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The application of Problem Based Learning to improve verbal communication in EFL students' level A2

La aplicación del aprendizaje basado en problemas para mejorar la comunicación verbal en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera nivel A2

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RESUMEN

En el mundo interconectado y acelerado de hoy, la comunicación efectiva se ha convertido en una herramienta esencial para el éxito. El desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas, que abarcan modos de comunicación verbal y no verbal, se ha venido relacionando con el crecimiento personal y profesional; la interacción efectiva, el trabajo en equipo, la toma de decisiones, la lluvia de ideas y la creatividad son las cualidades de quienes solucionan problemas en un entorno altamente exigente. Las habilidades comunicativas se han vuelto hoy más que nunca esenciales para una interacción efectiva en entornos personales y profesionales. Cuando las personas poseen buenas habilidades comunicativas, pueden articular sus pensamientos e ideas con claridad, evitando malentendidos y falta de comunicación. Al aprender un idioma, los estudiantes muchas veces enfrentan desafíos y obstáculos para alcanzar un nivel específico de inglés. A través de esta investigación, se pretende ayudar a los estudiantes a mejorar sus habilidades comunicativas mediante la aplicación de actividades de resolución de problemas. Estas actividades se aplicaron

a 95 estudiantes del nivel A2 que asisten a la Escuela de Formación de Soldados del Ejército-ESFORSE, grupo de edad de 18 a 22 años. Los hallazgos indicaron que las buenas habilidades comunicativas permiten a las personas articular sus pensamientos, necesidades, y deseos con claridad, evitando malentendidos y falta de comunicación. El desarrollo de sólidas habilidades comunicativas facilitó no sólo el aprendizaje del idioma sino también la resolución de conflictos, el pensamiento crítico y la toma de decisiones.

Palabras clave: aplicación, aprendizaje, comunicación verbal, lengua extranjera

ABSTRACT

In today's interconnected and fast-paced world, effective communication has become an essential tool for success. The development of communication skills, which encompass verbal and non-verbal modes of communication, has been related to personal and professional growth; Effective interaction, teamwork, decision-making, brainstorming, and creativity are the qualities of problem solvers in a highly demanding environment. Communication skills have become more essential today than ever for effective interaction in personal and professional environments. When people possess good communication skills, they can articulate their thoughts and ideas clearly, avoiding misunderstandings and miscommunication. When learning a language, students often face challenges and obstacles to achieving a specific level of English. Through this research, we aim to help students improve their communication skills through the application of problem-solving activities. These activities were applied to 95 A2 level students attending the Army Soldier Training School - ESFORSE, age group 18 to 22 years old. The findings indicated that good communication skills allow people to articulate their thoughts, needs, and desires clearly, avoiding misunderstandings and miscommunication. Strong communication skills facilitated not only language learning but also conflict resolution, critical thinking, and decision-making.

Keywords: application, learning, verbal communication, foreign language

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INTRODUCCIÓN

The interconnectedness of communicative skills and problem-solving abilities lies at the heart of their significance. Effective communication is often the foundation upon which problem-solving efforts are built. When individuals can articulate their thoughts, concerns, and ideas clearly, they can collaborate more effectively, share knowledge, and leverage each other's strengths to tackle complex challenges. Conversely, strong problem-solving skills can facilitate more effective communication, as individuals are better equipped for problem resolution by the time, they are learning the language.

The benefits of possessing strong communicative skills and problem-solving abilities are multifaceted and far-reaching. At the individual level, these skills can enhance personal and professional relationships, foster a sense of confidence and self-efficacy, and open up new opportunities for growth and development. The importance of effective communication and problem-solving skills cannot be overstated. These interconnected skills are essential for navigating the complexities of modern life, fostering positive relationships, and driving innovation and growth. By cultivating strong communicative skills and problem-solving abilities, individuals can unlock their full potential, achieve greater success, and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world at large. As we move forward in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world, the significance of these skills will only continue to grow, making them essential for individuals, organizations, and society.

One of the key aspects of successful language acquisition is being able to communicate and express ideas in the target language. This refers to the ability of students to overcome linguistic obstacles and find solutions to effectively communicate in the English language by thinking and communicating verbally. Spoken language has been the primary means of communication, enabling individuals to convey their thoughts, feelings, and ideas to others. English language learners often face various difficulties in their language production. These difficulties may include understanding complex grammar rules, expanding vocabulary, improving pronunciation, or even overcoming anxiety when using English in real-life situations (Yamin, Setiawan, & Retnaningdyah, 2022). Traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on student-centered approaches tend to overlook these challenges, as they usually follow a fixed curriculum and certain rigid teaching techniques. However, by implementing centered approaches, educators can better address the learning needs and provide effective solving strategies (Ranggi & Yuliani, 2021).

Problem-solving encourages students to identify and analyze their language learning difficulties independently. By doing so, students become active problem-solvers rather than passive recipients of knowledge. One effective problem-solving strategy for learning English is to provide authentic and meaningful learning opportunities (Tsuji, 2017). Authentic materials and

real-life situations allow students to encounter genuine language challenges, providing them with an opportunity to apply their problem-solving skills. For example, incorporating role-plays, debates, or simulations in the English language classroom can enable students to handle different communicative scenarios independently, forcing them to think strategically and employ appropriate language resources (Andleeb, Asgher, & Zimi, 2023).

As a result of traditional methodologies, students' learning has not been successfully guaranteed. In the past, language courses were focused on syllabus completion, covering contents but not applying them, repeating theoretical knowledge rather than practical. While teachers are active and students are passive, this is typical of the teacher-centered approach. The traditional method has received some criticism because it relies on behaviorism theory, whereas student-centered approaches aim to promote 21st-century skills. In student-centered approaches, learners play an important role in learning by doing practice and collaborating with peers thus, student-centered approaches are based on constructivism (Obloberdiyevna & Odilkhonovna, 2022). Quality teaching has become an important topic in higher education and has evolved over time. New students require inspiring classes. Governments, students, and their families are increasingly demanding efficient processes in educational systems. The most recognized institutions around the world, such as the University of Michigan, Western Governors, and Northern Arizona, incorporate learner-centered methods into their programs. Some language courses focus on syllabus completion, theoretical knowledge rather than practical, covering contents but not applying them; traditional teachers tend to perform a direct transmission of knowledge; instructors are engaged in lecturing while students are positioned like information receivers. Therefore, students received more summative than formative assessment (Li, 2020). The key personnel in educational institutions are required to achieve transformational learning (Li, 2020). This research aims to determine: **How does problem-solving improve verbal communication in EFL students' level A2?**

Justification of the research

Student-centered methods are crucial to producing meaningful and innovative learning. Pedagogy is the heart of teaching and learning; innovative practices will contribute to how students express their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and knowledge verbally in the classroom and in life. Learning based on problem-solving places the student at the center of learning so that they can autonomously solve certain challenges or problems. The problem-solving method supports learners in developing their ideas and their language skills.

Learner-centered teaching methods give opportunities to learn languages in real-world contexts in collaborative and challenging ways. These methods are focused on constructivism.

Problem-solving lets students state real-life problems from a different and new perspective through the integrated way of questions they will explore and apply. An individual will state a problem, solve it in different ways, and characterize it in different terms. Problem-

solving involves encouraging students to master the skills and strategies that allow them to learn, as well as the use of the knowledge available to face challenges and different situations.

Description of the relationship between the proposal and the research lines of the university

Research Lines: Pedagogy, Didactics, And Management Of Education

Research Topic: Pedagogical Innovations

Innovation in methodologies in teaching languages has become a critical aspect of language learning in today's rapidly changing world. As technology continues to advance, traditional methods of language instruction are being supplemented or even replaced by innovative approaches that incorporate critical thinking. This research will explore some of the key innovations in language teaching methodologies and discuss their impact on learners (Hoff, 2019). This research is aligned to pedagogy, didactics, and management of education research lines; pedagogy and didactics are two closely related concepts that encompass the theory and practice of education. Pedagogy refers to the art and science of teaching, focusing on the methods and strategies used by educators to facilitate learning. Didactics, on the other hand, refers to the principles and techniques of instruction, including curriculum design, lesson planning, and assessment. Together, pedagogy and didactics play a significant role in shaping the educational experiences of students and the future of teaching and learning. Doing research in the field is intended to track the evolving needs of teachers and students. Moving forward, it will be important for educators to continue enhancing their instructional practices in response to the changing needs and opportunities in the educational field. By embracing innovation and collaboration, educators can create more inclusive and effective learning environments that prepare students for success in the 21st century.

The object of the research

One of the key ways in which problem-solving improves verbal communication is by fostering a systematic and analytical approach to addressing challenges. When individuals are faced with a problem, they must engage in ways to assess the situation, gather relevant information, and consider various options before arriving at a solution. This process requires them to use reasoning and logic to evaluate the potential outcomes of different courses of action, enhancing their capacity for critical thought and communicative skills.

General objective

To investigate how the application of the Problem-Based Learning approach influences verbal communication in EFL students' level A2.

Specific objectives

- Explore theories about student-centered methods based on problem-solving and verbal communication.
- Diagnose the current level of verbal communication and the students' needs.

- Design a proposal that integrates the components of problem-solving and verbal communication according to the students' needs.

Description of the variables of the study (independent & dependent)

Independent variable - Problem-solving

Problem-solving involves the application of logical reasoning. When confronted with communication difficulties or uncertainties, individuals need to employ logical thinking to identify potential solutions. This logical approach to problem-solving enables individuals to overcome language-related challenges and enhance their language skills effectively (Whitehouse, Rahm, Wozniak, & Breunig, 2021).

Dependent variable -verbal communication

Verbal communication has been a tool in the transmission of language and culture. Before the advent of writing systems, oral communication was the primary way in which knowledge and information were passed down from generation to generation. People communicate orally through storytelling, songs, and conversations, allowing them to share their experiences, beliefs, traditions, and even culture with others. In recent years, technological advancements have transformed the way communication is used in language learning. With the rise of digital tools and online platforms, learners now have access to a wide range of resources to help them practice their speaking and listening skills. Language learning apps, virtual classrooms, and video conferencing platforms have made it easier for learners to engage in real-time conversations with native speakers and receive feedback on their language use. These technological innovations have enriched the learning experience and provided learners with new opportunities to improve their verbal communication skills (Sutiyatno, 2018). Despite the many benefits of oral communication in language learning, there are also challenges and limitations that need to be considered. One of the main criticisms of oral communication-focused language teaching is that it may neglect other important language skills, such as reading, writing, and grammar. Some educators argue that a balanced approach to language teaching is essential, where learners have the opportunity to develop all aspects of their language skills, not just speaking and listening. Additionally, not all learners may feel comfortable or confident in engaging in oral communication activities, which can hinder their language acquisition and motivation to learn.

Description of the beneficiaries and their main characteristics

- Number of students: 95
- English level: A2
- Age: 18-22
- Institution: “Escuela de Formación de Soldados del Ejército- ESFORSE”

The students at the Military Schools are the future officers of the Ecuadorian Army, they are loyal, men and women, respectful of human rights, and must have abilities, skills, and vocation to serve the country. Military students, also called “Trainees” enter the first military course, after

a rigorous psychological, medical, academic, and physical selection process; During the first military course, they complete their militarization process, which includes coupling to their new military life, training them with knowledge, skills, and abilities as combatants. They must approve different subjects of a military scientific nature, including physical condition evaluations, behavioral performance evaluations, and compliance with the practice of principles and values.

Description of the practical contributions of the proposal

By applying analytical skills, evaluating language resources, and utilizing logical reasoning, individuals can overcome obstacles in language acquisition and improve their ability to communicate effectively. By doing so, individuals can enhance their language skills and thrive in today's interconnected world (Ranggi & Yuliani, 2021).

The importance of the proposal comes from the following perspectives:

Professional, methodological, technological, and social needs

In some educational contexts, it is common for education to continue focusing solely on content and leave aside the development of skills, so it is necessary to find ways of teaching for future centuries (Sari & Wardhani, 2020). In Ecuador, educational institutions are pluralistic and open to all doctrines and forms of universal thought; they direct their activities to educate citizens to nurture a diverse and inclusive community. These institutions give students the opportunity to get professional qualifications or undergraduate degrees.

Over time, the importance of quality teaching in universities has grown. Modern classroom technology and innovative teaching strategies are needed by the students. These days, governments, students, and their families are calling for educational systems to operate with greater efficiency. This is especially true when it comes to the quality of teacher preparation, which is crucial for education at all levels. In addition to curriculum and expertise, quality calls for qualified individuals who can effectively and efficiently meet the expectations of today's society. Within the 'active learning' category, problem-based learning provides students with opportunities to gain critical knowledge and relevant skills for the twenty-first century. The use of teaching-learning methodologies is not only an approach for evaluating a subject, but it also helps students in their professional development (Rustamovich, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The research was primarily focused on providing a comprehensive description and explanation of the effectiveness of the problem-based learning approach in enhancing the verbal communication skills of trainees at Escuela de Formación de soldados del Ejército “ESFORSE”. The descriptive aspect involved a thorough assessment of the current verbal communication proficiency levels of the trainees, aiming to establish a solid baseline for the study. Additionally, the study went deeply into the nature of the problem-based strategy and its practical implementation, aiming to provide a detailed account of how these interventions were carried out.

In addition, the research aimed to clarify the impact of these activities on trainees' verbal communication skills by conducting post-tests and meticulously analyzing the gathered data. Moreover, the study was required to clarify the complex relationship between the intervention (problem-based approach) and the development of verbal communication skills among the trainees, addressing the distinctive aspects of how and to what extent these activities contributed to improvements in their verbal communication abilities. Finally, the research had a practical and applied focus, aiming to provide valuable insights and useful recommendations for educators and institutions looking to enrich students' verbal communication learning experiences through the application of the problem-based learning approach.

The research also had an experimental aspect, as it aimed to examine the effectiveness of problem-based learning in enhancing verbal communication skills among trainees. The experimental nature of the study involved a descriptive approach with a pretest and posttest design and, a sample of 95 students. This experimental design was intended to evaluate the impact of the problem-based approach on the trainees' verbal communication skills, allowing for comparisons between the four groups. Through quantitative data collection methods, including pre and post-tests, the research is required to establish causal relationships and draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the problem-based learning approach in improving the trainees' verbal communication proficiency.

Activities and sessions

Aim: the general objective of the application of the activities is that students will be able to expand and consolidate their language skills to communicate effectively in any setting at A2 level by applying the problem-solving strategy.

Proposal objectives

- Synthesize written information through charts, graphs, and maps. Identify the main ideas, supporting details, and author's purpose. Organize information into graphic organizers.
- Understand the main points, supporting details, and tone of medium-length narratives with clear standard input. Identify the sequence of events.
- Demonstrate an ability to use English in specific contexts.

Competencies

At an A2 level, Students will be able to improve their:

- Communicative skills – verbal communication
- Fluency, group interaction, comprehension
- Abstraction ability, analysis, and synthesis.
- Research skills.
- Problem-solving and decision-making ability.

Through a literature review, the most relevant aspects of problem-solving were analyzed, and some of the most relevant and modern findings regarding the topic of this proposal were taken into consideration.

Sessions

Interesting lessons will stimulate EFL students, for this reason, problem-based learning activities motivate students to work cooperatively and improve 21st-century skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, flexibility, and social skills), when oral and written skills are encouraged, this means better academic performance. Problem-based activities are presented in this section, including the driving questions, situated inquiry, collaboration, technological tools, the creation of artifacts, monitoring, and assessment are included:

Table 1

Methodology Sessions

	SESSION 1	SESSION 2	SESSION 3
Driving question (10 min)	Solving transportation problems	Exploring ways to protect ocean and marine creatures	Helping homeless people in the community
Situated inquiry (20 min)	Conduct research to explore transportation problems: parking spaces, dark streets, crime, car accidents, traffic jams, rush hour, etc.	Process information from video material, listening, restoring our oceans	Brainstorming ideas about the causes of poverty and inequality
Collaboration (30 min)	In groups, students read a blog and identify main ideas, they propose solutions to transportation problems.	In pairs, students discuss the causes of ocean contamination and find solutions for this problem.	Students read a text and identify new vocabulary by discussing the causes of poverty
Creation of artifacts (30 min)	Students create and present in class an informational infographic, related to transportation problems	Students create and present in class, a KWL chart about marine conservation.	In groups, make questions and think about ways to help people, then they prepare for a debate
Monitoring (20 min)	Peer dialogue	Feedback	Debate about the causes and consequences of poverty
Assessment (10 min)	Comprehension, communication, discussion, interaction	Comprehension of group details, oral	Organization of ideas, fluency, group interaction, comprehension

communication,
and group
interaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The application of problem-based learning (PBL) holds significant importance for several reasons:

Develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills: By grappling with real-world scenarios, students are actively engaged in analyzing situations, evaluating options, and formulating solutions. This hones their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, crucial skills for success in academics and beyond.

Enhance knowledge retention: PBL encourages students to apply acquired knowledge to solve problems. This active application strengthens understanding and improves knowledge retention compared to passive learning methods.

Promote collaboration and communication skills: Working in groups on PBL activities fosters collaboration and communication skills. Students learn to exchange ideas, listen effectively, and present solutions persuasively.

Boost self-directed learning: PBL empowers students to take ownership of their learning. They actively seek information, research solutions, and make decisions, fostering self-directed learning skills.

Increase motivation and engagement: PBL presents challenges that are relevant and engaging. Students become more motivated to learn as they see the practical applications of their knowledge in solving real-world problems.

Prepare students for the future: Many professions involve problem-solving and collaboration. PBL equips students with the necessary skills to thrive in such environments.

These are just some of the reasons why PBL is considered an important educational approach. By incorporating real-world problems and fostering active learning, PBL prepares students for success in a dynamic and ever-changing world.

Table 2*Survey Results*

Questions: (Before applying the intervention proposal)	Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Have you ever experienced difficulty speaking clearly or coherently?	10,5%	16,8%	34,7%	26,3%	11,6%
How often do you take part in face-to-face English conversations with others on a daily basis?	11,6%	35,8%	42,1%	10,5%	0%
How often do you actively work on improving your verbal communication skills?	18,9%	41,1%	34,7%	4,2%	1,1%
Do you think technology has impacted face-to-face communication?	32,6%	32,6%	22,1%	12,6%	0%
Are you satisfied with your current level of verbal communication skills when it comes to problem-solving?	33,7%	35,8%	22,1%	8,4%	0%
Do you feel comfortable speaking English in public or in front of a group?	28,4%	40%	24,2%	6,3%	1,1%
(After applying the intervention proposal)					
How confident do you feel in your understanding of the problem-based strategy regarding verbal communication?	26,3%	32,6%	35,8%	5,3%	0%
How often do you use problem-based activities to communicate verbally with others?	18,9%	35,8%	36,8%	8,4%	0%
Do you believe having a solid understanding of problem-based activities improves the effectiveness of your verbal communication?	26,3%	36,8%	27,4%	8,4%	1,1%

Interpreting the results

The survey results can be broadly divided into two parts: those collected before the intervention proposal was applied, and those collected afterwards. Here's a breakdown of the findings from each part:

Before the intervention proposal

A significant portion of respondents (34.7%) indicated that they occasionally had difficulty speaking clearly or coherently. Daily face-to-face English conversations were not very frequent, with only 35.8% of respondents reporting engaging in them frequently.

A similar proportion (41.1%) reported frequently working on improving their verbal communication skills. Over a third of the respondents (32.6%) believed that technology had an impact on face-to-face communication. While a sizeable portion (33.7%) expressed satisfaction.

with their verbal communication skills for problem-solving, a considerable number (35.8%) also indicated being frequently satisfied. Public speaking appeared to be a challenge for many, as only 28.4% reported feeling comfortable speaking in public or in front of a group frequently.

After the intervention proposal

The survey results after the intervention proposal are focused on problem-based activities for improving verbal communication skills. A relatively high proportion of respondents (35.8%) indicated feeling confident in their understanding of the problem-based strategy.

Using problem-based activities for verbal communication was reported as frequent by a similar number of respondents (35.8%). There seems to be a positive perception towards the impact of problem-based activities, with 36.8% of respondents believing it improves the effectiveness of their verbal communication. Overall, the survey results suggest that while there was a focus on improving verbal communication skills, there was still room for improvement before the intervention proposal was implemented. The positive results after the intervention suggest that the problem-based strategy may have been an effective way to address this need.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the survey results, here are some possible conclusions regarding the research application of problem-based learning (PBL) to improve English communication:

The positive impact of Problem-based learning:

Increased understanding and application: The survey shows a rise in confidence regarding the understanding of the PBL strategy (35.8% after vs. not measured before). Additionally, frequent use of problem-based activities for communication increased (35.8% after vs. not measured before). This suggests PBL was effectively adopted by participants. **Improved perception of communication effectiveness:** A significant portion (36.8%) believed PBL activities improved their verbal communication effectiveness. This indicates a potential positive impact on the core objective of the research.

Need for further investigation

Limited data on pre-intervention communication skills: While the pre-intervention data highlights areas for improvement (difficulty with clear speaking, infrequent daily conversations), it lacks specific scores to directly compare with post-intervention results.

Focus on specific communication skills: The survey doesn't delve into whether PBL specifically improved fluency, vocabulary usage, or other targeted communication skills.

Overall, the results suggest that PBL has promise as a method to enhance English communication skills. However, further research with more comprehensive pre- and post-intervention data, as well as a focus on measuring specific communication skills, would strengthen the conclusions.

Here are some additional points to consider

Qualitative data: Including open-ended questions or interviews could provide valuable insights into participants' experiences with PBL and its impact on their communication confidence.

Long-term effects: Investigating if the perceived improvements in communication effectiveness are sustained over time would be beneficial.

By addressing these limitations and incorporating further research methods, a clearer picture of PBL's effectiveness in improving English communication skills can be established.

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