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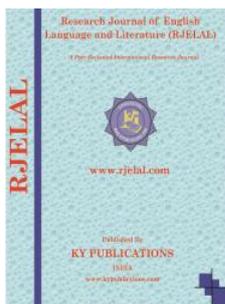
THE ACT OF LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: A THEORETICAL STUDY OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This article brings out a theoretical study of Kolb's learning cycle in the context of English as Second language learning and teaching. The main purpose of the experiential foreign language education is to create a true, authentic connection of the learners with the learning content, exposure with the world outside, and with each other by using a foreign language. However, learning has become memorization these days in schools and colleges which does not lead to an understanding of a specific topic. To have a better understanding and an acquisition of language skills, one's experience is the most essential part of the process of learning. It examines the theory of experiential learning and its features for making the English language classrooms a better learning environment for adult learners. It also traces the common forms of experiential learning and critically examines the core element of the same. This article accents that the method of learning requires deliberate effort to create new knowledge in the face of uncertainty and failure; and opens the way to new, broad and deep horizons of experience.

Key words: Experiential learning, Constructivist, Cognitive, Behaviouristic, Concrete experience, Abstract conceptualization, Reflective observation, Active experimentation, Active learning, and Cooperative learning.

Introduction

Learning process mainly refers to the interconnections between mental, emotional, and physiological stimuli. Experiential learning involves observing, doing, or living through things. Psychologists in the area of educational or cognitive psychology have proposed several learning concepts with regard to experiential learning. Learning is a social process of carefully cultivated experience which challenges every precept and concept of teaching. Learning to be permanent requires the

ability to learn from the life experiences. However, lifelong learning is about creating and maintaining a positive attitude to learning both for personal and professional development. In the case of second language acquisition, it seemed that the learners do not acquire one item perfectly one at a time. The method of learning requires deliberate effort to create new knowledge in the face of uncertainty and failure; and opens the way to new, broad and deep horizons of experience. The learning way honors affective experience in tandem with cognition,

acknowledging that ultimately learning is intrinsically rewarding and empowering. It is not a solitary journey but is sustained and nurtured through growth, fostering relationships in one's life.

Learning as a process (rather than an end product) focuses on what happens when the learning takes place. Adult learning theory can be traced to its philosophical roots back to the experiential learning philosophy of John Dewey (1938). Psychologists and philosophers have tried to understand the nature of learning, and what factors determine whether or not learning occurs. A modern psychological approach to language learning is based on Philip Riley's (2003) thought-provoking views which move around the following theories:

(1) Behaviouristic psychology: the learner as a physical organism and language learning as a branch of physiology, extrapolated to human beings from the physical behaviour of rats and rabbits.

(2) Cognitive psychology: the learner as a generalised, abstract model of the learning process rather than a person, as a decontextualised model of information processing common to all learners rather than to anyone learner.

(3) Constructivist, socio-cultural and experiential psychology: the learner as a person consisting of a self with a social identity, seen as a member of a culture and a society. (p.2)

Experiential learning theory varies from cognitive and behavioral theories. Cognitive theories emphasize the role of mental processes while behavioral theories ignore the possible role of subjective experience in the learning process. Kolb's experiential learning theory takes a more holistic approach and emphasizes how experiences, including cognition, environmental factors, and emotions, influence the process of learning.

Experiential learning theory places the experience at the center of the process of learning and is based on the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2002). Hoover and Whitehead (1975) have argued that experiential

learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement (p.25)

Experience based learning is so operative because it helps establish lasting behavioural change. Learners not only understand a new subject or gaining a skill, but they also develop new habits and behaviours. According to Sharifi and Mohammad, experiential learning is that

Any learning that supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding of real-world problems or situations where the instructor directs and facilitates learning. The classroom, laboratory, or studio can serve as a setting for experiential learning through embedded activities such as case and problem-based studies, guided inquiry, simulations, experiments, or art projects. (p.1)

The first conceptual challenge of a language teacher is to ensure that the learners are aware of the difference between 'knowledge' and 'skills'. Knowledge can be acquired by observation and by attending lectures of a teacher or by reading information. The knowledge we gain through all the sources is associated to abstract conceptualization presented in Kolb's learning cycle. However, skills can only be acquired through "learning by doing" which can be connected to active experimentation and concrete experience of Kolb's learning cycle. For example, the following skills such as swimming, drawing, trekking, cooking, singing, dancing, playing any game and typing and so on are skill based. All these can be attained only by practice, not by knowledge alone. These skills cannot be learnt through attending lectures, even if they are being delivered by the world's top experts. In order to become a good swimmer, one has to dive into the water first and learn by trying to swim. No amount of listening to lectures by even Olympic gold medalist or watching videos will help. Only getting into the water and thrashing it about would start the learning process.

Similarly, language skills such as speaking, writing, reading and listening are skills that need to be acquired only by actually trying to speak, trying to write, trying to read and trying to listen. Conventional lecturing would not help much in this regard. Most experts agree that when students take an active role in the learning process the student's learning is optimized (Smart & Csapo, 2007). Kolb defines learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience' (p.41). The experiential learning model is a cyclical process of learning experiences. For effective learning to transpire, the learner must go through the entire cycle. It immerses participants in an active and shared learning environment. Experiential learning creates an invaluable opportunity to make an intimate link between knowledge and experience.

Learners build deep understanding and expertise by cycling through the four steps of the experiential learning cycle proposed by Kolb: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Wurdinger (2005) found that his students absorbed the reading more easily when he introduced some direct experiences first. Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, and solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning. Experiential learning is more motivating to students than traditional lecture methods. Educators may try to force students to learn by threatening them with quizzes and tests, or they might try to 'sugarcoat' a lesson by offering external rewards, but when students are given freedom to design their own experiences, they have a tendency to take more ownership in their learning. Wurdinger avers that in order to help curb apathetic attitudes toward learning, educators should use a learning process that begins with problems and questions to be solved instead of a learning process that begins with information to be remembered" (p.51).

To build the skills of adults who are accustomed to learn through action and experience, Experiential learning is a preferred one. They especially learn by

interacting with peers to acquire new knowledge and skills. The process is designed on these premises, and aims at establishing a friendly space where learners can digest manageable knowledge nuggets, follow their curiosity, and chart their own learning paths. Participants are encouraged to focus on the essential skills, take risks and learn from their mistakes. The experiential-learning environment is meant to be a safe place, where participants are at ease to enjoy their own personal growth process.

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning is based on students being directly involved in a learning experience rather than they are being recipients of ready-made content in the form of lectures. Experiential Learning Theory draws on the works of prominent 20th century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and behavioral change-notably William James (1912), John Dewey (1938), Kurt Lewin (1946), Jean Piaget (1920), Lev Vygotsky (1978), Carl Jung (1933), Paulo Freire (1970), Carl Rogers (1969), and David Kolb (1984) to develop a dynamic, holistic model of the process of learning from experience.

Experiential learning is learning through doing. It is a process through which individuals construct knowledge, acquire skills and values from direct experience. (Association of Experiential Education, 1995). It occurs when individuals engage in some activity, reflect upon the activity critically, derive some useful insight from the analysis and incorporate the result through a change in understanding and/or behaviour. It adds to the interest and involvement of participants, but most importantly, it contributes significantly to the transfer of learning.

Ultimately, these skills, create students who become self-directed, lifelong learners.

List of principles of experiential learning adapted from the leading association on experiential education(www.aee.org) are as follows:

- ❖ Learning occurs when carefully chosen activities are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.

- ❖ The learner is actively engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically.
- ❖ Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learners to others, and learner to the world at large.
- ❖ The primary role includes structuring an intentionally sequenced flow of activities, setting boundaries, supporting learners, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the reflection process.
- ❖ The educator also recognises and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.

Experiential Learning Cycle

The four stages of learning model depict two polar opposite dimensions of grasping experience – concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualization (AC), and two polar opposite dimensions of transforming experience – reflective observation (RO) and active experimentation (AE). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves creative tension among the four learning abilities. The learner must continually choose which set of learning abilities to use in a specific learning situation. The basis of experiential learning is the idea that only doing (experiences) is not enough. It is the reflecting upon the experience and the learning from this experience that can lead to better understanding and/or change. The experiential learning cycle makes this basis clear.

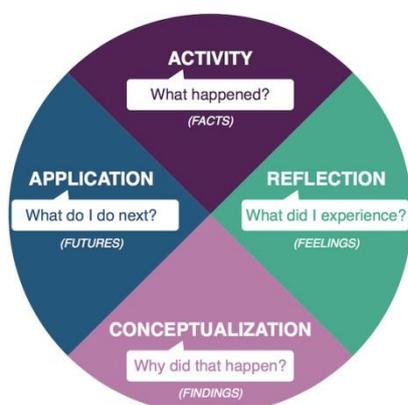


Fig.1 Experience Learning Cycle

Kolb includes this 'cycle of learning' as a central principle in his experiential learning theory, typically expressed as a four-stage cycle of learning, in which 'immediate or concrete experiences' provide a basis for 'observations and reflections'. These 'observations and reflections' are assimilated and distilled into 'abstract concepts' producing new implications for action which can be 'actively tested' in turn creating new experiences (p.38). Further, Henton gives a clear picture of this learning cycle that it can be applied to all activities where students learn through doing. Students need to process content material in order to derive meaning from it and to construct knowledge associated with it. A common approach used to facilitate this is the experiential learning cycle, which "begins with activity, moves through reflection, then to generalizing and abstracting and finally to transfer" (p.96). In a nutshell, it can be illustrated that a typical staged process in experiential learning can be described as follows:

- Experiencing and Exploring: *doing*
- Sharing and Reflecting: *what happened?*
- Processing and Analyzing: *what's important?*
- Generalizing: *so what?*
- Applying: *what works for me?*

The task of the trainer in this learning cycle is to facilitate the participants' learning, to help the participant to go through the different steps of the process. This is called 'processing'. Processing is best viewed as an activity that is structured to encourage participants to plan, reflect, describe, analyse and communicate about experiences and to learn from them. Experiential Learning Teaching (ELT) integrates the works of the foundational experiential learning scholars around six propositions that they all share:

Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. Although punctuated by knowledge milestones, learning does not end at an outcome, nor is it always evidenced in performance. Rather, learning occurs through the course of connected

experiences. As Dewey (1897) suggests, "...education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience: ... the process and goal of education are one and the same thing" (p. 79).

All learning is re-learning. Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the learners' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas. Piaget called this proposition constructivism—individuals construct their knowledge of the world based on their experience.

Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process. In the process of learning one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking.

Learning is a holistic process of adaptation. Learning is not just the result of cognition but involves the integrated functioning of the total person—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. It encompasses other specialized models of adaptation from the scientific method to problems solving, decision making and creativity.

Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment. In Piaget's terms, learning occurs through equilibration of the dialectic processes of assimilating new experiences into existing concepts and accommodating existing concepts to new experience. Following Lewin's famous formula that behavior is a function of the person and the environment, ELT holds that learning is influenced by characteristics of the person and the learning environment.

Learning is the process of creating knowledge. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner. This stands in contrast to the "transmission" model on which much current educational practice is based where pre-existing fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner.

Characteristics of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning can also be defined by the qualities it imparts on its learners. Successful experiential learners have a willingness to record or alter their conception of a topic. They have clarity of purpose with tasks they undertake, and the self-management skills necessary to work successfully both alone and in a group. As Moon asserts that experiential learners are aware of the 'rules' governing their discipline or mode of operation, but are also open-minded, and able to work with people with different views. Finally, experiential learners are in control of their voice that they can identify the role of emotion in their learning, as well as reflecting on how they have come to their new knowledge (p.163).

Active learning approaches, especially experiential and cooperative learning, provide excellent opportunities for differentiation. Indeed, one could argue that all learner-centered strategies, by definition, facilitate differentiation. This approach involves engaging learners in an authentic, first-hand experience that allows them to make discoveries and experiment, construct meaning and develop understanding. It is sometimes referred to more loosely as 'learning by doing' or 'active learning'. Experiential learning is based on a constructivist theory of learning. The learner develops a model of how the world works by relating new knowledge to existing knowledge. The theory explains how mistakes lead to learning. Mistakes arise when we encounter a new experience that does not fit with previous experience. This makes us check and refine our understanding. The result is deep learning, rather than the shallow learning that results when we learn by rote. Experiential learning leads to affective (feeling), as well as cognitive (thinking) learning. It's a powerful approach for developing empathy and changing attitudes.

Conclusion

Experiential learning could be used in English teaching to a large extent. Concerning the application of experiential education methods to TESL, EL can be employed to link knowledge and experience with this educational approach in

teaching English to adult learners. In language diverse classrooms, students should have frequent and multiple opportunities to read, write, listen, and speak in the language content. Lesson activities can be modified more appropriately to meet students' needs and abilities. Modification techniques include increasing or decreasing the language rigor, increasing or decreasing the independence rigor, and/or increasing product options. Experiential learning is not only offering participants, young people, structured experiences but also a reflection upon these experiences in order to learn from them, to link them to their own lives and to experiment with this new knowledge in the following activities and in their daily life.

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