PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING AS A METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ECONOMICS STUDENTS: THEORETICAL RATIONALE AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Komilova Dildora G‘ulamjanovna
PhD researcher, Gulistan State University, Uzbekistan
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Abstract: Abstract: This paper explores Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a theoretically grounded and pedagogically effective approach to developing the professional communicative competence of Economics students in English language education. Drawing on a systematic review of foundational PBL theories, a comparative analysis of major PBL models, and an assessment of their relevance to the specific requirements of economics education, the study demonstrates that PBL particularly its pure and hybrid variants creates a productive learning environment for the integrated development of subject-specific knowledge, communicative competence, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. The findings highlight the potential of PBL to enhance professionally oriented foreign language instruction and support the preparation of future Economists for real-world communicative challenges. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations for the effective implementation of PBL within the context of higher education in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: problem-based learning, PBL, professional communicative competence, Economics education, ESP, active learning.

The transformation of higher education from a knowledge-transmission paradigm to a competence-development paradigm has generated widespread interest in active, student-centred pedagogical methodologies. Among these, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has attracted particular scholarly attention for its capacity to integrate subject-matter knowledge with the higher-order cognitive skills analytical reasoning, collaborative problem-solving, autonomous inquiry that contemporary professional practice demands. In the specific context of English-language instruction for economics students, PBL offers a distinctive pedagogical advantage: it creates authentic communicative situations in which language use is not an end in itself but a genuine instrument for addressing complex, real-world professional challenges.

The present paper is motivated by a dual observation. On the one hand, the analysis of syllabi from Uzbek higher education institutions conducted in the broader research project of which this paper forms a part reveals that current English-language curricula for economics students remain largely oriented towards general communicative competence rather than professionally situated language use. On the other hand, the existing PBL literature, while rich and growing, has not yet produced a systematic account of how PBL can be specifically configured to develop professional communicative competence in economics students within the Uzbek higher education context. This paper addresses both of these gaps.

The intellectual roots of PBL extend back to John Dewey’s pragmatist educational philosophy and his pioneering work at the Laboratory School of Chicago, where he replaced the traditional curriculum with activity-based and problem-centred learning experiences rooted in children’s natural developmental needs. Dewey’s foundational insight that genuine understanding is not transmitted but constructed through purposeful engagement with real problems anticipated the constructivist learning theories that would later provide the psychological underpinning for PBL.

The formalisation of PBL as a distinct educational methodology occurred at McMaster University, Canada, in the late 1960s, where Howard Barrows and Robin Tamblyn introduced it into the medical curriculum as an alternative to the prevailing lecture-and-memorisation model. Barrows defined PBL as an instructional approach that confronts learners with ‘real, ill-structured problems’ for which no pre-determined solution exists, and in which the teacher functions not as a knowledge transmitter but as a facilitator guiding the inquiry process without prescribing its outcomes. The central pedagogical claim, empirically supported by Barrows and Tamblyn and subsequently by Schmidt, Norman and Schmidt, and many others, is that working through authentic problems activates prior knowledge, generates intrinsic motivation, promotes deep rather than surface learning, and develops the metacognitive capacity for self-directed inquiry.

Rubinstein’s dictum that ‘thinking begins with a problematic situation’ captures the psychological mechanism underlying PBL: cognitive engagement, and hence learning, is maximally activated when the learner encounters a situation that cannot be resolved by routine application of existing knowledge. This activation of productive cognitive dissonance is precisely what distinguishes PBL from traditional instruction and what makes it particularly well suited to the development of the kind of flexible, adaptive professional competence that economics graduates require.

From the domain of experiential learning, Kolb and Plovnik’s model provides additional theoretical support for PBL. Kolb’s cycle concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation maps directly onto the PBL process: students encounter a real problem (concrete experience), analyse and discuss it collaboratively (reflective observation), construct conceptual frameworks through independent research (abstract conceptualisation), and test their solutions through presentation and peer critique (active experimentation). This alignment between Kolb’s experiential learning cycle and the PBL process is not coincidental; both are grounded in the same constructivist epistemology.

The term ‘problem-based learning’ encompasses a spectrum of instructional models that vary considerably in the degree of problem ill-structuredness, the level of student autonomy, and the nature of expected learning outcomes. Hung, synthesising the taxonomies proposed by Barrows, Harden and Davis, and Hmelo-Silver, identifies six principal PBL models, which can be arranged along a continuum from teacher-directed to student-directed learning.

At the teacher-directed end of the continuum stand lecture-based case instruction and case-based lectures, in which the problem is fully structured and the teacher retains primary control over the learning process. While these models offer the advantage of efficient knowledge transmission, they provide limited opportunities for autonomous inquiry and do not replicate the ambiguity and complexity that characterise real professional situations. Modified case-based instruction represents a middle ground: the problem contains elements of genuine ambiguity, and student autonomy is partially engaged, though teacher scaffolding remains substantial.

At the student-directed end of the continuum stand pure PBL and closed-loop PBL, in which students encounter genuinely ill-structured, real-world problems and take primary responsibility for managing the learning process identifying knowledge gaps, locating and evaluating information sources, synthesising findings, proposing solutions, and critically reviewing the adequacy of those solutions. Hung’s analysis demonstrates that these student-directed models produce the highest levels of creative thinking, self-regulation, and adaptability to novel and ambiguous situations precisely the capacities that are most in demand in contemporary economic practice.

For the purposes of developing the professional communicative competence of economics students in English, pure PBL and hybrid PBL (which combines the authenticity of ill-structured problems with targeted theoretical input) are identified as the most appropriate models. The rationale is straightforward: economics graduates will routinely encounter situations in which there is no single correct answer, in which relevant information must be sought, evaluated, and synthesised from multiple sources, and in which solutions must be communicated persuasively to diverse audiences in English. PBL, in its student-directed forms, creates the pedagogical conditions in which these capacities can be genuinely developed rather than merely simulated.

The connection between PBL and the development of professional communicative competence is not merely instrumental it is constitutive. When economics students engage with a genuine professional problem in English say, the analysis of a company’s financial crisis, the evaluation of an international logistics disruption, or the preparation of a cross-cultural investment proposal language use is not an ancillary activity but the very medium through which professional thinking is conducted, collaborative knowledge is constructed, and solutions are negotiated and communicated.

In the PBL process as described by Boud and Feletti and Schmidt, students must engage in a rich array of professional communicative acts: they must comprehend and critically evaluate authentic texts in English; they must articulate and defend positions in small-group discussions; they must conduct independent research, synthesising information from multiple English-language sources; they must prepare and deliver professional presentations; and they must produce written outputs reports, proposals, analyses that conform to the genre conventions of economic discourse. Each of these activities directly develops a specific component of the PCC model described in the companion paper: the motivational-axiological component is engaged by the authentic professional relevance of the task; the cognitive component by the requirement to research and synthesise domain-specific knowledge; the communicative-activity component by the collaborative and presentational demands of the PBL process; and the reflective-evaluative component by the systematic review and peer critique that conclude each PBL cycle.

This alignment between the PBL process and the multi-component PCC model provides a principled basis for integrating PBL into the English-language curriculum for economics students. Rather than treating language instruction and subject-matter instruction as separate activities the default arrangement in most Uzbek higher education institutions, as revealed by the curriculum analysis conducted in the present study PBL enables their genuine integration: students develop professional communicative competence not by practising language in isolation but by using language to do the things that economists actually do.

Problem-Based Learning represents not merely a pedagogical technique but a fundamentally different conception of the relationship between knowledge, skill, and professional practice. Its theoretical foundations in Dewey’s pragmatism, Barrows’s medical education innovation, Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, and Rubinstein’s problem-based cognitive psychology converge on a single insight: that professional competence is not transmitted but constructed through purposeful engagement with authentic challenges. For economics students in Uzbekistan, PBL offers a uniquely powerful vehicle for the integrated development of domain knowledge, critical reasoning, and professional communicative competence in English.

The comparative analysis of PBL models conducted in this paper suggests that pure and hybrid PBL, with their emphasis on ill-structured problems and student autonomy, are the most appropriate forms for this purpose. Their implementation in the Uzbek higher education context

requires systematic curriculum reform, instructor professional development, assessment redesign, and resource development a comprehensive agenda that the broader research project of which this paper forms a part is designed to advance.

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