Experiential Learning for ESL Teaching: Using Games for Teaching Grammar in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In India, English is an official second language. However, there is a huge multi-linguistic diversity across the country where numerous languages are spoken by teachers and students. Learning English as a second language offers varied challenges, especially for students from non-urban locations. To offer a solution, the present paper explores and brings together the concept of experiential learning, its adaptation in Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and Koendraman's (2000) language teaching phases and also the activities suggested in communicative language teaching (CLT). The paper further suggests games as potential activities in the grammar classroom.

Keywords: experiential learning, the biology of learning, communicative language teaching, learning cycle, language teaching phases, verbs, games, lesson plan.

Introduction

English is widely spoken around the world and has rapidly emerged as a common language for communication. In an increasingly connected world, learning one of the major link languages is essential for the growth prospects of an individual. The ability and fluency to converse in English are considered the vital skills to get white-collar jobs and to clear many government and corporate recruitment and selection processes.

According to *worldatlas.com,* there are 125 million (approximately 12%) Indians speaking the language, making India the world's second-largest English speaking country. More than 99.8% of these speakers learn English as a second language. Further, *statista.com* notes that the proportion of English speakers in urban India (87.6%) far exceeds the proportion of those in Rural India (3%).Given that India offers a huge multi-linguistic diversity across the country where numerous languages are spoken by teachers and students, learning English as a second language offers its unique challenges, especially for students from non-urban locations. Students spend several years learning English in the classroom, and yet many face difficulty in applying this learning to the real world communicative context.

To combat this problem, this paper explores the use of experiential learning techniques and CLT activities to enhance the students' learning potential and teaching efficacy. The experiential learning method has been adapted from David A. Kolb's seminal work, *Experiential Learning*, of how to translate an experience into learning.

The paper presents

1. Development in neuroscience research and

CLT practices that build a strong case for use of experiential learning model;

2. Experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984) and an adaptation of this work for language teaching (Koenderman 2000);

3. Current classroom English teaching practices;

4. Sample class lesson plan that uses games for teaching grammar in non-urban classrooms for primary school students;

5. Considerations for adopting this method of teaching.

Through this work, the intention is to propose a method of teaching that helps educators impart learning that enables real competence building right from the grass-root level.

Understanding experiential learning theory and relevance

Communicative Language Teaching

The goal of CLT is communication, which is to say communicating effectively in real-life situations. The primary focus of the earlier methods was to drill in grammatical structures through rote learning, holding the belief that to know a language is to know its grammar. However, the contemporary view is to help the learner learn the language through the actual process of communication. This provides a better chance of engaging in meaningful communication and provides a better opportunity for the learner to absorb grammatical concepts. As an analogy, if one wants to learn how to play cricket, reading a book on the rules of the game cannot be considered as a substitute for playing the game on the field.

Experiential Learning Model

Experiential learning is not a new concept as we find its reference in a quote from Aristotle (350 BC), who said, "for things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." This idea gradually got lost in the years to come. However, today experiential learning has become a popular and preferred learning method all over the world. The most significant work in this area is that of David A. Kolb (1984) who has provided a model of the learning cycle that helps translate experience into learning. In his model, he suggests that the first step in learning is a concrete experience. Learning, according to him, does not happen merely through an experience but through further reflection on the experience. Here the individual understands the experience and makes sense of it through observations. These observations are further internalized and help in conceptualizing learning from experience, e.g. a child while walking may meet an obstruction, and through reflection may realize that s/he can walk around the obstruction to go ahead. Learning is further strengthened when the person takes active action and indulges in experimentation.

Following are the subparts of the learning cycle:-
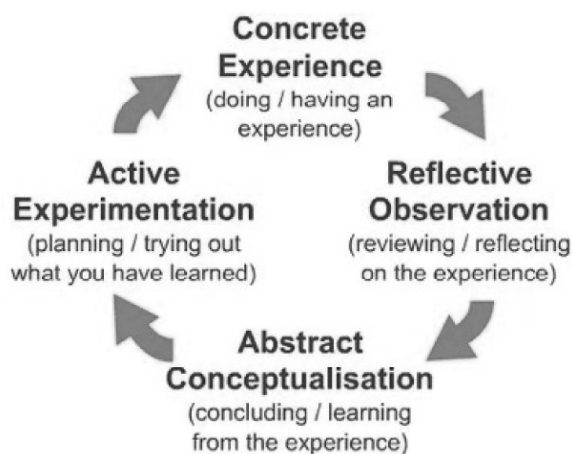
Kolb's learning model has been adapted in a variety of learning situations and settings. Koenderman (2000) provides such a model adapted especially for classroom learning, based on the following four steps:

1. Exposure phase: this phase activates background knowledge related to the subject and helps set the context for experiential learning activity;

2. Participation phase: this phase is the deployment of experiential learning activity;

3. Internalization phase: in this phase the teacher helps debrief on the activity to enable reflection and concept building;

4. Transfer phase: in this phase the student is given an opportunity to link the classroom learning to a real-world scenario.**Development of neuroscience research**

Through continuous advances in the study of neuroscience, there is convergent evidence supporting the above experiential learning cycle. James Zull, (Professor of Biology and Biochemistry at Case Western Reserve University) has mapped a relationship between Kolb's learning cycle and the anatomy of the human brain. He suggests that "Learning is about biology" or learning involves physical changes in the brain. He has depicted that there are specific regions of the cerebral cortex that support each of Kolb's learning cycle steps. True learning requires activation of all four areas of the cortex.

In his work, Zull draws on the importance of active emotional engagement and having a safe stress free environment to increase the learning potential from an intervention. Further Karyn

Purvis (world-renowned developmental psychologist) stated, "Scientists have determined that it takes approximately 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in the brain – unless it is done with play, in which case, it takes between 10 and 20 repetitions."

The Experiential Learning Cycle & Regions of the Cerebral Cortex
James Zull
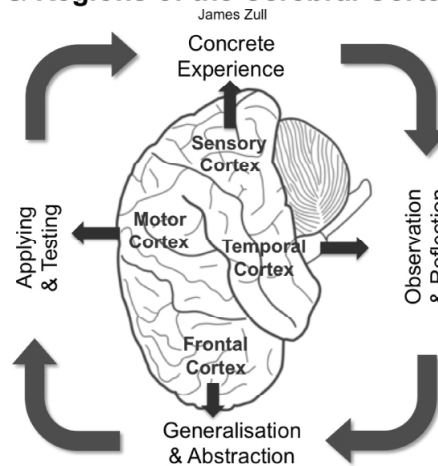
One can easily conclude that we learn best when we have a chance to learn from experience, in a safe social setting, e.g. through games. The ability to internalize a concept is strengthened when the activity is followed by reflection and debriefing.While there can be several interventions that can be designed using these principles, in the present paper games have been used as a medium for imbibing grammar.

Current classroom English teaching practices

English continues to be a second language for a vast majority of students in India. Several Indian classrooms follow the traditional teaching methodology with an emphasis on rote learning. There is a fixed syllabus and prescribed textbooks for each class and the teacher is expected to follow the same strictly. Classes are

basically instructional. The medium of delivery focuses on theoretical learning from the book, and teachers often use the blackboard to explain the concept or help solve questions from the prescribed course books.

Also, learning is excessively inspired by academic examination performance. Students want to excel in the examinations and are concerned about their scores, more than their skills. We can also see this pattern while job aspirants are preparing for state/ central government examinations. As a result, most of the students are unable to use the language in real-life scenarios. So for skill enhancement, there is a need to convert the traditional class into an experiential one.

Designing an experiential learning lesson plan

Any traditional classroom topic can be converted into an experiential learning lesson. Below is a sample lesson plan design that demonstrates the use of this concept, using games as a medium of learning

Guidelines and scope:

● **Duration:** 75-90 minutes

● **Class size:** 40 students

● **Format:** Pre-lesson planning; Classroom lesson delivered across 4 experiential learning cycle steps (i.e. Exposure Phase; Participation Phase; Internalization Phase; Transfer Phase)

● **Learning objectives:**

   o Gain a conceptual understanding of stative and dynamic verbs o Build a vocabulary of stative and dynamic verbs

   o Understand and practice communicative application of these verbs to real-life context

● **Targeted students:** Non-native English speaking students from primary school – fifth standard* The current game is targeted for students of the fifth standard, assuming that they are able to read, and are at a decent maturity level to understand the social constructs that the game utilizes. Though the game is designed for class fifth, it can be adapted for other target age groups as well.

● **Game Name:** Let's create a story!

● **Game Overview:** This game involves writing a story using a set of given verb cards. The game is constructed around the activity of Kite Flying (an activity very fondly celebrated by the people of Rajasthan on the auspicious occasion of *Makar Sankranti*)

Game Execution as per Learning Cycle: Pre-lesson planning:

● **Material Required:**

   o Four softballs for passing (one for every group)

   o Four sets of 10 verb cards (one set per group)

   o Four bags (one bag per group)

   o Blackboard and chalk

   o Mobile (for keeping time)

   o Relevant course textbook

● **Dividing the class into groups:** The class can be divided into four groups of 10 each (assuming the average number to be 40 in

each class). The aim is to have a sufficiently large group to have enough sentences for a story to get formed. The group size can be adjusted, based on an actual number of students and availability of time.

● **Time Guideline:** The total class time is assumed to be of 75-90 minutes, divided across each of the phases mentioned below:

   o Exposure Phase: 15 minutes

   o Participation Phase: 25 minutes

   o Internalization Phase: 25 minutes

   o Transfer Phase: 10 minutes

Exposure Phase:

Duration: 15 minutes

During this phase, the teacher helps set the context for playing the game. This is done via a group discussion and instruction sharing.

Probe questions on Kite Flying:

● Raise your hand if you like to fly a kite on *Makar Sankranti*

● Anyone who does not know and does not like to fly a kite? (This is followed by a discussion)

● Who do you fly the kite with? Do you fly with your family or friends? (Students share)

Here the intention is to assist reflection on the past knowledge and experience (schemata) of the students. This may evoke emotion and feelings of fun in the students and it is a context that the majority of people in Rajasthan are aware of. Linking the game to a socio-cultural local context and past experience helps the learner to retain the information.

Share Game Instructions and Objectives:

● Introduce the topic of verbs briefly

● Provide instructions for playing the game including the timing of each step

● Divide the group into two teams and give the respective material to each group i.e. verb card (Appendix 2), ball. Two groups get a verb bag for stative verbs, and the other two groups get a verb bag for dynamic verbs

In the exposure phase, the teacher also helps the student understand the objectives of the activity and sets goals for the same.

Participation Phase :

Duration: 25 minutes

In this step, the teacher deploys the game and facilitates the learning experience. Steps for playing the game:

● The teacher reads the starting line of the story, "On a happy Sunday morning, the day of *Makar Sankranti*, I went out to fly kites with my friends."

● The person in the group whose birthday is closest to the current date is asked to start the game.

● This first-person draws a verb card from the bag and is asked to read the card. Each card includes verb definition and supporting examples with pictures. This person needs to continue writing the story by writing a relevant sentence with the given verb. The student needs to also act the verb, and pass the ball to another person of his/ her choice.

● The next person continues the game by drawing another verb card and following the

same steps

● The team has 20 minutes to play the game.

In this step, the students get concrete experience. They work collaboratively with each other in a playful environment that is related to their own socio-cultural context. The ability to understand the verbs and their applicability is increased as the verb card provides the definition of the verb, and the students need to apply it and act it out using the supporting picture given. This process will help the students in writing a fun story together. In this manner, they will not only learn from their own chance but also learn by observing other students use and act out other verbs. The

game does not progress in sequential order because of which the students need to stay attentive all through the game.

This phase bridges the gap between the current ability and potential ability of the students, giving them a real chance to practice. Here the teacher's role is to give instructions and clarify doubts.

Internalization Phase :

In this phase, the teacher debriefs on the game, by asking one student from each group to briefly share their experience of the game. (Suggested questions: How was your experience? What went well? What did not go well? What was easy? What was difficult?) .

The teacher further uses the time for concept building on stative and dynamic verbs. The concept is built using the verbs from the verb bag and soliciting actual verbs used during the game. The teacher also reviews mistakes committed during the game to help understand

the concept better.

Here the student reflects on the activity and internalizes the concept better, having a rich learning experience.

Transfer Phase:

In this phase, the teacher concludes the debriefing and helps students understand how stative and dynamic verbs help in communication in real life.

Here the student is given an opportunity to link the classroom learning to a real-world scenario.

Conclusion

It may be fair to conclude that theoretical teaching followed by memorizing details may help students produce the data again during the examination, but the student will not learn from the information and fail to apply the data in real-life scenarios. In contrast, experiential learning significantly increases the chance to take risks and apply their learning confidently in real-life scenarios, increasing students' confidence and active participation, and at the same time fostering emotional learning (i.e. more effective learning stage) in a fun environment.

While there are several undeniable benefits, the shift to experiential classroom learning medium does require considering factors such as

1. Increased time for class to include concept building, activity execution and post-activity debriefing

2. Increased teacher preparation time to get comfortable with designing and executing experiential learning activities

3. Increased logistics e.g. props, additional

space for pair/ group work.

While there are pros and cons to every approach, the benefit of extending a deeper learning experience to students makes it a compelling proposition with a trade-off of increased execution efforts.

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Appendix 1

List of Verbs:

S.No.	Stative Verbs	Dynamic Verbs
1.	Know	Run
2.	Believe	Jump
3.	Understand	Work
4.	Doubt	Eat
5.	Need	Play
6.	Depend	Learn
7.	Contain	Grow
8.	Imagine	Go
9.	Involve	Talk
10.	Prefer	Fly

Appendix 2

Sample Verb Cards:

Verb: Understand to know the meaning of 	Verb: Run A faster movement than walk
Verb: Doubt An uncertain feeling 	Verb: Jump Muscular movement of pushing oneself off the ground in the air