

Experiential Learning: Transcendence in the Trends of Teaching English

UDAY Y

(Research Scholar, Department of Education, Regional Institute of Education (RIE) Mysore)

(Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Amrita Vishwavidyapeetham, Mysuru Campus)

Abstract:

Experience is something that we acquire in the course of life which leads to reconciliation of the internal and the external reality and hence that enriches our lives. Experience never and ever does not only mean that one learns. Experience results from one's reflection. Experience is not merely what happens to us. More importantly, it is what we do with what happens to us. Experience is undoubtedly not passive but active and it brings a certain change to our personality. Knowledge results from one's active taking part in changing reality. With due respect to this thought of experiential learning, it could be quoted as "education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life". It clearly means that learning takes place through one's reflecting upon one's own everyday experience, which is the predominant way that most of us do our learning either consciously or unconsciously. There must be a reflection on the experience followed by an understanding of what the new learning means to the individual and a conceptualization of how it can be used in the future. Hence, this paper provides insights on the emergence the concept of Experiential learning, Definition, Rational, Experiential learning theory, cycle, and style, the theory's educational implications in general and in terms of teaching English in particular followed by its advantages and the contexts of it's usages.

Key words: Experience, Experiential Learning, Experiential Theory and Cycle, Teaching of English

1. Introduction:

In general, experiences are the perceptions or impressions which are seen by many people as something positive, impressive and unusual besides the fact that they are subjective to discussions and consideration. Experience is something that we acquire in the course of life which leads to reconciliation of the internal and the external reality and hence that enriches our lives (Kujalova, p.4). Experience never and ever does not only mean that one learns. Experience results from one's reflection. Huxley stated that experience is not merely what happens to us. More importantly, it is what we do with what happens to us (as cited in Neill, 2004, p.1). Experience is undoubtedly not passive but active and it brings a certain change to our personality. Knowledge results from one's active taking part in changing reality. (Kujalova, p.4) With due respect to the definition of experiential learning, Houle puts it as "education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life" (as cited in Smith, 1996, p.1). It clearly means that learning takes place through one's reflecting upon one's own everyday experience, which is the predominant way that most of us do our learning either consciously or unconsciously. There must be a reflection on the experience followed by an understanding of what the new learning means to the individual and a conceptualization of how it can be used in the future.

Experiential learning emphasizes students' experience as the central role for the learning process. Learning through experience is also associated with learning through action, learning by doing, and learning through discovery and exploration. As a philosophy and methodology, experiential learning fosters educators to "purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values." (Association for Experiential Education, para. 2)

The theory of experiential learning provides a holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development which refers to how they learn, grow, and develop. There are some reasons of why it is called "Experiential Learning". Firstly, the term "experiential" is used to distinguish experiential learning from cognitive learning theories, which tend to emphasize cognition over affect, and behavioral learning theories that deny any role for subjective experience in the learning process. Secondly, its intellectual origin is derived from the experiential works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. Weaving together, Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, Lewin's Social psychology, and Piaget's cognitive developmental genetic epistemology form a unique perspective on learning and development. (Kolb, 1984).

2. Rationale:

The creation or recreation of knowledge requires an experiential base, language abilities, and interaction with other humans and the natural world. (p.33) Emphasis should be given to learning rather than teaching, and the approach should be participatory, interactive, and experiential rather than instructive. (p.55) All interventions, including even health and hygiene education, must rely on the practical and experiential dimensions of children's lives. (p.58) Self-reflection needs to be acknowledged as a vital component of any educational programme. A training policy needs to be worked out, defining parameters such as the periodicity, context and methodology of programmes.(p.112) In this sense, the experiential base can be further developed through more evolved forms of work in the school, including social engagement. This pedagogy is expected to facilitate a child-friendly route to disciplinary knowledge, development of values primarily drawn from the Constitution and related to social transformation, and the formation of multiple skills that are relevant for facing the complex challenges of a globalised economy. It is this educational process that calls for the application of critical pedagogy for linking the experience of productive and other forms of work with global knowledge. (p.116)

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) had brought up major shift in understanding the impact of the social context in educative processes. This would straight away lead one's attention to render the due importance for experience in one's learning or even teaching. Those major shifts are:

- a) From teacher centric, stable designs to the learner centric, flexible process
- b) Teacher direction and decisions to Learner autonomy
- c) Teacher guidance and monitoring to the facilitator, supporter and encourager in one's learning

- d) Passive reception in learning to the active participation in learning
- e) Learning within the four walls of the classroom to learning in the wider social context
- f) Knowledge as given and fixed to knowledge as it evolves and is created
- g) Disciplinary focus to multidisciplinary focus and educational focus,
- h) From linear exposure to multiple and divergent exposure,
- i) From appraisal, short, few to multifarious and continuous.

3. Definition:

Understanding how people learn is something that has both propelled and detained education scholarship at the same time. For decades, educational psychologists have studied the learning process. They concluded that learning is equated to a change in behavior. Beyond this important conviction, very little consensus about what characterizes the learning process exists and there is no common understanding. (Hansen, 2000) Through the literature it is ascertained that there are various terms that have been used to label the process of learning from experience. For instance, John Dewey (Dewey and Dewey 1915) had discussed the experiential learning styles as “learning by doing,” while Wolfe and Byrne (1975) used the term “experienced-based learning” to denote the same. The term “trial and error” learning is used to explain inductive learning processes. The AACSB Task Force (1986) used the term “applied experiential learning,” combining the learning from the “real-world” situation with the necessary condition of the application of concepts, ideas and theories to the interactive setting. Experiential learning theory is a dynamic view of learning (Passarelli and Kolb, 2011). The term “experiential learning” in the discussion will be used here on, but it is intended to cover the same domains as the other terms. (Gentry, 1990)

Experiential learning has a different view on a learning process than on most of the traditional methodological theories which have its focus on ratio or on the empirical knowledge. Having “experience” at its center determines the main difference from the more traditional methods. (Thihuonglan, Huyen, Huong, 2007). Experiential learning is a very wide subject with either clear or unclear boundaries. Writers tend to use the term in two different if not contrasting ways: On the one hand it is used to describe the sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting. This sort of learning is sponsored by an institution. On the other hand it is used to describe the learning that is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience and is the way the most of us do our learning. It is not sponsored by some formal educational institutions but by people themselves. (Brookfield, S. 1983:16 quoted in Smith 2005) (Kujalová, 2005).

According to V.D. Bhatt through his work “Experiential Learning – A Handout for Teacher Educators” asserts that experiential learning is not just ‘field work’ or ‘praxis’, which mean connecting of learning to real life situation. On the contrary, it is a theory that defines the cognitive processes of learning and it asserts the importance of critical reflection in learning.

4. Experiential Learning Theory:

David A. Kolb had given a theory through his published learning style model in 1984. From it he developed his learning style inventory. He labeled it as 'Kolb's experiential learning theory'. In order to do this, he imbibed the inspiration from the work of a gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin of Berlin. Kolb's experiential learning theory is shortly denoted as 'ELT'. This theory proposes a method in order to measure the commensurability, which connotes that a person's skills and job requirements can be assessed in same language. It has a holistic perspective which includes experience, perception, cognition and behavior. It works on two levels: a four-stage cycle of learning and four separate learning styles. Kolb's theory is mostly concerned with the internal cognitive processes of the learner. Kolb states that learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied flexibly in a range of situations. The Kolb's theory asserts that the impetus for the development of new concepts is provided by one's new experiences encountered in the world. Hence it is also said as, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

5. The Experiential Learning Cycle: Kolb's experiential learning style theory is typically represented by a four stage learning cycle in which the learner 'touches all the bases':

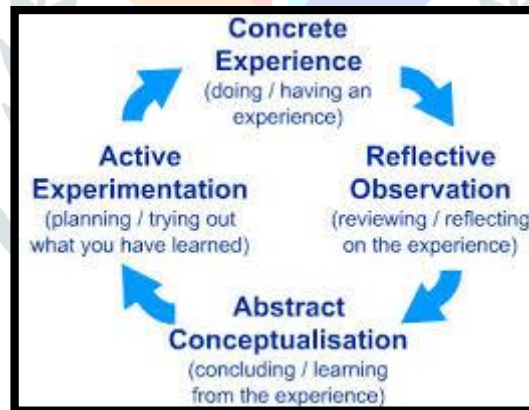


Figure. 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

6. The Four Stage Cycle of Learning:

The learning cycle basically involves four stages namely: concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Effective learning can be seen when the learner progresses through the cycle of these four phases provided that the learner can also enter the cycle at any stage of the cycle with logical sequence. Concrete learning is the first stage, in which a child or a learner encounters a new experience or else the reinterpretation of existing experience takes place. Reflective observation is the second

stage in which one reflects on the experience on a personal basis. Abstract conceptualization is the third stage in which new ideas are formed based on the reflection or could be a constituent of modifications of the existing abstract ideas. Active experimentation is the last stage in which a learner will apply the ideas to his surroundings to see if there are any modifications in the next appearance of the experience. All these put together will lead to the next concrete experience and this either could happen over a short duration or even long duration of time.

7. Kolb's learning style: Kolb's learning style is explained on the basis of two dimensions: they are how a person understands and processes the information. This perceived information is then classified as concrete experience or abstract conceptualization, and processed information as active experimentation or reflective observation.

Diverging: Individuals who possess this kind of learning style look at things in a different perspective. They prefer watching than doing, also they have strong imagination capacity, emotional, strong in arts, prefer to work in groups, open minded to take feedback and they have broad interests in different cultures and people. The learning characteristic is of concrete experience and reflective observation.

Assimilating: People who possess this kind of learning style prefer good clear information; they can logically format the given information and explore the analytic models. They are more interested in concepts and abstract things than in people. Characteristics include abstract conceptualization and reflective observation.

Converging: People who possess this type of learning style solve problems. They apply their learning to practical issues. Also, they prefer technical tasks, and they experiment with new ideas. They tend to be unemotional. The learning characteristics are abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

Accommodating: Individuals with these kinds of learning styles prefer to do things practically. They are attracted to new challenges and solve problems intuitively. The learning characteristics are concrete experience and active experimentation.

8. The advantages of Kolb's theory can be summarised in the following way:

- a) Provides ready directions for application.
- b) Gives directions for the necessary range of education methods.
- c) Provides effective connection between theory and practice. Offers a theoretical argument of things that many teachers apply and need advice on how to improve their practice.
- d) Clearly formulates the importance of students to reflect and the importance of providing feedback in order to stimulate their studying.
- e) Helps to rationalise the way of combining learning styles so that learning can become more effective.
- f) Without any effort, can be used in all subject areas.

- g) Can be used by an individual, by teams, or by whole organisations.
- h) Can be used in a particular lesson, session, or long course of study.

9. The Educational Implications of the Experiential Learning Theory in General:

The educational implications of the experiential learning theory consist of both Kolb's (1984) learning stages and cycle. It helps the teacher to develop more appropriate learning opportunities for the target learners through a critical evaluation. It urges the need of teachers that they should design and carry out the activities in such a way that those could give opportunities to all the learners to engage and learn in the best way that suits them. It strengthens the learning styles of diversified learners irrespective of their learning or preferred learning styles. The activities carried out should enable the learner to go through the whole process passing through each and every stage or phase of the experiential learning cycle in an order.

10. Implications of Experiential Learning for the Teaching of English: It is a well acknowledged fact that, in many English classes all over the world, students are engaged in the activities in which they are being exposed to language input and provided exercises to practice the language in variety of activities. These activities basically provide students with concrete experience to the learning of any of their target language. However, there are some principles of how to implement experiential learning in the English classroom. a) Cooperative involvement of students in an assigned task b) Contextualisation of language with its four skills c) Leading towards the authentic and real world through direct encounter with the subject matter d) Physical involvement in a given phenomena e) Involvement in activities that promote psychomotor actions, activities, and aspects f) Action based utilisation of multiple skills

On the one hand, those techniques tend to be learner-centered by nature which include hands-on project such as nature project, computer activities especially in small groups, research projects, cross-cultural experiences etc., field trips and other "on-site" visits such as a grocery store, role plays and simulation. On the other hand, there are some teacher-controlled techniques which may be considered experiential. These techniques include using props, realia, visuals, show-and-tell sessions, playing games which often involve strategy and singing, utilizing media such as television and movies (Brown, p. 292).

Adapting Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle in English Language Teaching, based on four elements, Koenderman (2000) provides experiential learning model that is a series of phases that outline the sequencing of classroom activities from the introduction of a topic or theme to the conclusion. He then proposes four phases: exposure phase, participation phase, internalization phase, and dissemination or transfer phase. In the exposure phase, a topic is introduced, and students are given the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in this area and to relate the topic to their personal learning goals; in the participation phase, the students become personally engaged as they participate in an activity, either in the classroom or outside, intended to build on or enhance their previous experience; in the internalization phase any of the debriefing

exercises will be initiated by the teacher, and the students have the opportunity to reflect on their participation in the activity and discuss potential effects on their future behavior or attitudes; and at last, in the dissemination or transfer phase, the students apply and present their learning, linking it with the world outside the classroom.

Experiential learning in English classroom builds on the principle that language learning is facilitated when students are cooperatively involved in working on a project or task, and when the project includes the four above mentioned phases namely exposure, participation, internalization, and dissemination. Using each phase of experiential learning illustrated earlier, an English classroom can be established as the following:

1. Exposure phase: Students are initiated into the project or task in a manner that will activate their background schema, past experience, and previous knowledge about the subject of the project. According to Brown, schema is defined as “information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and culture” (Brown, 1987, p.284). This phase offers explicit and effective techniques to activating schemata. Through the exposure phase, students are given the chance to understand the objectives of the activity and set goals for themselves. The role of teacher in this phase is that the teacher can direct the class using elicitation of questions to encourage reflection on students’ past experiences and relate that with the new topic or activity.

2. Participation phase: This phase provides concrete experience or actual activity. Since it is designed as project based or task-based learning model, students are encouraged to work collaboratively in group. Students will then be actively involved in direct experience in using the target language communicatively with their peer in group. Richard (2001) highlights that through engaging students in taskbased language learning, it provides better opportunities for real communication in the form of providing experience at its best. Students learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in the activities and tasks.

The Second language acquisition theory that showed its support to this phase is Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) that refers to the gap between students’ current ability and their potential ability with peer or mentor guidance. The application of Vygotsky’s theory in Second Language Acquisition context has shown that learner-learner interaction is indeed beneficial to the English as a second language student (Kolb, Kowal, & Swain, 1994; Wajnryb, 1990 as cited in Knutson, p.57). In addition, the central roles of the teacher in this phase include:

(a) selecting, adapting, and creating the task themselves and then forming these into an instructional sequence in keeping with student needs, interest, and language skill level;

(b) preparing students for tasks including clarifying task instructions, helping students learn or recall useful words and phrases to facilitate task accomplishment, and providing partial demonstration of task procedures;

(c) raising consciousness in the sense that the teacher employs a variety of focusing techniques, including attention focusing pre-task activities, text exploration, guided exposure to parallel tasks, and use of highlighted material. (Richard, 2001, p. 236).

3. Internalization phase: In this phase, the teacher plays roles as a facilitator to help students reflect on their language learning experience in the participation phase. The teacher must skillfully ask questions to help draw students' attention to their feelings and participation in the language learning experience. This reflection seeks to involve the emotions and identity of the learner. During the internalization phase, students are questioned about their own language learning and how they feel it progressed, as well as how they feel contributed to their own progress. Although the teacher sets up the questions, no answers are provided, and the teacher should respond in a non-judgmental way to any of all students' contribution. This phase closely links to the techniques of Community Language Learning developed by Curran (1972) that is called reflection on experience (Larsen-Freeman, p. 104). At this stage, the teacher gives students the opportunity to reflect on how they feel about the language learning experience, themselves as learners, and their relationship with one another. The teacher's non-judgmental response in this phase can encourage students to think about their unique engagement with the language, the activities, the teacher, and the other students, and strengthen their independent learning.

4. Dissemination or transfer phase: This phase is the final stage of experiential learning. This phase is very important to help students link the classroom learning with the real world outside the classroom. It is widely recognizable among ESL teachers and researchers that there is a need for language learners to be able to transfer their classroom experience into their day-to-day contexts. The demand put on language learners and teachers to make a clear link between the classroom and the world outside is undeniable. Consequently, projects or tasks may culminate in a role-play of a social situation in class or in students going on a field trip to practice newly acquired skills.

Apart from the aforementioned, action and reflection are the core attributes of learning through experience or experiential learning. Experiential learning traditionally applies to three areas of educational endeavor: field based experiences, prior learning assessment, and experiential classroom-based learning (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Burnard (1989) defines experiential knowledge as that "knowledge gained through direct encounter with a subject, person or thing" (p. 6).

a) Field-Based Experience: Working with practitioners of your field of study, actually doing the job that you are being trained to do. Included in this category are learning activities like internships & practicum assignments.

b) Prior Learning Assessment: Credit or certificates are given for knowledge attained from life experiences. These are generally in the form of standardized tests or portfolios or assessments given by some any educational, academic institutes, colleges and universities.

c) **Experiential Classroom-Based Learning:** In a formal setting this includes teaching methods that involve the students in doing activities and reflecting on what they did. This includes such techniques as case studies, simulations, or any activity that uses real life experiences as its basis of instruction.

11. Context for Usage this theory:

Generally the learning cycle is suggested to be used (Sharlanova, 2004):

- a) During the initial defining of the problem in order to find out if the previous experience might suggest a method
- b) During the natural interruption of the task as well as in the end of a meeting or working day
- c) When the advancement obviously goes well or badly. The model can be used in groups
- d) Concrete Experience – the team members are involved in a task and in a relationship
- e) Reflection – the team members use open reflection, a dialogue for sharing the perception and how they interact. They evaluate the facilitated and not facilitated processes in the team
- f) Interpretation – the team develops a common culture through building the shared significance of the events
- g) Planning – the team is engaged in common planning, solution, and expression of an agreement for action. The abundant supply of practical methods for completing each of the phases of the learning cycle increases the learning effectiveness
- h) For the experience planning are suitable; planning of actions; defining the goals; planning of experiments; a list of everything that will be observed; defining criteria; educational agreements
- i) For increasing the realisation of the experience – diaries, questions, increasing the understanding of the feelings, silent demonstration
- j) For returning the experience back and reflection on it – diaries, using audio and video records, mutual evaluation, structured discussions, structured briefing, self-evaluation, mutual interview, a list of everything, on which will be reflected, reflection after a pattern
- k) For providing a replacing experience – studying of cases, games, simulations, role games, evaluation through replacing experience

12. Conclusion: Students' experiences are valuable and meaningful for their language learning. Through the activities nonetheless through project-based, taskbased, or any of the exercises that would adopt the experiential learning will allow students to experience directly the use of real communication in a set up scene and context, to reflect their feelings and language learning experience, and to enable them to link and transfer their experience in the classroom into the real world. Furthermore, experiential learning offers some potential benefits not only for students' language development, but also for strengthening their independent learning, building motivation, and cultural understanding. Nevertheless, there might few shortcomings of the use of experiential learning in teaching English crept in as no theory, approach, method or technique is the sole possible one in teaching of English, like either linguistic demand beyond students' level or even the native

like command and proficiency, and the use of mother tongue during the accomplishment of any assigned task. For sure, in order to overcome those obstacles, the subject concerned teacher plays pivotal and crucial role to select a task that is relevant to their level and equip students with adequate required preparation.

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