

A Review of Experiential Learning in English Teaching

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Received: 26 May 2021; **Accepted:** 21 June 2021; **Published:** 26 July 2021

Abstract:

This paper systematically reviews the experiential learning in English Teaching. The article analyzes the experiential learning activities like games, role-plays, simulations and field-trips to expound how experiential learning is combined with English teaching, and its effect on English teaching, pointing out the achievements and limitations of current research, hoping to help future scholars in this field.

Keywords:

Experiential Learning, Experiential Learning Activities, English Teaching, Literature Review

1. Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a prominent modern educational theory in the 20th century, which is associated with the names of leading educators such as David Kolb, John Dewey, William James, Lewin, and Piaget. Experiential learning has been playing an important role in progressive education, considered as the trend and cornerstone of education in the 21st century [13].

Experiential learning is a process that enables students to learn through ‘doing’, ‘learning while experiencing’, and learning through ‘hands on practice’ and ‘reflection’ [14]. In experiential learning, learners participate “in concrete activities that enable them to ‘experience’ what they are learning about” and the “opportunity to reflect on those activities” [26], since “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” [14]. Kolb put forward the experiential learning model, which is called “experiential learning cycle”, that is “concrete experience---reflective observation---abstract conceptualization---active experiment”. For effective learning to transpire, the learner must go through the entire cycle. The experiential learning model depicts that in this cycle, concrete experience is the basis of reflective observation, and what is observed is assimilated into the newly arising cognition or theory. Then, these perceptions or assumptions will guide future actions and produce new experiences. Kolb’s model suggested that learning is individual and that Kolb believed that experiential learning is a continuous process whereby the learner will bring individual learning needs and experiences to their learning environment and learning communities [14]. Also in Knutson’s perspective

[17], experiential learning as a philosophy is based on the ideals of active and reflective learning, building on previous learning experiences and requiring the personal involvement of the learner.

Kolb's cycle of experiential learning supports creative learning, and suggests that as students are encouraged to plan, do, and reflect on their own learning, this ultimately leads to reflective practice [14]. The traditional instruction forms a situation where teachers are one-way indoctrinated and pay much attention to the content of books, while students just passively absorb knowledge. However, in experiential learning, students are no longer the passive learners, instead they become the active participants [11]. The philosophy of experiential learning fosters the educational, personal, and professional growth. It is learner-driven and therefore student-centred. Also, the concept of experiential learning in foreign language puts the experience of students and teachers at the core, allowing students to create new knowledge in the process of experience and cultivate their language ability [28]. Experiential learning has the potential to promote students' abilities of meta-cognition and self-direction, as well as to enhance their learning attitudes [16].

2. Experiential Learning Activities in English Teaching

Teaching not only involves forming knowledge for students, but more importantly, it involves how to teach students to apply knowledge to practice. The real problem with traditional teaching is that it is normally low on students' activity, the students are passive learners [4]. But according to Burke [5], active participation is key to a successful learning environment in the world language classroom. Experiential language teaching pedagogies emphasize the importance of the learner's own experiences as the "fuel" for learning and the reflective practices that organize and give meaning to the experiences in relation to learning [17]. In order to effectively implement experiential learning in English teaching, it is important to select and plan activities that are clear, relevant to learning outcomes, and include student reflection related to the activities.

Cooper, Bottomley, and Gordon [8] stated that experiential learning activities provide students with the opportunity to understand and strengthen their learning and application of classroom knowledge. However, when conducting experiential learning activities, one of the important issues identified is how do instructors devise effective experiential learning activities to make students engage with experiential learning in a deeper manner and what the teacher's role should be in trying to make this happen [22]. The following four experiential learning activities as games, role-plays, simulations and field-trips will further explain the role of experiential learning in English teaching and its effect, and how to implement experiential learning in class activities.

2.1. Games

Games generally meets the basic requirements of learning environments and can provide an engaging environment for learning. Traditionally, games are equivalent to entertainment. However, the games designed in the classroom is not just for having fun, more importantly they can enhance students' motivation and make them more willing to engage in leaning in class [10,18]. Łodzikowski and Jekiel [18] conducted an experiment to examine the usefulness of print board games for learning about English prosody of advanced EFL learners. They developed three in-class print-and-

play board games that accompanied three prosody-related topics in a course in English phonetics and phonology at a Polish university. The participants were 29 Polish first-year students of English Studies at the Faculty of English (25 females and 4 males and their average age was around 20 years old). Finally through post-class quizzes and a course evaluation survey, they found that playing board games during classes that discuss prosody will be associated with increased learners' in-class engagement and post-class assessment performance, also learners reported that board games can be a fun alternative to the more typically used in-class worksheets.

In addition, games can reduce learners' anxiety about speaking English, thus improving their speaking competence [10]. A study was carried by Hung in which the participants were 48 Taiwanese university sophomores (most of them were intermediate-level learners) who were learning English as a foreign language, and were enrolled in a language course called 'English Listening and Speaking Practice'. Participants were randomly divided into experimental group (game-based classroom) and control group (conventional classroom), and there is no significant difference in English level between the two groups. After the experiment, the author conducted questionnaire surveys and interviews to conclude that the gamified flipped classroom is beneficial for EFL learners as it reduces their anxiety about speaking English in class and enhances their motivation to take part in classroom activities [10].

Games are used as methods or techniques to involve students in learning. Well-chosen and designed games are invaluable as they give students a break and at the same time allow learners to practice language skills [1]. However, in the process of implementing the games, teachers should pay attention to avoid this phenomenon that students are immersed in the entertainment of games and neglect learning. At the same time, teachers should consider how to design games better in limited time and space.

2.2. Role-plays

Role play is a method of acting out particular ways of interacting with others in imaginary situations. One problem in English classes is how to provide learners with opportunities for meaningful practice because traditional activities can not arouse students' passion for learning. However, role-play, a typical classroom activity in experiential learning, is an effective means of language learning as it can increase students' enthusiasm, self-confidence, and encourage critical thinking [9]. It can also create a good experiential environment to improve students' sense of cooperation and test their comprehensive ability [27].

The use of role-play activities encourages students to master and enrich vocabulary learning through conversational activities [19,24]. Sadeghi and Sharifi [24] conducted an experiment to investigate the effect of four post-teaching activities, namely game, narrative writing, role-play, and speaking tasks on vocabulary gain of 111 elementary Iranian EFL learners across gender. The results of the experiment showed that exposure to certain vocabulary items through role-play activities results in better learning compared to other activities, and female learners outperformed their male peers.

Also through role-play, learners practice in the second language which stimulates authentic learner-to-learner conversational interaction and fosters their communicative and speaking competence [2,12,23]. Aliakbari and Jamalvandi [2] randomly selected 60 EFL sophomores in different universities in Ilam to test whether role-play makes

any considerable change in the participants' speaking ability in the experimental group (role-play cards were provided) compared with that of the control group (materials provided based on traditional methods of language teaching). The findings of the study made it certain that role-play, as underlined and recommended by many experts in the field, was practically shown to be an effective and fruitful activity for enhancing EFL students' oral ability. A similar conclusion was found in Islam and slam's study [12]. They investigated 120 students of Department of English of Stamford University Bangladesh to find out if there is any positive impact of role play on the students. And they found that after a series of role play, the students showed remarkable improvement in their speaking ability and they were also found to be quite fluent.

The topics and forms of role-plays are very important, they should not only play a teaching role, but also to arouse students' interest to engage the activity. How to enable every student to participate as much as possible when the number of students is relatively large is a question worth considering for teachers.

2.3. Simulations

Simulation can be defined as the act of initiating the behavior of some situation or some process by means of something suitably analogous [3]. The basic aim of a simulation is to attempt to represent part of the 'real world' so that participants can gain experience. Its main use in the EFL classroom will be to recreate social situations in which students are encouraged to use language spontaneously and leads to more engaging interaction by learners of all ages [6].

Simulation encourages active participation of all learners and develops their speaking skills [3,7,29]. Zhang [29] applied experiential learning to "Learning to Speak: An English Video Course". Each class, she let the students to perform prepared role-play to the classmates with 20 minutes. She found that in the process of role-playing, students are active and dependent learners, they engage in class more actively, and their listening and speaking ability also developed. Similarly, in Ayudhya's experiment [3], she chose 100 Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat English major students and divided them into 2 groups based on their English communicative proficiency, and finally left 80 students (high English proficiency group and low English proficiency group). Comparing with the scores in the pre- and post-communicative proficiency test, she drew the conclusion that through simulation, the speaking ability of high and low English proficiency students are all improved, but low English proficiency students improved more. A similar conclusion was reached in a study with 36 second year EFL students aged 20-21 at University of Constantine 1 [7]. After analysing the pre- and post-test results, the findings revealed that simulation has successfully improved the EFL learners' speaking and listening proficiency. The advantages of simulation is not only for developing speaking competency, but also for listening competence as shown by Chergui [7].

In addition to fostering speaking and listening abilities, some scholars believe that simulation can increase the writing competency of ESL composition [25]. A study was conducted at the University of Central Oklahoma by Spelman [25]. 50 students were divided into two groups: control group (explicit grammar instruction on usage) and experimental group (learn in simulations without explicit grammar instruction) to exam the effectiveness of simulations in ESL writing instruction. Through the analysis of tests, writing samples and surveys, the author concluded that the students

in the control group did no better than those students in experimental group, and that students taught with simulations developed better writing competency than those taught with the traditional method.

In order to get the best practice of using simulation in the classroom, teachers should prepare it well so that it can fit students well.

2.4. Field-trips

Field-trip is an educational activity in which school group leaves the classroom and goes out into the community with the aim of giving students first hand information and experiences. Since the larger community is new and unfamiliar to students, field trips to selected sites allow them to explore their environs [20].

Conducting field-trips can enable students to have the opportunity to interact with native speakers, thus developing their communicative skills [21]. Montgomery & Eisenstein [21] conducted an experiment to evaluate the success of an experimental oral communication course (OCC) offered at Passaic County Community College in Paterson. The OCC was designed around weekly, structured field trips, and each field trip unit consisted of three related classes. Participants were divided into two groups: one is taking both OCC and ESL course; the other is taking only ESL course. Finally through tests and interviews, the author concluded that OCC conducted through field-trips indeed increase students' language skills as speaking skills.

Although field-trips have a positive effect on fostering learners' motivation and language skills, the rising costs and teachers' need of more time and patience are also problems that need to be faced when organizing field-trips.

3. Conclusions

The analysis of the above four aspects of experiential learning points out the research achievements and limitations, as well as the implications for future study in the current researches. We can see that experiential learning does play an effective role in English teaching. When conducting experiential learning in class, teachers organize various activities to fully motivate the students to engage in learning, thus improving their language skills and proficiency. Since experiential learning emphasizes learner-centeredness, students with different learning styles may have different performances in experiential learning, and teachers should have a clear understanding of this [15], and if students are not achieving deeper outcomes from experiential learning, the instructors may need to re-think and re-design their activities to fit every student as much as possible, and to further stress critical thinking.

Most of the scholars combined experiential learning with vocabulary acquisition, listening and speaking skills. Therefore, when conducting researches in the future, we should think more about how to apply experiential learning to other language skills, and how to conduct experiential learning for students with different proficiency of English to improve their engagement and motivation in class activities, thus improve their overall language proficiency.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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