# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Adapting Kolb's Learning Cycle in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

> Abstract: Experiential Learning adalah sebuah teori belajar yang menempatkan pengalaman sebagai sumber belajar. Proses belajar dalam experiential learning terjadi dengan cara merefleksikan pengalaman yang telah dilalui secara langsung oleh peserta didik untuk menemukan makna, nilai dan konsep baru dari pengalaman tersebut. Dipopulerkan pertama kali oleh John Dewey, experiential learning ini kemudian diterjemahkan oleh David Kolb dalam siklus belajar yang melibatkan empat tahap yaitu pengalaman kongkrit, refleksi, formulasi konsep, dan ujicoba dalam kontek baru. Tulisan ini berupaya untuk mengilustasikan experiential learning sebagai sebuah metode pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Dengan meng– adaptasikan siklus belajar Kolb, tulisan ini mencoba untuk mena– warkan tehnik-tehnik pembelajaran yang bisa dilakukan guru dalam menerapkan experiential learning di kelas bahasa Inggris.

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## Experiential Learning: Theory and Learning Model

Experiential learning values experience as crucial for learning. 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)

In general, experiences are perceptions/impressions which are seen as something positive, impressive and unusual. It is something that enriches our lives: it is something we acquire in the course of life which leads to reconciliation of the internal and the external reality (Kujalova, p.4). Nevertheless, Experience per se does not necessarily means that one learns. An effort of making such meaningful learning experience for through reflection is also an important step to carry out. 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 not passive but active and it brings a certain change to our personality. Knowledge results from taking active part in changing reality. (Kujalova, p.4)

With respect to the definition of experiential learning, Houle puts it as "education that occurs as a direct parti– cipation in the events of life" (as cited in Smith, 1996, p.1). It means that learning takes place through reflecting upon everyday experience, which is the way that most of us do our learning. In line with that, Kolb (1984) mentioned that experiential learning emphasizes the central role of experience in the learning process (p.20). He then created a now widely accepted model of the learning cycle to demonstrate the process by which experience could be translated into learning. 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.

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 Dewey, Lewin, and 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).

According to Kolb, experiential learning encompasses four basic elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts, and testing in a new situation. Kolb's well-known cycle of EL representing those four elements I potrayed below:

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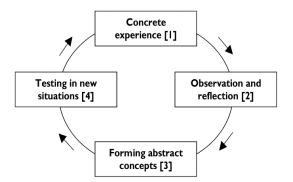


Figure I. The experiential learning cycle Note. From "David A. Kolb on Experiential Learning," M.K. Smith, 1996, Infed.Retrieved August 7, 2008, from http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-explrn.htm. Reprinted with permission.

According to the four-stage learning cycle depicted in figure 1, immediate or **concrete experiences** are the basis for observation and **reflection**. This reflection is assimilated and distilled into **abstract concepts** from which new implications for action can be drawn. These imply– cations can be actively **tested** and serve guides **in creating new experiences**. (Kolb, 1984).

### Experiential Learning Principles for the Teaching of English.

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 learning the target language. However, there are some principles of how to implement experiential learning in the English classroom. Firstly, Experiential learning in English language teaching is built on the principle that languagelearning is facilitated when students are cooperatively involved in working on a project or task (Knutson, 2003). Secondly, the use of experiential learning in English language classroom requires the teacher to contextualize language that integrates the four skills and lead toward authentic, real world purposes Experiential learning highlights a direct encounter with the subject matter or the topic being studied rather than simply reading and talking about it. It needs some physical involvement in the phenomena as well (Brown, Brown further stated p.291). that experiential learning tends to put an emphasis on the psychomotor aspects of language learning by involving students in physical actions in which language is subsumed and reinforced. Through action, students are drawn into a utilization of multiple skills (p. 292).

In the field of second-language acquisition (SLA), the experiential approach encourages learners to develop the target language skills through the experience of working together on a specific task, rather than only examining discrete elements of the target language. With regard to the phase of reflection that follows such experience, students are then required to actively engage with their own past experiences and focus on the future (Knutson, p. 53). In addition to students' language development achieved through the experience of working together to practice the target language, experience learning implies many other potential benefits for SLA in terms of motivation, investment, and cultural understanding.

There are ample language activities or techniques that correspond to the experiential learning principles. 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 (campus, dinner group, etc.), field trips and other "on-site" visits such

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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

As depicted in figure 1, Kolb's experiential learning cycle entails four elements beginning with direct experience, followed by reflection, forming abstract concept, and finally, testing it in a new situation. This cycle is easily adaptable to a wide variety of educational settings, especially to classrooms where project-based and task-based learning are designed as the core learning models. This part is seeking to adapt Kolb's experiential learning cycle into English Language Teaching.

Based on the Kolb's 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 participa*tion 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,* a debriefing exercises is initiated by the teacher, and the students have the opportunity to reflect on their partici– pation 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 leaning 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 abovementioned phases namely exposure, participation, internalization, and dissemination. Using each phase of experiential learning illustrated earlier, 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 question 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 projectbased or task-based learning model, students are encouraged to work



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collaboratively in group. Student are then 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. Students learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in the activities and tasks. Second language acquisition (SLA) theory supporting 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 Vigotsky's theory in SLA context has shown that learner-learner interaction is indeed beneficial to ESL students (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/or 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 formfocusing 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 answer are provided, and the teacher should respond in 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 give 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 language, the activities, the the teacher, and the other students, and strengthen independent their learning.
- 4. *Dissemination or transfer phase*. This phase is the final stage of experiential learning. This phase is very important to help student link the classroom learning with the real world outside the classroom. It is widely recognizable among ESL teachers and researchers that there is 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.

#### Conclusion

Students' experiences are valuable and meaningful for their language learning. Through project-based or taskbased, the experiential learning phases allow students to experience directly the use of real communication in a set up scene, 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 strengthening their independent for learning, building motivation, and cultural understanding. Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings of the use of experiential learning in TEFL such as linguistic demand beyond students' level and the use of mother tongue during the project accomplishment. To overcome these obstacles, the teacher plays very central role to select a project that is relevant to their level and equip students with adequate lexical preparation. []

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