Enhancing Student's English Proficiency Through Experiential Learning

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Abstract

In teaching English the method which is used should be communicative and suited to the students' characteristics. It is aimed to create the teaching learning process which is interesting and comforting to the students so that they can reach the learning goal and English becomes a more attractive subject for them. From the reason above, experiential learning method could be as the solution. Experiential learning method can be used in teaching English to make the teaching learning process much interesting and fun. It will enhance students' interest in learning process in the classroom, because the circumstances become more interesting. It is suitable with the students who are like to be active so experiential learning can be helpful in teaching English. Experiential learning is so effective to enhance the student's English proficiency because it's a process of learning by doing. Experiential learning is also a fun way to learn life skills. The students will have fun while they learn and this makes learning more effective and long lasting.

How to Cite

Anisa, I. (2016). Enhancing Student's English Proficiency Through Experiential learning. _International Journal of Active Learning,_ 1(1).

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is the first foreign language which is taught formally from the junior high school to the university level. However, nowadays, English is taught in some elementary schools, and even in the lower level such as kindergarten and play groups. It means children are introduced to English earlier. It is hoped that they will learn English more naturally as they learn their mother tongue, besides it will be the basis for the students to learn English in the higher level.

To teach English, teachers will face some problems during the teaching learning process. Even though, teachers have their own priority to manage their classroom, as Richards states "teachers have primary responsibility for how they teach; they may assume very different roles within their own classroom (1994: p. 97)." So, teachers should make their classroom more comfortable and interesting.

Here, problems always occur when teaching English is applied. There are some psychological barriers from the students: they feel shy and afraid to ask the teacher if they find a difficulty. These problems may give a great influence to their learning process.

From the reason above, experiential learning could be the solution. Experiential learning method can be used in teaching English to make the teaching learning process much interesting and fun. It will enhance students' interest in learning process in the classroom, because the circumstances become more interesting. It is suitable with the characteristics of the students who are like to be active in learning English so experiential learning can be helpful in teaching English.

Experiential learning is learning through reflection on doing. Here, experiential learning focuses on the learning process for the individual. Keeton and Tate (in Brown, 2000: p. 239) state:

" The learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about the realities but never comes in contract with them as part of the learning process … It involves direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it."

According to Brown (2000: p. 238) experiential learning includes activities that engage both left – and right – brain processing, that contextualize language, that integrate skills, and that point toward authentic, real world purposes. It means that experiential learning is constructivist learning, where students are active learners, constructing their own knowledge, rather than observing the demonstrative behavior of a teacher. Because experiential learning is active learning, students more readily understand what they are learning and thus retain the knowledge to a greater degree than when merely having information presented to them by another. The hands-on nature of experiential learning is highly motivating for students. Such learning may involve one or more of the following instructional strategies:

From the model of experiential learning above one of the examples is field trips, here we can borrow students going to the zoo and learning through observation and interaction with the zoo environment, as opposed to reading about animals from a book. Thus, one makes discoveries and experiments with knowledge firsthand, instead of hearing or reading about others' experiences.

Another example of experiential learning is playing game and learning through it. Students usually like playing and game is effective way to discover and experiment everything in their surrounding and it also an effective way to teaching English for the students.

Game is basically a play governed by rules. Playing just to pass the time will not have the same effect. To make simply activity into a game just give a couple of rules. One of the rules, and probably the main one, is the achievement of an objective. This objective can be something like making points for correctness or finishing an activity first. Games must have a

beginning and an end. It must be easy for the players, or the teacher, to know who is about to reach the aim. This make the activity more attractive.

There are many types of games. Not all games are the same. More than one of the categories listed here may sometimes apply to a game:

1. Cooperative games

In this type of games, the main action is centered in trying to reach the aim in cooperation. This type of game is excelent to encourage the shy students, since it requires the participations of all member of a team, group or pair.

2. Competitive games

As the same indicates, in this type of game thereis an overt competition between teams,or sometimes of an individual against the rest of the class.

3. Communication games

The main objective in this type of game is getting the message over to other players and reacting appropriately to their message.

4. code-control games

This type of game requires the students produce correct language: structures, spelling, pronunciation, etc.

Role plays is also used in teaching vocabulary because most educators understand the important role experience plays in the learning process. A fun learning environment, with plenty of laughter and respect for the learner's abilities, also fosters an effective experiential learning environment. It is vital that the individual is encouraged to directly involve themselves in the experience, in order that they gain a better understanding of the new knowledge and retain the information for a longer time.

Brown (2000: p. 238) highlights for us that experiential learning is giving the students concrete experiences through which they "discover" language principles by trial and error, by processing feedback, by building hypotheses about language and by revising these assumptions in order to become fluent.

Using Experiential learning in teaching vocabulary can be fitted to the real situation in the classroom. To be said knowing vocabulary, students have to know the meaning, the spelling, the pronunciation, and the use of the words. In order to equip the students in those four aspects.

In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is seen as the focal point for learning, giving 'life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process (Kolb in Nunan 1993: p. 14).

Here, in grasping experience some of us perceive new information through experiencing the concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world, relying in our senses and immersing ourselves in concrete reality. Others tend to perceive, grasp or take hold of new information through symbolic representation or abstract conceptualization – thinking about, analyzing, or systematically planning, rather than using sensation as a guide. Similarly, in transforming or processing experience some of us tend to carefully watch others who are involved in the experience and reflect on what happens, while others choose to jump right in and start doing things. The watchers favor reflective observation, while the doers favor active experimentation.

Here, Kolb (in Nunan, 1993: p. 16) figures the general theoretical model of experience into four stages of orientation to learning: concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation.

1) Concrete experience

with an involvement in personal experiences and an emphasis on feeling of over thinking. This is an 'artistic' orientation relying on intuitive decision-making.

2) Abstract conceptualization

using logic and a systematic approach to problem-solving, with an emphasis on thinking, manipulation of abstract symbols and a tendency to neat and precise conceptual system.

3) Reflective observation

focusing on understanding the meanings of ideas and situations by careful observation, being concerned with how things happen by attempting to see them from different perspective and relying on one's own thoughts, feeling and judgment.

4) Active experimentation

with an emphasis on practical applications and getting things done, influencing people and changing situations, and taking risk in order to accomplish things.

According to the model above, experiential learning is seen as four basic stages. Thus, simple everyday experience is not sufficient for learning. It must be observed and analyzed consciously. It can be argued, that theoretical concepts will not become part of the individual's frame of reference until they have been experienced meaningfully on a subjective emotional level. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge between experience and theoretical conceptualization. The process of learning is seen as the recycling of experience at deeper levels of understanding and interpretation. This view entails the idea of lifelong learning.

In conclusion, experiential learning will give a significant contribution to the success of teaching learning process. They have a great power in motivating and stimulating the students. The teacher, therefore, is encouraged to use experiential learning in teaching the students, especially to young learners to teach vocabulary.

In the classroom the teacher and students take on roles similar to that of the parent and child respectively. Teacher introduces the learners to the topic and covering basic material that the learner must know beforehand. The activity may be a simple game, simulation or may involve more complex grammar and more detailed scenarios. Experiential learning can be used to practice and teach various things. It is well suited to teaching classroom language and other vocabulary connected with actions. It can be used to teach imperatives and various tenses and aspects. It is also useful for role plays.

(http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/index. php?title= Experiential Learning#Weaknesses.2FCriticisms).

Experiential learning is largely about movement. By introducing the learners' knowledge to the topic, they learn verbs and many kinds of nouns, learning increases and stress decreases. However, it is recognized that experiential learning is most useful for beginners, though it can be used at higher levels where preparation becomes an issue for the teacher. It does not give students the opportunity to express their own thoughts in a creative way. The following are some steps to integrate experiential learning in the classroom:

a. Aspect of meaning
1) Teacher explains in native language about the rule of experiential learning by introducing the topic, that is the students just listen and need not to speak at first. They have to act out the commands from the teacher.
2) Teacher asks some students to come to the front of the room and sit with her/him in chairs that are lined up facing the other students. Other students listen and watch.
3) Teacher gives some nouns and various commands beginning with verbs while doing them together with some students.
4) Teacher allows the students to mention the words and to do the instructions.
5) Then, teacher asks one of the students to mention and perform the instructions alone.
6) Teacher approaches the other students who have been sitting observing her/him and the volunteers and gives the same commands.
7) The students follow the teacher's action.
8) After the students master the instructions and some nouns, the

teacher gives the new ones as the steps above.

9) Teacher turns to the rest of the class and gives the commands randomly to the students.

10) The last step, teacher writes the new commands on the blackboard. Each time she/he writes a command, she acts it out.

11) The students copy the sentences from the blackboard into the notebooks.

b. Aspect of spelling

1) The teacher asks the students to write the words and the instructions on the board.

2) The teacher asks students to spell the words along with her.

3) The teacher asks the students randomly to spell the words alone.

c. Aspect of pronunciation
1) The teacher asks a student to play the game and practice the dialogue.
2) Then, the students play the games and practice the dialogue.
3) From the first student, teacher can check the pronunciation, and from the second student, teacher can check whether the meaning is correct.

d. Aspect of using word
1) The teacher asks the students to make new imperative sentences spoken or written using the same words on the board.
2) The teacher asks the students to practice using their sentences.

Kolb in Nunan (1993: p. 24-25 proposes that there are some strengths of experiential learning which enable students to improve their achievement. The strengths are as follows:
1. Helping learners involve actively in the learning process.
2. Providing a challenge which encourages learners to stretch themselves (in order to answer the question).

3. Helping learners to forget they are studying: they lose themselves in the fun activity of the learning process.
4. Encouraging collaborative learning: By having active interaction among members of a group, learners are demanded to involve in real communication.

Despite having the strengths, experiential learning also has weaknesses when it is applied in teaching vocabulary. There are some weaknesses as stated by Kolb in Nunan (1993: p. 34-37).
1) The concrete experience part of the learning cycle is not appropriately explained in the theory and remains largely unexplored.
2) The idea of immediate and concrete experience is problematic and unrealistic..
3) The ELT concepts are too ill-defined and open to various interpretations.
4) ELT model is only an attempt to explain the societal benefit.
5) The experience is the starting point of knowledge acquisition and disregards the observations concerning the subjective reality of the learner
6) The ELT learning model focused on the learning process for a single learner and failed to mention how the individual fit into a social group during this process and what role this group may play. Also, there was no discussion on how a social group may gain knowledge through a common experience.

Problems always occur when teaching English is applied. The writer found that the students' English mastery is low and the students get difficulties in mastering English as follows: (1) the students got difficulties in grasping and memorizing the meaning of the words; (2) they found it hard to write down the words correctly; and (3) they got difficulties in pronouncing the words correctly; 4) they found difficulties in using vocabulary in sentences. So

the teacher should have extra power to teach the students in teaching English because students have their own specific characteristics.

There are some psychological barriers from the students. They feel shy and afraid to ask the teacher if they find a difficulty. They are afraid of being humiliated by their friends and their teacher if they cannot answer well. They also do not have self-confidence in answering the questions. These problems may give a great influence to their learning process.

The other reason that causes the students' failure is the teacher's teaching method. He/she is not creative when teaching the foreign language to children. Sometimes it makes the students get bored and they also feel that the teaching method doesn't give more chances to them to internalize the words in their memory.

The classroom situation in learning vocabulary showed that the atmosphere was not alive, with the teacher domination of teaching vocabulary.

In teaching English, the teacher should make the students understand and memorize new words and their meaning not only in a short period of time or at the moment when the vocabulary is given, but also in a long period of time. To make the students memorize the meaning, spell, pronounce, and use the words, the teacher should use a suitable method to teaching children. Here experiential learning is as a method that could be enhance the students' English proficiency.

Experiential learning is suitable with the students characteristics especially children. They like fun activities and talking about "here and now" in their learning process. Experiential learning is a great way to present, and practice English, because experiential learning is an active learning which is highly motivating for the students. Then, it will be advantageous if the teacher uses the experiential learning method to enhance the students' English proficiency.

The success of applying this method can be seen through indicators, they are: (1) students know the meaning of words. One of activities is playing the game. By doing so, it is easy for the students to memorize the meaning of the words.

In finding the meaning of words, students need not open a dictionary because it has already been clear through the instructions they have practiced before; (2) Students are able to pronounce words correctly. The teacher gives the commands several times in a correct pronunciation in order to give examples to the students. The teacher asks the students to pronounce the words and corrects the students' pronunciation; (3) Students are able to spell or write words. The teacher gives some words and asks the students to spell and write the words after the teacher has given students the correct spelling of words and writes them on the white board; and (4) students are able to use words in a sentence. Teacher asks the students to make new commands or sentences based on the words given.

So, it can be assumes that by using the experiential learning method in teaching learning process, English mastery of the students can be improved.

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning is a great way to present, and practice English, because experiential learning is an active learning which is highly motivating for the students. Then, it will be advantageous if the teacher uses the experiential learning method to enhance the students' English proficiency.

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