Fostering Critical Thinking through PBL in Students of 9th Grade at Institución

Educativa San José in Itagüí, Colombia

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Abstract

This action research aims to explore how the implementation of Problem-based Learning (PBL) fosters ninth grade students' critical thinking at Institución Educativa San Jose in Itagüí, Colombia. All the emergent information was gathered through a journal, a survey, an interview and students' work. The findings evidenced that PBL not only fosters students' critical thinking and empowerment, but also it develops attitudes, values and language skills in students.

Key words: Critical Thinking, Empowerment, Problem-Based Learning.

Degree Requirements

This action research is submitted as a requirement of the bachelor of education in Foreign Language Teaching (English- French) at Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin Colombia.

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Preface

This action research portrays the PBL implementation in ninth grade at Institución Educativa San José in Itagüí, aiming to foster critical thinking in the students of this setting. This study was conducted from 2017/2 to 2018/1 as part of my practicum.

After a preliminary approach to the mentioned setting, I could identify that the activities done in the class were quite traditional, they were not assessed by using rubrics nor any criteria, and any feedback was provided. Therefore, there was a weak empowerment and motivation by the part of students leading to an evident absence of critical thinking. Therefore, based on the desire of fostering critical thinking expressed on the PEI and my particular interest on this methodology, I decided to implement Problem-based Learning as a way to achieve such a goal.

This study reports the impact of PBL in this setting, expressing how its implementation can provide students with the opportunity to reflect on and think critically about the different issues and situations that are connected to the topics covered in class and reflected on their specific context. I hope this action research can inspire others to implement this kind of methodologies to foster an educational change that, hopefully, will lead to the evolution of our society.

Description of the Context

"Institución Educativa San José" main branch is located in Itagüí, Antioquia near to a well-known round point and company called Pilsen. This public institution has about 1.934 all-female students in all its branches. Its population belongs to the middle and low social strata coming mostly from different Itagüí neighborhoods, but also from San Antonio de Prado and Envigado. The institution attends preschool, elementary, secondary and high school levels in three different branches within two shifts (morning and afternoon). This action research started to be conducted in the main branch in 2017/2; however, as this branch would be razed throughout 2018, the second part of the research was carried out at John F. Kennedy which is not a branch but a borrowed school. This institution is located in a neighborhood called San Pio X at Itagüí.

I. E. San José was founded in 1964 as "Liceo Departamental Femenino" being the first feminine school in Itagüí at that time. In 1968, the name was changed for "Liceo Técnico Comercial" since "Ministerio de Educación" (MEN) started to create technical centers inside most of the schools. In 1993, the MEN commanded all the schools to become mixed; nevertheless, the school stayed being a feminine school and it was renamed as "Instituto de Bachillerato de Itagüí". In 2002, the school changed for the last time its name for "Institución Educativa San José" and started to focus on the English and French teaching. In 2005, SENA started to operate in the school. Finally, in 2012 the school achieved the highest degree in the ICFES scale which gave them good prestige among the other schools.

At the very beginning, the school used to be a house, but as time went by, it became bigger and, after some modifications, it finally turned into a school. Nowadays, its main branch has a 3-floor building where there are located 18 classrooms, 2 technological classrooms, 1 teacher's room, a physics and chemistry laboratory, a covered playground, and some administrative rooms. There is also a library and an auditorium. There are not many

English posters or advertisements around the school. Regarding John F. Kennedy School, it has two 4-floor buildings and shares all the different rooms mentioned before. In this borrowed school, I. E. San José attends students from the third grade to the ninth grade. The institution counts on the presence of 63 teachers from different areas, four secretaries, four coordinators and one principal.

The institution has a humanistic and developmental methodology that pretends to help people to grow integrally by achieving their goals and developing certain abilities and competences in different areas of study. Its objective is to provide students with tools that support them in their pursuit for excellence, autonomy, knowledge and critical thinking. Regarding English, its methodology is focused on learning to learn and using language as a tool for the everyday living. Besides, the school is meant to work on task-based learning, project based learning, and problem based learning. It is also important to mention that the school works with the fellowship program that is being conducted in Colombia. Thus, they count on the presence of two native fellows that work mainly in 10th and 11th grades.

The class where this action research started to be conducted was composed by 30 girls of ninth grade who are between 14 and 15 years old. For the second part of the research, the group was composed by 25 students. In general, the English level in both groups was very basic, although there were some students who have a good English level. The classrooms were not fit with specific language tools for teaching English because every grade in the school has a specific classroom for the whole academic year and having special classrooms for every subject is not possible. However, in 2017/2, the students worked on a book proposed by the "MEN" called "English Please" and an application which name is Duolingo. Nowadays, they only work with Duolingo in ninth grade.

The Cooperating Teacher is graduated from Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó where she did a degree in English teaching. She has been working as a teacher since 2009.

However, she is part of IESJ since two years ago. Currently, she is the homeroom teacher of the class where I conduct this action research. She does not have any other higher education studies even though she has taken several training courses in different teaching areas. In addition, she does not belong to MEN yet since she could not pass the required exam for being part of it.

Problem Statement

Along the development of this action research, different situations and issues emerged and directed me to narrow down the focus of study. I took advantage of several data collection instruments such as class observations, journals, informal interviews to my CT and to the students, and archival data analysis. By employing these instruments, I could realize there were several factors that influenced the arising of the problem. Firstly, there was a persistent lack of criteria when assessing students' work and performance. This situation was followed by an unfortunate lack of feedback after every assessment event. Secondly, there was few empowerment by the part of students due to the strong discipline strategies employed by my CT. Thirdly; the activities proposed by the teacher did not allow students to foster their critical thinking and, rather, they created receptive and passive attitudes towards learning. Finally, there was a subtle lack of motivation by the part of the students.

Through several observations, I noticed that there was a lack of criteria when assessing students' work and performance since any rubric or assessment tool was employed by my CT in any of the assessment events. This situation went together with a lack of feedback, which made the assessment merely summative, static, and did not help much students since it did not say much about their performance and their actual place in the learning process. The lack of criteria and feedback went against the assumption that learning is a constructive process in which comments from the teacher and reflection by the part of students must go together seeking for a more critical thinking towards learning.

Given that my CT was the homeroom teacher, she had a strong influence on the students leading to an easy classroom management. However, I observed that certain behaviors on my CT such as looking too sharp; looking straight, those who misbehave, scolding or speaking loudly and strongly, frighten some students and, as a result, created a very quiet atmosphere. As a consequence, some of them felt afraid to take the floor, to give an opinion, and even to present something in front of her. Therefore, empowerment started to become seriously affected by that situation.

I could perceive that the activities proposed by my CT were actually very creative and tackled current subjects on the many different issues and problematics around the world and the country. Nevertheless, these activities did not seem to foster students' critical abilities since they were meant mainly to memorize what they have to say, for example, in the case of a random poster presentation. Thus, they were not trigger to grasp meaning and significance on the different topics but to repeat and pronounce as accurate as possible. This situation did not seem to respond to one aspect I found when analyzing the school mission; that was, fostering critical thinking in students.

In several conversations held with my CT, she expressed a big concern regarding students' motivation. She claimed that she would like to increase her students' intrinsic motivation; however, she thought she did not know how to achieve such a goal. Furthermore, the institutions recently changed its language learning focus. In the past, they used to worry about developing students grammatical competences but, recently, they started to focus on the development of pragmatic and oral skills. Therefore, the employment of PBL in this context could be the bridge to accomplish the aims of fostering critical thinking in students and developing both pragmatic and oral skills.

Theoretical Background

Around the vast concept of Critical Pedagogy, it exists a number of approaches, methods, and concepts that goes from the most general to the most specific. For the right development of this action research, it is mandatory to explore and to have a concrete idea of the next approaches, methods and concepts: From the widest to the narrowest, they are Critical Pedagogy, Problem-Based Learning, Problem Posing and Critical Thinking.

Talking about Critical Pedagogy is talking about the bridge between the classroom context and the social context created by teachers in order to empower students with the idea that they can transform society with the help of education. (Akbari, 2008, p.1) Rather than learning by heart language structures, vocabulary, concepts, and so on, Critical Pedagogy intends to provide students with the opportunity to improve their level of understanding of both educational and social issues, and to prove and create their own beliefs and point of view.

Baynham, as cited by Akbari (2008), reinforces the idea that "what happens in the classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom". It is exactly the way Critical Pedagogy aims to work. That is, transforming the classroom environment, practices, activities and thinking, so that they already transformed, can also make changes in their own micro and macro contexts. Critical Pedagogy, then, frames the wide sense of this action research.

According to Winter (2004) Problem-Based Learning "begins with the assumption that learning is an active, integrated, and constructive process influenced by social and contextual factors." That means, PBL conceives the learner's role as active rather than passive, learning as an opportunity to integrate knowledge from different subjects and as a way to construct knowledge, beliefs, and points of view permeated by social and contextual factors.

In a common PBL course, learners would work together cooperatively and collaboratively on complex and authentic issues while constructing content knowledge and achieving skills like problem-solving, reasoning, and critical thinking. (Winter, 2004, p.1) Thus, PBL provides students with a different approach to learn a language while analyzing and working on the different educational and social problems that are strongly connected and influenced one to another. Therefore, PBL serves as the approach for conducting this research searching for a real transformation of the classroom experience reflected in the learners' lives.

Assessment in PBL also plays an important role since it allows the teacher to follow and conclude the whole learning process. Reynolds, as cited by Winter (2004), claims that "Assessment needs to fit the philosophy of active learning rather than passive reproductive learning." Providing a clear and powerful learning to the learners, help them to find both their strengths and weaknesses, their own achievements, where they are in the learning process, and what and how to improve regarding those weaknesses. What is previously mentioned portrays learners' activeness in their own learning process and a first step to achieve both autonomy and empowerment.

To carry out PBL, it is very important to have a number of methods, techniques and strategies. Problem Posing allows to encourage students to participate and to critically think and reflect on the prescribed curriculum connecting and expanding it to the curriculum of their own lives. (Wink, 2004, pp. 51-52) Employing this strategy can increase students' empowerment by helping them to identify issues on their own lives and, with the aim of education, solve them immediately or prepare themselves to a future event.

Osborn (2002) states that "problem posing in the foreign language classroom involves constructing units around questions, issues, concerns and puzzles related to the language." In this way, lessons are planned to be Problem-Based for making students to reflect, wonder,

question and think about the different problems, issues, and concerns that a "common" topic could have behind what we normally see.

The final concept to be covered has to do with the purpose of this action research: Fostering Critical Thinking in students. Nina Wallerstein and Elsa Auerbach (2004) claim that the role of Critical Thinking "starts from perceiving the root causes of one's place in society, and continues with analyzing the interaction of our personal lives within these socioeconomic, political, cultural, and historical contexts." Bearing this in mind, critical thinking could be understood in education as the skill that leads students and teachers to further analysis and reflection on the different contexts that surround society and education.

Research Question

For the development of this action research, the following question has been taken as the basis and focus: "How can PBL foster critical thinking in students of a 9th grade at IESJ in Itagüí?" To answer this question, a general objective and three specific objectives have been needed. Those objetives are:

General Objective:

- To foster critical thinking in students of a 9th grade at IESJ in Itagüí.

Specific Objectives:

- Identifying PBL strategies to foster students' critical thinking
- Raising awareness in students on different issues through PBL strategies
- Determining how PBL can foster critical thinking in students of 9th grade

Action Plan

As the basis of this Action Research is fostering students' critical thinking, one of the most important action will have to do with creating a Problem-based Learning Unit. This unit will be based on the topics already established on the PEI. However, these topics they are

going to be covered inside the class will be completely different from the way they are used

to do. Some of the actions to be taken will be several class discussions on the topics designed

but adding a critical sense to each of them. In addition, a considerable number of reflections

on different problematics around the context and the topics to be learned will be done.

Besides, the students will be also meant to perform certain activities in which they can

express their opinions, beliefs and perceptions.

Since it happened that in the first part of the research process some classes were

missed, an informatics instrument will be employed for those days where classes are lost.

This platform is called Edmodo and it provides different opportunities to both teachers and

students. On it, we can post information from different sources, create tasks with a specific

time to deliver them, add grades, create questionnaires, and so on. The idea is to provide

students with an opportunity to reflect on different topics by using videos, articles and class

discussions that can end up as a reflection.

Another important action to be taken is assessment. As it was mentioned in the

statement of the problem, none rubric or feedback was provided by the part of the teacher on

the students' performance. Assessment plays such an important role at the moment of

fostering students' critical thinking since it allows them to realize their actual location on the

learning process, to recognize strengths and weaknesses, to create strategies to overcome

those weak aspects and to, step by step, be more autonomous. Therefore, every assessment

event will have a detailed feedback on each student's performance and one that will be shared

to the whole group.

Data Collection Instruments

For the development of this Action Research, four different data collecting

instruments will be employed: Journal, Survey, Interview, and Archival Data. Each of the

instruments previously mentioned will be used for a specific purpose and its utility will be highlighted in the following lines.

Having a journal will allow to do a deeper reflection and, thus, comprehension of every action, situation, reaction or event that happened in each of the lessons. It will help to identify the emergent categories and to reflect on my own interventions and the reactions by the part of the students. Furthermore, it will save the most relevant events where any sign of critical thinking, empowerment, autonomy, commitment, and reflection emerged from students. The survey will serve as a reliable proof of students' perceptions on the methodology employed and the emerging changes that they could experience. It also will give the opportunity to identify differences and changes between the very beginning where only observations were made, and the culminating part of this action research.

The interview will provide the information about the CT's perception on the actions taken, the changes she could perceive, and the whole research process itself. Moreover, it will give a wide idea of the learning she could get from this experience and suggestions for further research on this topic in a similar context. The Archival Data will serve as strong evidence of students' actual reflection on the tasks to be proposed and fostering regarding critical thinking. Writings in paper and on Edmodo, notebooks, posters and tangible things are considered a source of emerging archival data.

Development of Actions

As it was mentioned in the action plan, this action research strongly values the use of a journal along the whole research process. Therefore, each day spent on the practicum field was stored, analyzed, and categorized in the journal. This journal was composed by three categories: Lesson plan, development of actions and reflection, and emerging categories. In the first category, every lesson plan was entered describing the activities that would take place, the strategies that would be employed and certain details regarding class arrangement

and materials. In the second category, it was stored and analyzed all the actions, events,

situations, reactions and comments that took place in the class; besides, a further reflection

was also added. In the last category, emerging categories were entered after analyzing each

entry. The practicum advisor also analyzed all entries.

At the very beginning of this action research, some observations were needed since it

was a new group and, maybe, some things could be different compared to the past group. I

considered this opportunity of having a new group as an advantage more than an

inconvenient situation because it allowed me to have an experience with more than one group

of ninth grade. Those observations took place during the two first weeks of February and they

served as a valuable insight of the class and the students. Besides, those observations helped

me to address more precisely the actions I already had in mind, make some subtle

modifications and polish some ideas. After this action, I started the first PBL implementation.

In general, every PBL implementation was planned taking into account the topics,

thematic and content prescribed in the curriculum. However, the way they would be covered

differed from the traditional methods in the sense that it involved critical thinking, analysis,

reflection, active roles by the part of students and teachers, and the connection with

interdisciplinary topics and issues. The PBL implementations were carried out both in class

and on Edmodo due to some of the classes were supposed to be missed from the very

beginning and further reflection and extra time were needed to develop some of them.

The topic surrounding the first PBL implementation was the Family. For covering it,

two different activities were planned: A class discussion and reflection writing. In the first

activity, students should reflect on a number of questions guided by the practicum student.

For example, they had to think about what a family is, how it is composed, what kind of

families exist and how they are different. The discussion was guided to a controversial topic

that is *Gay Families*. Students had the opportunity to take a position and to express

agreement, disagreement and their different points of view. Both subjective advantages and disadvantages of Gay Families were exposed. For the second activity, students had to write individually a reflection were they clearly express their agreement or disagreement, and their point of view regarding Gay Marriage and Gay Families Adoption. A general and a specific feedback were given. Both activities took place in the third week of February.

For the second PBL implementation, I took advantage of a topic proposed in the English syllabus called *values*. Moreover, at that moment we were covering the simple past and how to retell stories and past events. In this implementation, students should watch a video called "*French Toast*", do a detailed retelling of what happened there and write a short reflection on the video. 22 out of 25 students submitted the activity, and a specific and a general feedback was provided. This activity was developed in the first week of March.

The third implementation took place around the topic of *friendship*. For this activity, students had to define what a friend is and what he/she is not. Then, they should create an ideal friend by choosing a number of characteristics. They shared them with the class and the idea of an ideal friend was problematized and immediately razed. After reflecting on what actually a real friend is, they could change their minds and abandon the idea of an ideal friend adopting a critical position. Finally, they got into pairs and asked each other a series of questions were they could realize how their favorite friend inside the class was also human and had both positive aspects and things to better. This implementation was done in the second week of March.

In the fourth implementation, students, before attending class, should watch a video called "*Happiness*" by Steve Cutts. The objective was giving students the opportunity to analyze and reflect on the people's daily routine and lifestyle in a more critical way. Then, a discussion around the video took place and students expressed their opinion about the topic. The practicum student guided the discussion, but students also directed it with some

emerging questions. Besides this in class activity, students had to answer the next questions on Edmodo: How is the world today? What is your opinion about people's daily routines and lifestyle? How should the world be different? And what is your reflection on the video? 24 out of 25 students submitted the activity and an individual feedback was shared to every student. This PBL implementation took place in the second week of April.

In the final PBL implementation, students participated in a music fair. For this implementation, they had to create five groups of five students and select one musical genre from the following ones: Electronic, Rap, Reggaetón, Rock and Pop. They had to decorate a particular stand related to the chosen genre and presented to the class. Therefore, students should go around the different stands and listen to each group. They talked about the origins, the principal characteristics, artists, festivals and songs. They also reflected on what the songs try to transmit and how people that listen to these genres are. All the students participated in this fair, the stands were carefully decorated and the presentations were very complete. This implementation took place in the first and second week of May.

Another action planned to be taken had to do with conducting a survey to the students and an interview to the teacher. These two data collection tools were really important since it provided information about the Cooperating Teacher and the students perceptions attending to the belief that the role of students and teachers is active. The questions selected for this data collection instruments were created and discussed by the practicum student and the practicum advisor. For the survey, I employed the Google Form Tool which allowed the creation of different kind of questions and gave transparency to the survey itself since it kept in secret the identity of the students who answered it. Regarding the interview, I conducted a structured one since the questions selected for conducting it could obtain the information required. Both the survey and the interview took place in the first week of May.

In order to make it clear, the next chart will portray all the actions taken along this action research and the moments they took place distributed weekly.

Activities	February				March				April				May			
	W 1	W 2	W 3	W 4	W 1	W 2	W 3	W 4	W 1	W 2	W 3	W 4	W 1	W 2	W 3	W 4
Journals and Reflection								Holy week								
Class observation																
PBL Implementation			1°		2°	3°				4°			5°			
Interview																
Survey																
Data analysis																
Analysis and writing																
Final presentation																

Findings and Interpretations

Aiming to analyze the data collected along the research process, I decided to firstly code all the emerging information collected through the data collection instruments already mentioned; secondly, a triangulation of those was done to look for commonalities among the existing coded information creating categories that later would be set up as the findings and interpretations of this action research. Those findings and interpretations would be described in this section.

Edmodo

As it has been mentioned, Edmodo was employed as an important tool for this action research since many classes would be missed and it provides both teachers and students with the opportunity to work at home. Nevertheless, it was not the only advantage of employing

such a complete platform. As it was expressed in the survey conducted to the students, Edmodo was perceived as a space for reflecting, critiquing and expressing their opinion about different social issues. One of the students made the following comment about Edmodo: "The activities, videos, and texts posted on Edmodo, helped me to express my critical point of view" (Students' survey, May 4th, 2018) Moreover, some students highlighted the Edmodo activities and resources as the key for developing a critical thinking towards diverse social issues (Students' survey, May 4th, 2018).

Another example that remarks the importance of Edmodo has to do with the commitment expressed by students when submitting every activity. In this platform, it was posted a number of videos, texts, links and activities to be developed. Every post could be easily followed with great detail and showed who saw the post and who delivered every task. In a nutshell, around 90% of the students developed every single activity and all of them saw what it was posted on it. On the contrary, some of the activities proposed and developed by the Cooperating Teacher inside the classroom showed poor participation and commitment. It was the case of an activity in which students had to tell their daily routines by heart and "14 out of 25 students presented their daily routines." (Journal entry, April 12th and 16th, 2018) This portrays a high level of commitment by the part of the students with the task proposed when using Edmodo. Moreover, it illustrates autonomy as a notorious characteristic that could clearly be triggered by the use of this platform since they had to do everything by their own, read some instructions and develop the activities in a determined time.

The information collected from the interview conducted to the Cooperating Teacher also stood out the usefulness of Edmodo. In the interview, she exalted Edmodo as the most important resource employed by the practicum student since it involved the use of ICT within the teaching and learning processes, and it raised commitment, autonomy and engagement in the students. (CT's interview, May 2nd, 2018) In my own perspective, Edmodo was the most

useful resource that I could implement since it allowed us to keep working out of the school

in those missed class days, it provided them with a comfortable and technological space

where reflections and tasks could be easily submitted, and it fostered indirectly the

emergence of commitment, autonomy and critical thinking in the students.

Development of Language Skills

From the data collected, it was perceived that a series of language skills were obtained

by the students along the whole research process since a notorious improvement was

perceived. Honestly, this finding took me by surprise since I was not expecting such an

improvement regarding language skills and communicative competence since the focus of

this research was on fostering some attitudes towards life rather than developing those

competences and skills.

On the one hand, the students' perceptions on the PBL implementation highlighted

reading comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary recognition, written production, and oral

production as the language skills obtained along the learning process. (Students' survey, May

4th, 2018) On the other hand, the Cooperating Teacher also pointed out both written and oral

production as some of the language skills enhanced by the students through this

methodology. (CT's interview, May 2nd, 2018) In my opinion, students showed a

considerable improvement regarding writing and oral skills. At the very beginning, they

started writing small paragraphs and saying short phrases. But as the time passed by, students

increased their vocabulary and acquired more precisely the different time tenses leading to

complex and long texts and more extensive oral presentations.

Development of Values

Data has also evidenced the activities developed inside the class as an aiding bridge

that allowed the emergence of a number of values and attitudes by the part of students. In

many cases, students showed the acquisition of values such as: Respect for the others, group

work, effort recognition, social awareness and honesty. For me, seeing students respect each other's voice, turn and presentation was quite valuable since it allowed us to work in a comfortable environment, let students express their own opinion and saved lots of time that could be lost by interruptions.

For example, one day we decided to carry out an activity called "Spelling Bee" where students must compete among them by spelling a number of words from a bag and "whenever a student went in front and finished spelling the words, all the students encouraged and congratulated them." (Journal entry, April 17th, 2018) These actions reflected the evident respect inside the group, the encouragement given by themselves, the willingness to work, and the effort recognition. Moreover, from the survey it was perceived that students felt the PBL implementation as an aid to develop values such as: group work, respect for the others, active participation, consciousness and awareness regarding social issues. (Students' survey, May 4th, 2018) Besides, the Cooperating Teacher also highlighted group work and respect for the others as values obtained throughout the PBL implementation. (CT's interview, May 2nd, 2018)

Empowerment

One of the keys for acquiring a critical thinking is developing a sense of empowerment in the students. When students are empowered, their intrinsic motivation increases immediately, their autonomy stands out, the engagement and commitment with the tasks proposed acquire great seriousness and leading roles start to appear frequently. I am more than glad that it was the case of this action research. Therefore, I will share a couple of anecdotes that took place both in the class and on Edmodo.

The first anecdote was around a class discussion on the video "Happiness" by Steve Cutts. The day before the activity, I posted on Edmodo the already mentioned video afraid that some of the students would not see it. When I got to the class, I asked how many of them

could see the video and "24 out of 25 students watched it. For me, it was such a great feeling since it shows the commitment these students have with the class" (Journal entry, April 10th, 2018) Once we get into the discussion, students made their own comments on the video, respecting each other's turns, willing to express their opinions and in fact, most of them did it reflecting signs of motivation, empowerment and critical thinking.

The second anecdote has to do with an activity where all the students had the opportunity to be part of a language competition. Actually, this activity by itself was a sign of empowerment, commitment and motivation since "all the students had the opportunity to participate on it and they actually did... I did not have to call for participants since they voluntarily went in front of the class and made their best" (Journal entry, April 17, 2018). The same day, and at the very end of the activity, one student who was not the best example of discipline and wisdom, after finishing the activity and classifying to the final round, stood up and said: "We all are able to do great things if we change our minds and believe in ourselves" (Journal entry, April 17th, 2018) Both, the Cooperating Teacher and the students were surprised but happy to see her classified to the final round and to hear those words from her. It was encouraging for all of them and was a clear evidence of the empowerment acquired by the PBL implementation.

In the interview conducted to my Cooperating Teacher, she expressed that "among all the attitudes acquired by the students throughout the PBL implementation, motivation was the most outstanding" (CT's interview, May 2, 2018). At the very beginning of this action research, the Cooperating Teacher expressed a huge concern regarding student's motivation; therefore, it was wonderful that her biggest concern turned into the most outstanding attitude acquired throughout the PBL implementation. Finally, the students, in a great number, has also expressed being part of the decisions made inside the class regarding topics, activities

and assessment (Students' survey, May 4, 2018). They claimed that these decisions were also made by the Cooperating Teacher and the Practicum Student.

Rubrics and Feedback

As it has been established along this action research, assessment is quite important when focusing on fostering attitudes like autonomy, empowerment and motivation that are meant to trigger a critical thinking in students. Therefore, I decided to not only putting into practice the use of rubrics and effective feedback, but also trying to incite my Cooperating teacher to do it. Thus, I used very detailed rubrics for assessing each of the PBL implementation and the common activities inside and out of the classroom, and I provided students with an explicit feedback where strengths, weaknesses and individual comments were presented.

Unfortunately, I could not have enough impact on my Cooperating Teacher's beliefs since she continued conducting assessment events without any rubric at hand. Besides, her feedbacks continued to be quite poor or inexistent. For instance, one time she asked me to assess an activity she planned. I did not refuse to do it, but immediately I asked her for the rubrics that would support a fair assessment. Her answer was "You are a teacher, you must know how to grade it" (Journal entry, April 12, 2018). I felt deeply disappointed since I really tried to foster the use of rubrics and feedback and show each of its benefits to the learning and teaching processes.

Critical Thinking

As it was aimed, this action research evidenced Problem-based Learning as a method that allows the fostering of critical thinking in students. Through the many different discussions, reflections, role-plays and tasks, students showed the acquisition of critical thinking expressed by means of attitudes towards learning and cognitive skills such as: Autonomy, empowerment, motivation, commitment, encouragement, reasoning, social

awareness and reflection. For instance, in one of the reflections done on Edmodo, students

should watch a video, have a discussion in class and reflect on what happiness is and how it

is perceived by people in general. One student wrote:

> This world makes us think that material is more important than a word or than a
>
> feeling, but in reality what worries most is how people can change things that have
>
> value, for things that will be finished in such a short time... Many people depend on a
>
> bottle of alcohol, drugs or money to be "happy", but ... is that the happiness that all
>
> beings need? Will you look for that happiness in things that are not material?
>
> (Edmodo task, April 12th, 2018)

This clearly expressed her perception on how people understand happiness nowadays

questioning people's' decisions and wrong focuses regarding happiness. Also, she portrayed

critically and in simple words how the world influences people in their search for happiness

leading to sadness and sorrow reflected on empty belongings. This clearly reflects a critical

thinking by the part of these students since she expresses her opinion on the topic, shows her

perceptions and questions the controversial topic: "happiness".

In the survey conducted on May 4, 2018, students reported that through the

implementation of PBL, they actually could acquire a critical thinking and start to change

their way of perceiving "normal" things. There, students pointed out PBL as an opportunity

to express their own opinions, perceptions and feeling on the diverse topics surrounding the

topics to be covered. One student claimed: "The activities done about society made me think

more critically helping me to focus on others' opinions and, besides, reflecting on the issues

that surround us" (Students' survey, May 4, 2018). Moreover, students highlighted PBL

strategies such as videos, discussions, explanations, role-plays, readings and games, as a new

way to have fun and go beyond the topics while learning English in a non-traditional way

(Students' survey, May 4, 2018).

Finally, in the interview conducted to my Cooperating Teacher, she expressed that both, general and specific objectives were achieved since she could perceive a critical thinking through the students' work and performance in and out the classroom (CT's interview, May 2, 2018).

Conclusions

After concluding this fulfilling experience as a researcher, I would like to share the final thoughts about this PBL implementation with students of ninth grade at IESJ. Before starting, I must say I am convinced that this PBL implementation in this setting was a complete success since it surpassed all the expectations I could have imagined and a rewarding feeling stays inside the minds of those who were involved in the process. I have to underline the usefulness of Edmodo as one of the keys for the success of this action research for the opportunities that it provided to the realization of it. I also remark that the employment of this platform could not fit in all kind of contexts since both students and teacher must own a technological device (computer, cellphone, tablet, etc.) and internet access.

Students have also perceived this PBL implementation as a way to learn differently from the routine, common and traditional methods. Among the favorable aspects of this method, both the Cooperating Teacher and the students pointed out PBL as the influence of the fostering of different attitudes towards learning such as: motivation, engagement, autonomy, consciousness and awareness regarding social issues, and critical thinking. Besides, they remarked that the appearance of values such group work and respect for the others has to do with the PBL implementation in this setting. Moreover, it was also evidenced that throughout the process, some language skills like oral and written production, vocabulary recognition, reading comprehension and pronunciation. What has been mentioned in this

paragraph shows that PBL not only fosters critical thinking in students, but also fosters attitudes, values and develops language skills.

Reflection

Along the whole learning process of the Foreign Language Teaching degree at Escuela de Idiomas, I had the opportunity to attend to very diverse courses with different focuses, topics and strategies that modeled my teaching style. Among all those courses, I would like to highlight one elective course called Critical Pedagogy since it strongly influenced this action research. In the mentioned course, several methodologies and strategies were covered and applied around the different social issues giving me a huge insight on how to foster critical thinking on students. Moreover, it made me change my way of thinking and reflecting on the different life issues and circumstances.

Conducting this action research at IESJ allowed me to grow professionally and humanly. I could confront my fears regarding teaching to a numerous group, teaching in a public school and dealing with discipline. I also found a way to connect more to students' life and contexts that helped me to direct the learning process more appropriately. Besides, I had the opportunity to apply such a great methodology leaving a strong mark in my beliefs as a teacher and as a human being. I would definitely recommend and use again this methodology in the future since the outcomes were enriching and memorable.

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