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work.

In the process of completing their projects, students also hone their organizational and research skills, develop better communication with their peers, and often work within their community while seeing the positive effect of their work.

As students are evaluated on the basis of their projects, rather than on the comparatively

narrow rubrics defined by exams, essays, and written reports, assessment of project-based work is often more meaningful to them. They will quickly see how they progress and their weaknesses are solved within certain periods of time [3].

**How**



Graph 2. Action Research Steps [4]

As can be seen from graph 2, 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, 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.

The next part of the paper will discuss in details of how a PLB project is carried out with specific guidance for learners who want to apply this approach in solving their language difficulties.

**PROPOSED SEVEN-STEP ACTION PLANS in PBLs.**

To guarantee the success of a PBL project for better improvement of learners’ English capacity, we proposed that seven-step action plans should be strictly followed as described below:

**Identify the problem**

This is an essential step in the process of doing a PBL project in which learners identify real-life difficulties, analyze their

language learning needs and weaknesses (or those of their students) that limit the success in using the English language.

### **Make a team**

It is important to think carefully about a team (ideally with no more than four people) since each member will work extensively with this group of people both face-to-face and online between the beginning and the end of the course. Most obviously, team members should all be able to agree upon a project focus that will help them build their language skills in specific areas. Moreover, it will help if participants are from the same school or district so that they can easily meet with one another outside of class time.

### **Question it**

The next step would be finalizing the project focus and plan by writing it in the form of a question. A good question will be specific and action oriented.

The work as a team is in fact a determined effort to find an answer to the question created. This question should simultaneously describe the common problem that members face as a team as well as the strategies that they will use to find solutions.

### **Plan it**

Planning your PBL projects refers to drawing up a step-by-step picture about what a group can do to actively answer their action learning question. The plan should include specific action steps that can be carried out over a four to six week time period.

### **Do it**

Once the plan is approved by the instructor, team members should carry out the action steps as outlined in their plan. The majority of class-time during PBLP tutorials will be set aside for each team to work together on the project. It is noted that each group is required to bring one laptop computer and one USB 3G modem for internet access to tutorial meetings. It is also the learners'

responsibility to bring any other resources needed to complete their project.

### **Discuss it**

Every week PBLP tutorial sessions will also include time for participants and their team to discuss the effectiveness of what they are doing to answer their action learning question. The instructor will serve as a consultant and coach during this time to ensure that students' work is focused and effective.

During team discussions, group members will analyze what is helpful about what they have been doing and what has been less helpful than expected. As a result, they may decide to make some changes to their original plan if they think that doing something different would help them reach their project goal more quickly.

### **Share it**

The goal, again, is to find answers to the original question by means of members' effort and experience. The final report is an essential part of that process. It is an opportunity for learners and their team to summarize what they have learned from these projects. An excellent report will also provide invaluable advice and resources to colleagues who face problems similar to their own. The final report is therefore also a cooperative effort among team members.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is obvious that a key priority with the NFLP2020 is renovating the way languages are taught and learned in Vietnam. Renovation requires rethinking about old assumptions and discovering new ways of doing things. PBL projects are one way to accomplish this renewal of learning and have been proved to be of great help to teachers of English in improving their language proficiency at TNU. It is expected that these teachers will continue applying PLBPs to solve problems in their classroom teaching when coming back to their schools with the ambition of building a community of practice in the whole country to better implement NFLP2020.

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## TÓM TẮT

**ĐỀ XUẤT KẾ HOẠCH HÀNH ĐỘNG GỒM BẢY BƯỚC NHẪM THỰC HIỆN ĐỀ ÁN HỌC TẬP DỰA TRÊN VẤN ĐỀ CHO GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH THAM GIA CHƯƠNG TRÌNH BỒI DƯỠNG CỦA ĐỀ ÁN NGOẠI NGỮ QUỐC GIA 2020 TẠI ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN**

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Việt Nam cần những loại hình nghiên cứu nào để phát triển năng lực ngoại ngữ và phương pháp giảng dạy cho giáo viên tiếng Anh? Bài báo này sẽ giới thiệu một cách tiếp cận mới với nghiên cứu hành động dành cho giáo viên – một trong những nhiệm vụ quan trọng của Đề án Ngoại ngữ quốc gia (ĐANNQG) 2020. Trong hai năm qua, tại Đại học Thái Nguyên, các đề án nghiên cứu hành động đã được thử nghiệm với những thành công ban đầu cùng với tên gọi: Đề án học tập dựa trên vấn đề. Bài viết sẽ giới thiệu ngắn gọn thế nào là học tập dựa trên vấn đề, cách thức thực hiện và lợi ích của các đề án này đối với việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ. Sau đó, chúng tôi đưa ra đề xuất gồm bảy bước cụ thể để thực hiện một dự án nghiên cứu hành động thành công. Với mục đích hướng tới việc tạo ra những người học có khả năng học tập suốt đời và có quyết tâm cao, bài viết này phù hợp với giáo viên tiếng Anh ở mọi trình độ mong muốn tìm hiểu xem các dự án nghiên cứu hành động có thể giúp họ cải thiện khả năng ngôn ngữ của mình bằng cách nào. Hy vọng rằng, các chiến lược tự học và học cộng tác theo nhóm đề án trong mô hình này sẽ được các giáo viên tiếng Anh các cấp tiếp tục áp dụng và nhân rộng để giải quyết các vấn đề liên quan đến phương pháp giảng dạy của mình ở cơ sở đào tạo.

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