



# Experiential Learning as Active Learning Strategy in ESL Classroom

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 7 April 2015;

Received in revised form:

25 May 2015;

Accepted: 1 June 2015;

### Keywords

Experiential Learning,  
Transformation of experience,  
Learning methods,  
Learning cycle,  
Comprehension.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the effectiveness of experiential learning method in the educational environment. While training is often viewed as a means toward self-awareness and acquisition of knowledge and skills, its overriding goal is change. It is argued that experiential learning activities are critical to the mission of bringing in change in communicative capabilities of learners. It contains five-step model and illustrates how experiential learning activities contribute to each step. Conventional teaching and training are based mainly on knowledge acquisition and skills transfer, but this does not address specific issues related to individual growth. Experiential learning is a powerful way to address individual growth and potential. The present study proved that the use of experiential learning techniques helped students to gain exposure in a stimulating and interactive environment. It also provided students opportunities to talk and listen to each other's responses to questions, and to the teachers.

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## Introduction

Learning from experience is one of the most fundamental and natural means of learning available to everyone. Traditional learning, with the teacher or trainer spouting facts and figures and with pupils or participants regurgitating the information without deeper involvement, is a very ineffective form of learning. A much more effective and long-lasting form of learning is to involve the learner by a creative a meaning learning experience. This paper would enable one to see new ways to unleash some of more potent ingredients of learning through experience. It has much to offer in the search for greater learning efficacy. It is the sense-making process of active engagement between inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment. Experiential learning is the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment. Experience pervades all forms of learning; however its value is frequently not recognized or is even disregarded. Active engagement is one of the basic tenets of experiential learning; experiential learning undoubtedly involves the 'whole person', through thoughts, feelings and physical activity.

### What is Experiential Learning?

Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it. - Kolb (1984, 41). Oxford dictionary describes experience as 'The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition; of being consciously affected by an event; a state or condition viewed subjectively; an event by which one is affected; and knowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone. This definition can provide initial starting point, yet John Dewey (1925:1), who wrote extensively on the subject of experience, and also gave us a well-known library classification system, stated that experience is a weasel word. Its slipperiness is evident in an inconsistency characteristic of many thinkers'. An indication of this slipperiness can be illustrated by looking at our own experience. Take an accident that jointly happened to you and another person, e.g a road accident or

perhaps a memorable event, and describe to the other person what happened in detail. Next, get the person to describe the event as he or she saw it. While many things will be very similar, there will parts that either of you or perhaps both do not remember at all, and there may be interpretation of events that you both see differently. You would both agree that although the event was experienced by both of you, its impact was in many respects different. Form the road accident example above, it is evident no two people experience the same event exactly the same way. Likewise another example of how we experience things differently is illustrated by Dewey (1925:4-5), who stated:

When I look at a chair, I say I experience it. But what I actually experience is only a very few of the elements that go to make up the chair, namely, that colour that belongs to the chair under these particular conditions of light, the shape which the chair displays when viewed from this angle, etc. The man who has the experience, as distinct from a philosopher theorizing about it would probably say that he experienced the chair most fully not when looking at it but when meaning to sit down in it precisely because his experience is not limited to colour under specific conditions of light, and angular shape.

This difficulty in accurately and precisely pinning down the meaning of experience is further complicated by the fact that previous experiences and a consideration of the experience alter the interpretation of the event and therefore, the experience itself. David Nunan (2004) reflects that an important conceptual basis for task-based language teaching is experiential learning. This approach takes the learner's immediate personal experience as the point of departure for the learning experience. The active involvement of the learner is therefore central to the approach, and a rubric that conveniently captures the active, experiential nature of the process is 'learning by doing'. Experiential learning has diverse roots in a range of disciplines from social psychology, humanistic education, developmental education and cognitive theory. David Kolb (1984) argued for integration of action and reflection. In his model, learners move from what they already know and can do to the incorporation of new knowledge and skills. Kohonen (1992:37) Experiential learning

theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning. 'Experiential learning' sounds as if it will be more satisfying, more personalised, more memorable, more significant, more real, more risky and perhaps even more fun.

### Experiential Learning and Learning from Experience

The distinctions drawn in various places between the 'learning from experience' and 'experiential learning' seem to be particularly helpful. Usher and Solomon (1999), for example, see 'learning from experience' as 'taking place in the life world of everyday context'. In contrast, they see 'experiential learning' as 'a key element of a discourse which constructs experience in a particular way, as something from which knowledge can be derived through abstraction and by use of methodological approaches such as observation and reflection' (ibid., p.161). A similar view is expressed by Brah and Hoy (1989).

Experiential learning theory differs from cognitive and behavioral theories in that cognitive theories emphasize the role of mental processes while behavioral theories ignore the possible role of subjective experience in the learning process. The experiential theory proposed by Kolb takes a more holistic approach and emphasizes how experiences, including cognitions, environmental factors, and emotions, influence the learning process.

### Characteristic of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is adaptable for individual style, preferences, strengths, direction, etc. As such it is more likely than conventional prescribed training or teaching to produce positive emotional effects, notably confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of personal value and purpose. People need learning which is adaptable for them as individuals, and also the traditional prescriptive teaching and training focused on external needs, typically of the organisation, or to pass exams or gain qualifications. Experiential learning, especially used at the beginning of a person's new phase of learning, can help to provide a positive emotional platform which will respond positively and confidently to future learning, even for areas of learning which initially would have been considered uncomfortable or unnecessary.

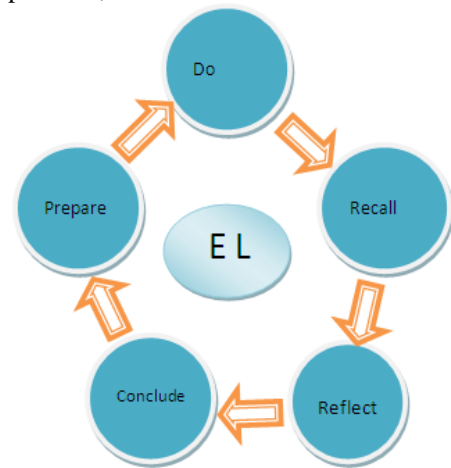
Experiences also need to be processed consciously by reflecting on them. The learning model outlined by the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) contains two distinct modes of gaining experience that are related to each other on a continuum: concrete experience (apprehension) and abstract conceptualization (comprehension). In addition, there are also two distinct modes of transforming the experience so that learning is achieved: reflective observation (intension) and active experimentation (extension) (Baker, Jensen, Kolb, 2002). When these four modes are viewed together, they constitute a four-stage learning cycle that learners go through during the experiential learning process. The learners begin with a concrete experience, which then leads them to observe and reflect on their experience. After this period of reflective observation, the learners then piece their thoughts together to create abstract concepts about what occurred, which will serve as guides for future actions. With these guides in place, the learners actively test what they have constructed leading to new experiences and the renewing of the learning cycle (Baker, Jensen, Kolb, 2002).

### Experiential Learning Cycle

The process of learning often involves five steps:

1. Doing something;
2. Recalling what happened;
3. Reflecting on that;

4. Drawing conclusions from the reflection;
5. Using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience;



**Figure 1. Experiential Learning Cycle**

Again, it is important to distinguish between learning and teaching. Information, feedback, guidance and support from other people may come in at any of the five steps of the cycle. In the Handbook of Experiential Learning and Management Education, Hornyak, Green, and Heppard (2007) assert that people learn best from direct experience coupled with guided reflection and analysis. Citing the work of Kolb (1984) and Fenwick (2001), they make the point that experiences alone are not sufficient for learning to take place. Experience must be followed by reflective thought and an internal processing that links the experience with previous learning, transforming the learner's previous understanding in some manner. Learning, therefore, takes place within a cycle that includes action, reflection, and application. Such cycles are common to many experiential learning models involving real-world experiences. For example, Kember (2000), in his book, Action Learning and Action Research, refers to a learning cycle involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The essence of effective experiential learning is that the entire process is centred on the learner - not the task, not the organisational objective, not the qualification standard, not the group, and certainly not the trainer's or the teacher's personal opinions. In this respect the underpinning philosophy of well executed experiential learning has much in common with the principles of good modern life coaching, and also interestingly in facilitative decision-making methodology, both of which place the other person at the centre of the issue, not the coach, seller, or organisation.

A learning activity is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The purpose of an experiential learning activity is to create an opportunity for valuable and memorable personal learning. The ideal activity will engage, stimulate and challenge with individuals becoming absorbed in the task as them. They are provided various questions, questionnaires, simulations, and case examples from which to draw on their own beliefs and experiences to stimulate class or small-group interactions.

### Conclusion

Experiential learning, or active learning, interactive learning, or "learning by doing" has resulted in positive outcomes. Most experts agree that when students take an active role in the learning process the student's learning is optimized (Smart & Csapo, 2007). Experiential Learning Theory outlines the manners in which learners gain knowledge and understand through experiences. One size does not fit all. Properly

organized and facilitated experiential learning, along with other similar approaches to developing people as individuals, can help enormously in attaining a much more useful balance in the ways we teach, train, develop and attempt to give to people the skills and emotional well-being we all need for a happy productive life. Through experience, learners are able to construct a sense of understanding of the events going on around them. Educators have begun to harness the power of experience in study abroad courses, field studies, role plays, and numerous computer-based interventions. The future learning could bring active learning and unending even more applications of this theory a possibility as exciting for the learner as much as it is the facilitator.

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