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Enhancing Efl Students' Active Learning Through Experiential Learning

Rrita Sylja

Abstract

The conventional model of school-based language learning and teaching aimed to accentuate the transmission of knowledge regardless of concrete experience. The experiential approach to learning was developed around the 1940s by Kurt Lewin's research on group dynamics. It draws inspiration from learning approaches that focus on hands-on and real-world experiences. In light of this, it gained popularity in the late 20th century and encompassed the relationship between experience and learning. This study addresses both the benefits and challenges of experiential learning in enhancing EFL students' active learning. Teachers' perspectives on experiential learning and students attitudes toward this method are analyzed. Results showed that experiential learning offers more opportunities for active learning, increases student motivation, and provides ways of constructing knowledge through discovery and exploration. Moreover, the findings highlighted several challenges that EFL teachers face. These include students' diverse learning styles, assessment strategies, and the foreseen curriculum which is not fully designed to match this learning approach. In order to effectively integrate experiential learning in English Language Teaching (ELT), it is recommended that training sessions and workshops be offered for EFL teachers.

Keywords: experiential learning, experiences, foreign language teaching, Kolb's theory, active learning

Introduction

As ESL methods evolved over time, “each new method broke from the old but took with it some of the positive aspects of previous practices” (Brown, 1987, p. 52). There are a plethora of studies that highlight the benefits of experiential learning in enhancing active learning. This research aims to explore EFL teachers’ views and experiences with experiential learning. It also examines high school students’ preferred teaching-learning method in learning English. The main objective is to analyze whether EFL teachers integrate the experiential approach and what difficulties this approach poses both for EFL teachers and students. This study will respond to the following research questions:

1. To what extent are EFL teachers familiar with experiential learning?
2. How is experiential learning perceived by the EFL teachers of this study?
3. Do EFL high school students prefer active learning methods over conventional methods?

Theoretical Review

Experiential learning is based on John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jan Piaget’s learning theories, which emphasize the importance of experience and introspective thinking in the learning environment. The definition of experiential learning is multifaceted; however, it generally means learning by doing. Experience is, per se, learning through action, exploration, discovery, and hands-on experiences. It is a learning theory that moves away from the behaviorist view and the classic knowledge-transfer model of education and instead acknowledges the relevance of learners’ experience and their own reflection. Accordingly, it is based on the work of Kolb’s model of four stages where they are directly involved in the process of doing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and applying. Miettinen (2010), in his paper, states that in experiential learning, two processes are involved: learner experiences and their reflection. As such, past experiences help learners derive meaning through reflective practice. Moreover, Bergsteiner & Avery (2014), in their study about experiential learning, stress the importance of making sense of what a person is learning since individuals should not only define what they are doing but also what they aim to learn because it can heavily influence if the experience was concrete, abstract, active, passive, primary, or secondary.

This is why it is highly important to have a clear purpose and contextualize learning. It is firmly believed that during experiential learning, the students are actively engaged in exploring questions that are relevant and meaningful, and also their feelings and way of thinking can result in learning outcomes (Chapman et al., 1992). In this direction, experience is regarded as a stimulus for learning that allows students to directly experience the connection between experience and knowledge. According to Rubem (1999), experiential learning “allowed for interactivity; promoted collaboration and peer learning; allowed for addressing cognitive as well as affective learning issues; and, perhaps most importantly, fostered active learning” (p.501). In this way, learners are no longer passive receivers, rather than active partners who actively participate in the learning process. Moreover, experiential learning allows learners to combine information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and cultural insights into the class (Brown, 1987). Therefore, there is a clear link between learner’s emotions and the quest for knowledge. Correspondingly, Zhuang (2023), in his recent study, argues that through their experiences, learners are able to instinctively create a framework of learning based on their need and their style of learning, resulting in increased enthusiasm for achieving better learning outcomes. As a consequence, the learners are granted flexibility, to some extent, in order to enthusiastically pursue a desired outcome that aligns with their learning styles. As claimed by Warren et al. (1995), the experimental approach bases its assumptions on the assumption that knowledge should start when the learner relates to the topic of the lesson. Hence, it is highly important to tailor learning experiences to accommodate learner’s relationship to the subject, as this guides learners toward quality learning opportunities.

Despite the benefits of experiential learning, Knutson (2003) in his article mentions some limitations, such as “classroom time constraints, difficulties with assessment, and lack of training in how to meet course outcomes experientially”(p.55). What is more, this type of learning requires good time management and teachers who are trained to evaluate learners’ progress with the help of this non-traditional approach. Furthermore, in experiential learning, the role of interaction between the student and the environment is crucial. Mollaei & Rahnama (2012) argue that this learning approach is more than simply ‘fieldwork’ or ‘practice,’ which involves linking learning to real-life situations, but it includes phases of reflection aimed at helping the learner connect their current learning experience with past and future experiences.

Apart from the authentic nature of real-life experiences, experiential learning activities offer many benefits for the learners, such as increased problem-solving and critical thinking skills. These experiences outside the schools give learners opportunities to gain more knowledge of their community's unique features (Fleming, 2000).

Putting forward real-world relevance benefits the learners, as it pushes them toward making sense of direct experiences and constructing their learning pathway.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized the mixed method. In this study, quantitative and qualitative data are separately analyzed and teachers' responses from open-ended questions are interpreted.

Research Group

The study group was composed of 16 EFL teachers and 130 high school students. Of the participant teachers, eight are high school teachers, four are middle school teachers, and four are elementary school teachers. Additionally, five had more than ten years of teaching experience, five had two-five years of teaching experience, and only one had less than two years of service. On the other hand, students come from different backgrounds. The students who participated in the survey were Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish high school students from Tetovo.

Data Collection

The first research method is teacher survey which contains 5 point Liker-scale questions, and open-ended prompts which explore teachers' views towards experiential methods, the drawbacks that EFL teachers face and the need for training sessions. The second research method is a student survey which contains 5 point Liker-scale statements regarding students' preferred method of instruction, their learning styles, and the challenges that they face by being exposed to experiential learning.

Results of the Study

The data collection results were obtained from students' survey and teachers' survey combined with open-ended questions. Teachers' survey contained three parts,

namely, items related to teachers' familiarity with experiential learning, teachers' views, and benefits along with drawbacks.

Table 1

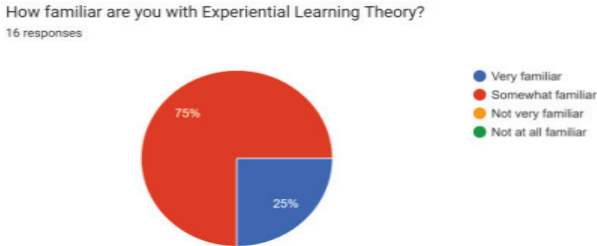
Students' Perceptions on the Use of Experiential Learning

Statements	S/A	A	N	D	S/D
1. I enjoy working on applicable projects and tasks.	49	40	29	8	4
2. I want to apply the knowledge that I gain in real-life scenarios.	79	28	16	6	1
3. I find memorization and passive learning less challenging than active learning.	29	25	46	22	8
4. I like activities that require problem-solving.	42	44	30	6	8
5. I want to be included in role plays and simulation tasks.	39	32	37	13	9
6. I am confident in taking the initiative for a project or task.	38	40	28	18	6
7. I like working collaboratively with others.	53	43	26	3	5
8. I always reflect on the things I learn through hands-on learning.	43	35	30	16	6
9. By being exposed to practical learning, I become more motivated.	61	43	18	6	0
10. If I am engaged through direct experience, I retain and learn new concepts quickly.	70	33	20	7	0

Results in Table 1 show that 68.5% of the students enjoy working on applicable projects and tasks, and 82.3 % want to apply the knowledge in real-world situations. Also, 80% of the students agree that practical learning helps them become more motivated. Moreover, 60% of the students reflect on the things that they learn through hands-on learning, and this supports the idea that reflection is a crucial element in experiential learning. A large number of students, namely 41%, find active learning more challenging than passive learning, and 35.4% remain undecided. Another important issue is that by being engaged in practical learning, 79.2% of the students agree that this way, they retain new information quickly. Therefore, it is evident that experiential learning is perceived positively by the vast majority of the respondents.

Figure 1.

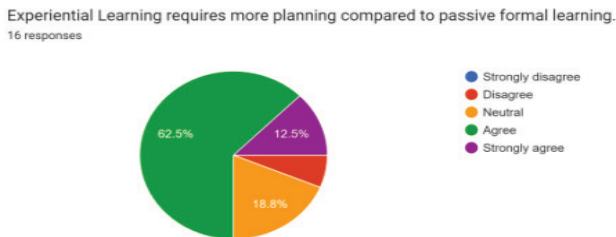
Teachers' Familiarity with Experiential Learning



Furthermore, the results from Figure 1 show that all the teachers who participated in the survey are familiar with experiential learning to some extent. As data show, 75% of the teachers are somewhat familiar with experiential learning, and 25% are very familiar with it.

Figure 2.

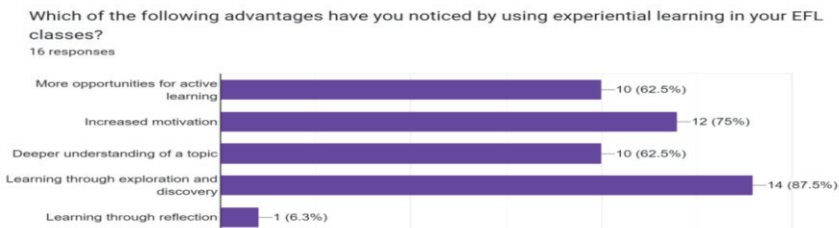
Experiential Learning Compared to Passive Formal Learning



According to Figure 2, 62.5% agree that experiential learning is more demanding compared to passive formal learning as it requires more planning. This suggest that EFL teachers require extra preparation and additional resources.

Figure 3.

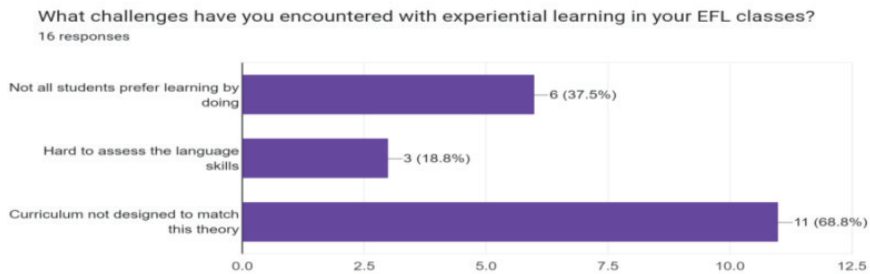
Advantages of Experiential Learning in ELT



As it can be seen in Figure 3, most of the respondents believe that experiential learning has the ability to expose students to exploration and discovery by increasing their motivation. They also state that one of the main advantages is that experiential learning offers more opportunities for active learning and a deeper understanding of a topic.

Figure 4.

Drawbacks of Experiential Learning in ELT



Data in Figure 4 shows that 68.8% of the participants see the foreseen curriculum as the main obstacle. This suggests that teachers need to modify and design tasks which promote experiential learning by themselves. In order to do this, teachers need training and workshops so that they can grasp the principles of experiential learning.

Regarding the open-ended question related to respondents' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of experiential learning, they have listed the following:

Table 2

Teachers' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Experiential Learning

In what ways is experiential learning effective?
Teacher 1: Students comprehend much better a topic when they are engaged in doing something firsthand.
Teacher 2: It provides a better understanding of different topics.
Teacher 3: You learn by doing.
Teacher 4: Students are active during lessons.
Teacher 5: Students gain problem solving skills and also understand that there are different solutions to a problem through real world encounters. It also motivates the students and boosts their confidence.

Teacher 6: Its main effectiveness is that the learner is a participant in the educational process.
Teacher 7: I think that experiential learning is effective because we learn by doing; we learn through experiences.
Teacher 8: It gives a better insight in one's abilities and skills.
Teacher 9: Students are engaged actively in learning.
Teacher 10: Students have the freedom to be more creative.
Teacher 11: It gives an opportunity to students to get involved in knowledge building/creation by doing and understanding the situations from real life perspectives; it fosters problem solving skills and creativity; increases motivation which results in active involvement and positive outcome of learning.
Teacher 12: Students tend to engage more and connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations.
Teacher 13: Experiential learning is an educational approach where students learn through direct experience, engaging in activities that reflect real-world situations.
Teacher 14: It stressed the importance of reflection on past experiences and fosters collaborative learning.
Teacher 15: Students learn by doing, and they get more motivated by experiential learning.
Teacher 16: It involves learners actively participating in their learning process rather than passively receiving information. It also encourages their critical thinking and problem-solving skills since they must analyze, reflect, and decide based on their experiences.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of experiential learning and their experiences with the help of this approach. Complementary to this, high school students' views on active learning were analyzed. Therefore, it could be concluded that experiential learning is positively perceived by the vast majority of high school students who participated in this study; in addition, EFL teachers had positive perspectives and demonstrated an eagerness to engage their students in hands-on experiences. Moreover, the students displayed positive attitudes towards experiential learning. With the help of experiential learning, they become more motivated and retain new knowledge quicker; therefore, they want to be included

in applicable projects and tasks and be involved in role plays and simulation tasks. In this way, they develop reflection skills and work collaboratively with others. Also, a crucial element of experiential learning is that the students actively participate in the knowledge-construction process. Based on prior research and the results of this study, experiential learning provides learners with active engagement opportunities and hands-on experiences that make the learning process more tangible and applicable.

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