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A study to prove that experiential learning method improves students' communication skills in English in comparison to traditional learning method

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Abstract

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." -Confucius

Teaching means helping someone know and understand something they don't know and understand. Experiential education complements traditional models of education as a method of teaching and learning that supports the individualised knowledge that occurs outside the classroom walls, allowing students to stretch in unique and creative directions. Because the learning takes place outside of the classroom, it is beyond the comfort and predictability of the student's typical learning environment, in a place that is truly foreign. The classroom in India is characterised by repetition and memorisation of the literary-grammatical content of prescribed textbooks, but experiential language classroom stresses 'learning by doing' style. It targets acquisition of communication skills through critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making. Experiential approach accelerates learning. English can be learnt not by learning about it but by doing tasks and projects that promote English communication skills and critical thinking skills. It is personal and effective and it has a positive force on cognitive, affective, and physical domains of learners. It ensures involvement and participation of learners since it treats language as a social activity. This study aims to compare experiential learning method and traditional learning method to explore which method inculcates and improves the communication skills in students and an attempt to assess the applicability of experiential approach in English of class eight students in Govt. Middle School Mahmand, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India. The study was conducted using an experimental research design. The sample size comprised of 60 students of class eight. The data were collected using a pre-test and post-test. For the pre-test, communication skills techniques were imparted to both the groups using the traditional teaching method. For the post-test, the controlled group was taught using the same traditional teaching method while the experimental group was taught using the experiential learning method. Mean scores 27.80 & 30.36 with a significant value of .002 of post-test showed that the two groups under study had different identities in scores. This proved that experiential learning method improves students' communication skills better than traditional communication skills.

Keywords: Experiential learning method, traditional learning method, communication skills

Introduction

Education is vital to the pace of the social, political and economic development of any nation, so effective teaching is very essential. Effective teaching is important because teaching is based on helping children progress from one level to another in a more sociable interactive environment and to get the approach right to get students to be independent learners (Muijus and Reynolds, 2005). Effectiveness does not mean being perfect or giving a wonderful performance, but bringing out the best in students.

The methods used in classrooms determine the interest level and motivation of the students towards learning and acquisition of communication skills.

The Traditional method of teaching is the expectation that students will learn because we tell them to. A teacher directs students to learn through memorisation and recitation techniques thereby not developing their critical thinking problem solving and decision-making skills. Learners suffer being passive listeners in lecture-dominated classrooms. Traditional method relies mainly on textbooks, where presentation of materials starts with the parts. It emphasizes on basic skills. With traditional method of teaching, assessment is seen as a separate activity and occurs through testing whereas the experiential learning method is a

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method of educating through first-hand experience. Experiential learning also known as (EXL) is the process of learning through experience, and is more specifically defined as "learning through reflection on doing." Skills, knowledge, and experience are acquired outside of the traditional academic classroom setting. The concept of experiential learning was first explored by John Dewey and Jean Piaget, among others. It was made popular by education theorist David A. Kolb, who, along with Ron Fry, developed the experiential learning theory, which is based on the idea that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience.

The important aspects of experiential learning are

Students are sent out into a complex and unknown environment, forcing them to re-evaluate their pre-existing worldview. Students take responsibility for their own learning. They work and learn through direct experience (whether it be reading, writing, conversing, or researching). Students gain valuable experience in their field of study by means of leadership on projects, activity-based learning, physical interaction, and many other means. These students engage in critical thinking based on the new situational and contextual factors that surround them on a daily basis. Through action and reflection, students better understand the impact and larger implications of their learning or research from a global perspective more so than when they were in the classroom.

Hypothesis

Null hypothesis

Research questions

The following research questions enabled the research scholar to focus on the idea of applicability of experiential learning method to English as a second or foreign language:

1. Are students challenged to take responsibility for their own learning?
2. How does experiential learning method support second language learning?
3. Do students understand why English is beneficial to their personal lives?
4. How is experiential learning method more effective than traditional teaching method?
5. Are students encouraged to make discoveries for themselves?

Review of literature

Kolb (1984) ^[5] provides a model which demonstrates how experience could be translated into learning. He is of the view that learners reflect on the initial experience and then understand what the new learning means to them individually and finally, conceptualises how it could be used in the future.

Koenderman (2000) supplies a model that focuses on four phases between the introduction of the theme and conclusion: Exposure phase, participation phase, internalisation phase, and dissemination/transfer phase. Learners are provided the topic and they are given the opportunity to reflect over their own experiences in the area at the first phase. In the second phase, they are expected to participate in activities both in the class and outside of the class for enhancement of their previous experience. They get opportunities to reflect over their participation in

activities and to relate them to their future attitudes and behaviour during the 3 internalisation phases. In the dissemination/transfer phase, they apply their classroom learning experience to real life experience outside the classroom.

Result

Mean scores 20.46 & 19.90 with a significant value of 0.375 for the pre-test established identical nature of both groups. Mean scores 27.80 & 30.36 with a significant value of .002 of post-test showed that the two groups under study had different identities in scores, which proved that experiential learning method improves students' communication skills better than traditional communication skills.

Discussion

Our message to students is this: "Go, Explore, Learn" – For effective teaching to take place, a good method must be adopted by a teacher. A teacher has many options when choosing a style by which to teach. The teacher may write lesson plans from other teachers, or search online or within books for lesson plans. When deciding what teaching method to use, a teacher needs to consider students' background, knowledge, environment, and learning goals. Teachers are aware that students learn in different ways, but almost all children will respond well to praise. Students learn in different ways, of absorbing information and of demonstrating their knowledge.

Experiential learning means the process of learning from experience. It is referred to by different labels, such as 'learning by doing' by John Dewey, "experience-based learning" (ELB) by Wolfe and Byrne, 'trial and error' learning, problem-based learning, experiential teaching, and experiential activities. Experience is the first phase in the learning process. Experiential approach to learning stresses the transformative process from experience to learning. Learners at any level bring with them plenty of life and language learning experiences and they can be related to the classroom language learning experience, and reflection over them can also be compared to the future experience. Since the object of experiential language learning is communication and not the discrete formal elements, communicative tasks and activities should be authentic. Learners' benefits from reflection are the new insights, discoveries, and understanding. Reflection enhances learners' self-esteem, confidence, and personal value. Experiential learning is therefore an educational philosophy and it is based on the notion of active, reflective learning. Thus, they acquire a sense of ownership to their learning by becoming participants in the learning process. Rogers (1969: 5) says: It has a quality of personal involvement, the whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects being in the learning event. It is self-initiated. Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within. It is pervasive. It makes a difference in behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner." Learners are therefore expected to acquire and develop English language communication skills through interaction by adopting cooperative and collaborative strategies. However, experiential approach appears to offer some ray of hope on how to optimise the harvesting of literary texts for the acquisition and enhancement of communication skills. It values the past, present, and future experience of learners.

Students can easily relate literary experience with their personal knowledge of life and compare it with past experience. It ensures the whole person approach to learning. Personal, past experience can inform their present experience via literary experience. Thus, in the process of discussion in pairs and groups, my students developed their oral and written communication skills as naturally as possible by active conversing and attentive listening among all group members. Hence, it was proved that structural elements and aspects of language need not be mastered and mistaken for learning English for communication. Communicative experience becomes the yardstick to measure the learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Experiential learning is the foundation for all learning. Though experience-based learning is elusive for want of solid methods and techniques, it can be translated into reality with proper in-service training to teachers. Students should be given ample opportunities to use English in the class by way of reflecting over experience that they derive from learning so that real learning can be measured. Cooperation and collaboration should become the norm rather than passive listening. Experiential learning is preferred for it facilitates participation, interaction, and application. The index of success in language class is the acquisition of capacity to communicate with fellow learners and the teacher. Language is social and not individual. It can be learnt and used only collaboratively and socially as my students did.

Suggestions

Teachers of experiential learning not as experts but facilitators, guides, and helpers.

- Spruck Wrigley (1998)

English teachers' communicative competence and experience itself becomes a million-dollar question. Hence, most of them should be inclined in reading the latest updates in teaching English as a foreign or second language and communicate through writing articles and presenting papers in conferences. There should not be any question of reflecting on their own communicative experiences. Their classroom spoken English should be such which learners could follow as a model for use in their real life. Experiential learning clearly defines the role of learners, it also expects teachers to change their role from knowledge disseminators to facilitators. Teachers should encourage reflection on the part of learners by creating comfortable relaxed classroom atmosphere for learners to share and reflect experiences. They should equip themselves with questioning skills so that learners can be encouraged to collaboratively find solutions to the tasks and activities. They should create a sense of trust, respect, and care for the well-being of the learners.

Learners too should build on previous learning experiences through active involvement in the learning process. They should be personally involved. They should help themselves to learn by asking for help from each other, from the teacher. They should face challenging, communicative classrooms. They should learn only through tasks and activities that promote interaction and communication. Their experiential learning is characterised by the phases of reflection on their part of learning; hence they should relate current learning experiences to past and future experiences.

My message to students is: *“Go, Explore, Learn.....”*

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