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# Experiential Learning Methods for imparting language skills to tertiary level students

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## ABSTRACT

Experiential learning method (ELM) is more strategic and easy to implement activities for language learning. When experience is made the nucleus of the learning process, learning takes place automatically. It is also possible to make ELM a guiding star to show the destination of communication. Successful learning of language skills occurs through the process of experiential learning cycle. This method allows the learning transformation to take place within the learner without much enforcement from the teachers and allows the learners to naturally overcome the inhibition and actively participate in doing activities. This method also permits learner independency and getting familiarized with the learning methods. The learner's personal experience becomes the point of initiation for learning experience. Familiarity of the context and the content chosen for the classroom activities, enable the learners to involve fully which, in turn, allows the learning possible. The present experiment was done with a group of 30 students from the second year under graduate course of an arts and science college situated in Thrissur, Kerala state.

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## Introduction

### New Age Learners

Students of the new era would like to learn language in their own way and their expectations are varied, focusing mainly on 'language for specific purposes'. Language Teaching, especially second language teaching approach has changed drastically from grammar teaching and vocabulary memorizing to communicative language teaching. Learner has become the centre point of the new era language teaching. Belief that learning as a process of habit formation is outdated. Learners and the learning processes they use are important for communicative language teaching activists. Since language is a part of the social behaviour, learning language as a social process is highlighted. Learning content of the previous era has given way to how they acquire information, though form and content are equally important. A child learns his language in his desperation to express himself. Communicative compulsion creates a ceaseless longing within a child to learn his language through 'trial and error method'. The same environment is supposed to be created for learning a second language. A child, while learning his language, is undisturbed by the environment. But an adult or an adolescent is very conscious of the environment. Due to that he goes through a lot of mental inhibitions. Dictionary gives meaning for the term 'inhibition'. One of the very common factors which makes a learner mentally inhibited in the classroom is being conscious of the audience and the fear of exposing oneself ineffective.

### Advancement in Language Teaching

Community language teaching is considered as a method where same methodology and similar teaching techniques are used. In fact communicative language teaching has become a main branch or major approach which has several subsidiaries and thus communicative language teaching is a cluster of

various learner centric approaches. Even though many such approaches have more dissimilarities than similarities, they all are clubbed into the communicative language teaching family. In addition to task-based language teaching, other teaching approaches "reside within the communicative language teaching family which includes content-based instruction (Brinton 2003), text-based syllabuses (Feez 1998), problem-based learning and immersion education (Johnson and Swain 1997)." (David Nunan, 2007, p. 10)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has its foundation in communicative language teaching. Change of times, advent of new opportunities and needs of learners who belong to different nationalities, continents, cultures and occupations, made it necessary to adopt a new second language learning methodology, which was found easily in communicative language teaching or communicative language teaching family or approaches. The new learner need not or did not want to learn the entire grammar or vocabulary. He wanted vocabulary for his occupation and grammar necessary for his communication purposes – personal and professional. English for Special Purposes can be a natural extension of communicative language teaching and emergence of the new needs of learners made it necessary to develop a new curriculum and design new teaching materials. Savignon (1993) writes that "Functions were based on assessment of learner needs and specified the end result, the product of an instructional program. The term 'communicative' has been used to describe programs which used functional-notional syllabus based on needs assessment, and thus Language for specific Purposes (LSP) movement was launched." (p. 37)

The emergency of communicative language teaching and later ESP/LSP made some ambiguity in the syllabus designing. Breech suggested that language learning process and language

product should be considered together as an indistinguishable element to avoid this confusion. Breen (1984) suggests that the 'designer would give priority to the changing process of learning and the potential of the classroom to the psychological and social resources applied to a new language by learners in the classroom context... as greater capacity for communication, with the activity of learning a language viewed as important as language itself, and with a focus upon means rather than predetermined objectives, all indicate priority of process over content.' (p. 52-53) In Breen's opinion learners want to communicate in the target language using communication as a learning methodology. Thus end and means dissolve to a single entity.

Latest development in communicative language teaching favours both grammar and form. Without giving over-importance, grammar and form can be integrated to communicative language teaching approach. Incorporating grammar is necessary because it is a resource in making meaningful structure. Littlewood talks of a strong and weak communicative language teaching. Strong interpretation disregard form while weak interpretation welcomes form to the communicative language teaching methodology. According to Littlewood (1981) the following skills need to be considered:

- The learner must distinguish between the forms he has mastered as part of his linguistic competence, and the communicative functions which they perform. In other words, items mastered as part of the linguistic system must also be understood as part of communicate system.
- The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meaning as effectively as possible in concrete situations. He must learn to use feedbacks to judge his success and, if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.
- The learner must become aware of the social meaning of language forms. For many years, this may not bet entail the ability to vary their own speed to suit different social circumstances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable form and avoid potentially offensive ones." (p. 6)

The emergence and development of communicative language teaching revolve mainly around methodology and syllabus design. It also brought in the concept of task to the centre stage within the curriculum. Regarding the relationship between communicative language teaching and 'task' David Nunan (2007: 10) says, "...communicative language teaching is a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on theory and research in linguistics, anthropology, psychology and sociology...Task-based language teaching represents a realization of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology." (p.10)

### **Experiential Learning**

Experience is transformed into or used to acquire knowledge. This is done instead of the conventional teachers passing knowledge to their students. Experiential learning is a conceptual basis for task-based language teaching. Learning experience is used as a language learning content. By reliving that experience orally and/or writing their learning intensely. These experiences can be artificially created by asking or allowing them to do different tasks which in turn will promote language learning. 'Learning by doing' is the central idea and the learner's active participation is a must and it is very much possible if the teacher provides them with interesting tasks, which is related to the everyday life, culture, etc. David Kolb

(1984) believes that experiential learning has its roots in subjects like social psychology, humanistic education, developmental education and cognitive theory. Learners make use of what they already know and can do to acquire new knowledge and do new skills. Learners "do this by making sense of some immediate experience, and going beyond the immediate experience through a process of reflection and transformation." (Nunan, 2007: 12)

Another theorist of experiential learning Kohonen provides the following maxims for action for experiential learning.

- Encourage the transformation of knowledge within the learner rather than transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the learner.
- Encourage learners to participate actively in small, collaborative groups.
- Embrace a holistic attitude towards subject matter rather than a static, atomistic and hierarchical attitude.
- Emphasize process rather than products, learning how to learn, self-enquiring, social and communication skills.
- Encourage self-directed rather than teacher-directed learning.
- Promote intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation." (quoted in TBLT, Nunan, 2007: p.12)

Kohonen (1992: 37) believes that basic philosophical view is that any learning is a part of personal growth. Experiential learning is based on, this maxim, learning a new language is learner's prerogative and responsibility. Experiential language learning enhances learner's ability for self-direction. The learner brings in his/her own personal experiences and thereby adds to the content and learning process instead of waiting for the teacher to do it. All this prove that experiential learning is ideally learner-centred and the learner sidelines the teacher and becomes an independent and self-directed person.

### **Task-Based Language Learning**

Long (1985:89) defines task any job undertaken by somebody for himself or other people. It can be buying a ticket, reserving a seat in the theatre and similar other jobs anybody does in his or her everyday life, personally or professionally. Richards (1986: 289) defines a pedagogical task as a performance done as a result of 'processing or understanding language'. Watching a play and later enacting it is an example of a pedagogical task. Practicing or doing a good variety of tasks will enhance the language learning and can be considered as the successful task completion. It also will increase the communication skill of the student. Language is practised for learning communication and not for the sake of the language. Breen (1987:23) defines pedagogical task as any language learning attempt which has a definite aim, suitable content and a planned procedure. Doing the task should enhance language learning. Tasks can be done individually, in pair or as a group activity.

Skehan (1998) considers meaning as the basic of a task. Learners have to invent, find out or guess meaning and he can't take other people's meaning. The tasks which are given to the learning should be similar to the real life incidents. Prominence should be given to the successful completion of the task. Task evaluation is done on the basis of outcome.

Ellis (2003:16) wants a task to be like a real work activity, and it can involve in productive, oral and written skills like any other language learning process.

David Nunan (2007: 4) defines a task as a classroom work, which helps students to understand, manipulate and communicate in the target language. Students should acquire grammatical knowledge, while involving in a task. For meaning

expression., conveying meaning is preferred to manipulation. A task should be complete, independent and should have 'a beginning, middle and an end'. As said earlier, grammar is used to express meaning and form is intended to meaning.

#### A Task Framework

A task used in the task based language teaching is similar to or identical any activity which a person do in his or her routine life. Halliday (1985) divides these which are real world tasks, into three general activities. He calls them three 'macro functions of language. People use language to buy or sell or exchange goods and do and get service and this is transactional or service macro function. We as social human beings use language to interact with other and this is known as the interpersonal or social macro functions. We use language to write or read, i.e., for enjoyment and entertainment and this, Halliday, calls the aesthetic macro function of language.

Day to day activities or real-world tasks are brought into the classroom for learning purpose and they are presented as pedagogical task. Tasks are planned and implemented in the classroom not for repeating what they do outside but to use as a learning method. In the beginning they will reproduce with or without changes, but later this will make them capable to create language expression selecting from the texts and other material they have developed for doing the tasks. David Nunan says, "...Language classrooms are unnatural by design, and that they exist precisely to provide for learners the kinds of practice opportunities that do not exist outside the class room." (2007: 22)

#### Experiment

Kolb's learning cycle was used as a main theoretical framework for the study. The framework for the Activity Based Language Teaching (ABLT) method advocated by David Nunan was used for framing the tasks. Certain tasks are based on David Nunan's activity design. The activities used for the research are given below:

The Researcher conducted a pre-task test to assess the level of students and also made an assessment at the end of the test to compare the scores. All the tasks were administered to the same

set of students in 60 sessions of 50 minutes each. Approximately 5 hours were allotted for each activity. Teacher as Guide helped the students to learn the language skills using their own experience for the learning process. The Researcher made sure that the learners could go through the experience, reflection and transformation process systematically and had enough rehearsal. This process made sure that the learning took place. A feedback questionnaire was administered at the end of each activity to know about the experience of the learners. The Researcher also followed carefully the activities and made note of the number of the learners approaching him for various kinds of support for doing the activities. The study was complete in every aspect as it considered the student performance, student feedback and teacher observation. The scores were compared and assessed statistically using paired sample t-test with the help of an expert in SPSS.

30 students who did their schooling in regional-medium schools and living in very rural background were chosen for the research. All the respondents were from Thrissur and its vicinity. Parents and the close relatives of these respondents were not educated. The researcher also made it certain that the respondents studied English as one of the subjects. The students who had severe communication problem in English language and a little knowledge of English grammar structure were chosen. It was felt that these respondents were more suitable for the application of experiential learning method.

ELM was applied for the learning process and related activities were introduced for specific sessions. The learning was monitored all through by using different assessing strategies, viz., test, questionnaire and observation. Various assessment tests were conducted viz., test at the beginning of the research, test at the end of all the sessions, tests both at the beginning and end of each task and a test at the end of fifth task. All the scores were compared, analyzed and tabulated to find out the effectiveness of ELM for acquiring language skills. A questionnaire was also administered to get the feedback of the students while the researcher himself used a strategy to observe the students behavior in the learning sessions.

S. No.	Title of Activity / Task	Macrofunctions	Microfunctions	Grammar / Language skills
1	Introduction	Telling about oneself and others in the group	Introduce oneself and others	Use of simple present tense / simple past
2	Pronunciation	Speak out different words, short expression and conversations	Using phonetic transcription	Vowels / Consonants
3	Interaction for travel	Discuss the pros and cons of carrying certain goods	Ask and answer	Why / How / What questions
4	Story line	Weave a story using an idea with beginning, middle and end	Each one coming up with a sentence for the story	Sentence connectors / Coherence
5	Motion picture	Observing a movie without audio	Observing the dialogue and the activity	Vocabulary
6	Event narration	Narrative an event	Presenting one's daily activity in a chronological order	Past tense Present tense Discourse markers
7	Develop a thought	Developing a paragraph using the topic of their own choice	Elaborating a topic with proper beginning, explanation and end	Vocabulary Coherence & cohesion
8	Localized description	Describing a festival	Telling about one's own festival	Adjective Contextual words
9	Marketing strategy	Selling a product	Asking, explaining and discussion information related to a product	All wh-questions and how question Persuasive language
10	Transcoding	Describe a picture	Giving details of what one's see and interpret them	Vocabulary Comparative and superlative

## Conclusion

Through frequency analysis it was found that there was a positive impact of ELM. Out of 30 respondents 29 were either average or poor as per the assessment of the pre task, whereas in the post task none was poor. In writing also there was a positive difference between pre task and post task. In the pre task around 27 respondents were either poor or average. In the post task all the learners showed improvement. More than 90% of the respondents considered that they could involve themselves in doing the tasks. More than 80% of the respondents approached the researcher with no inhibition. Experiential Learning Method proved to be more fruitful when it was adopted for imparting language skills to rural students who enrolled for higher studies after doing their schooling in regional medium. The ELM in language classroom would help the L<sub>2</sub> adult learners and the same technique could be adopted to any level of students for improvement in communication skills.

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