



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY MEETS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

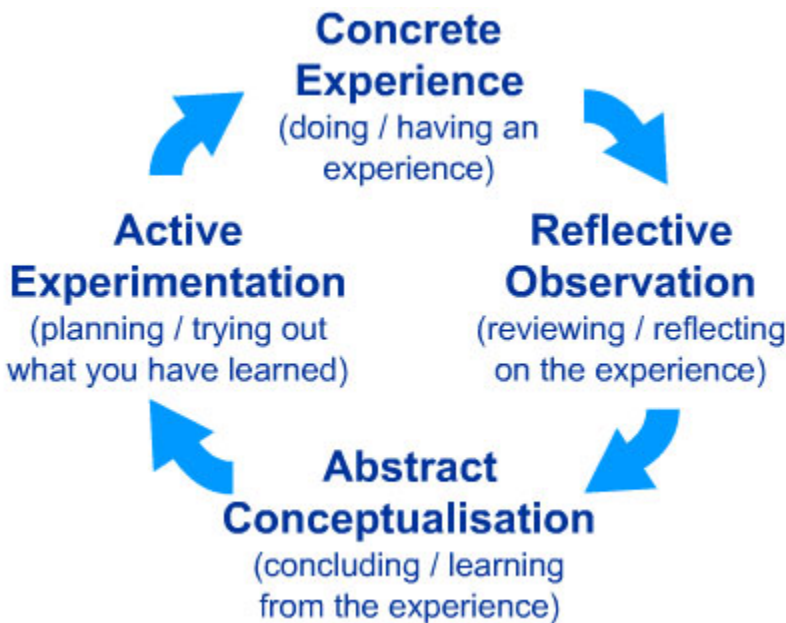
[Document subtitle]

Kathleen Teixeira
[Email address]

Introduction. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how my preferred teaching style, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT,) is a great method to use to teach English Language Learners (ELLs.) I have an interest in community teaching and I also enjoy teaching English Language Learners. Since my preferred teaching technique is Experiential Learning, and I have successfully used it in my class with English for Speakers of other languages (ESOLs,) I would marry the two as a topic and argue that this teaching style is best for not only all learning styles but all ELLs. Using this technique, it would behoove teachers to employ ELT, at least in part, in their classes. Of course there are times when lecture is necessary, but only to lead up to the main assignment, which should be hands-on. I will introduce ELT by explaining what it is and what it means to teach using ELT. I will offer some examples of assignments using ELT. Next will be an explanation of David Kolb and his four-step Experiential Learning Theory cycle. Propositions, Oppositions and Counter Propositions will be discussed. My reinforcement for my argument that ELLs will benefit if the teacher uses ELT in their classroom, followed by the conclusion of this paper.

One evening when I was volunteering for my English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class, I tasked them with ordering from a menu. I noticed something that they did. Each person went along and ordered the same thing as the person before them had ordered. I do believe it was out of lack of confidence or maybe nervousness, but I noticed it. So, what I did since I was the “waitress” was say that we are all out of eggs. I asked them to order something else. Later the students, who were adults, thanked me for the lesson and asked me if we could practice more real-world scenarios. Since they live here now, they would be ordering food like this, as well patronizing other stores and establishments.

David Kolb. The Experiential Learning Theory is a theory introduced by David A Kolb as a four-stage learning cycle, where, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (McLeod, pg. 9-10). In the same Paragraph, McLeod explains that Kolb’s theory is, “Much of Kolb’s theory is concerned with the learner’s internal cognitive processes.” The following image is the Experiential Learning Cycle as explained in pages 9-10 in McLeod’s 2010 article:



The first step, Concrete Experience, is when you have a new situation or experience, or, in the case of an assignment in the classroom, a new assignment. Next, Reflective Observation takes place. This is where the student examines the assignment given to them; they will take note of any understanding or inconsistencies, or any questions they may have about the assignment. Then, Abstract Conceptualization happens, where, after examining the assignment and taking notice of it, the student modifies the concept or idea in his own way. The assignment becomes the student’s own challenge; this is the reflection stage. Finally, Active Experimentation takes place, where the student applies what they have learned and what they know about the

assignment through the first three steps and produces an end result which is immediately testable (McLeod, 2010). It is important to note that,

“Kolb (1974) views learning as an integrated process with each stage being mutually supportive of and feeding into the next. It is possible to enter the cycle at any stage and follow it through its logical sequence. However, effective learning only occurs when a learner is able to execute all four stages of the model. Therefore, no one stage of the cycle is an effective as a learning procedure on its own” (McLeod, pg. 9-10).

Experiential Learning Theory as an umbrella. I think of the Experiential Learning Theory as an umbrella to other theories such as Placed-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, and Project-Based Learning. Both are hands on techniques. I liken Place-Based Learning to the ELT most because it is everything ELT is except a little more. For example, instead of learning in class how to plant a tree, students will be taken outside to a place to actually plant the tree themselves. Here they are still doing a hands-on assignment, but they are actually in the place that it is to be done. With Problem-Based Learning, students learn by working with classmates to solve a problem that exists or has been presented to them at a given moment. This theory is extremely similar to Experiential Learning, in that it’s working in groups, except the student gets to choose the problem based on the material that is given to them. Problem-Based Learning does not call for an answer, a conclusion, nor does the issue need to be solved. The purpose here is to develop skills and knowledge. Project-Based Learning does call for being solved and/or finding a solution to the problem. Project-Based learners present their work in a presentation-style setting, where they talk about their experience and findings. Check out the following table that I have designed to better explain each style of learning under the Experiential Learning Theory:

PLACE-BASED LEARNING	PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING	PROJECT-BASED LEARNING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planting trees • Hands-on • Location, location, location (learning environment has everything to do with lesson at hand.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food waste in school cafeteria • Working in groups • Hands-on • Current issue or problem • Develop skills or knowledge-not for solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations • Hands-on • Real-world challenges and problems • Make projects for display or presentation-science fair project, for example • Find/offer solution to problem or issue

Why Experiential Learning Theory for English Language Learners? This method appeals to me because it is a hands-on method, and it allows many students of many different learning styles and language. acquisition to gain understanding. Each student can apply their own way of approaching the lesson, and each student will have an outcome. As I found out in my research, other teaching styles work well, but “If practice is added, it reinforces the learning” (UCDavis.edu, pg. 1). All service-type of jobs require experiential learning. Plumbers, electricians, beauticians and chefs all learn on the job. Usually, these types of jobs require one to start out in an apprenticeship. I share the same opinion as other educators in that, “Many educators believe that without an experience, there can be no true learning or real understanding

of a concept or situation” (UCDavis.edu, pg. 1). For ELLs, culture plays a large part in their learning. Since their culture is different than the country in which they are studying, experiential learning is the best way for ELLs to take on a lesson. “Teachers talk to their students, ask questions, and discuss facts. However, only 20% to 30% of any large group could remember 75% of what was presented through discussion. To solve this problem, some learning style theorists suggest matching teachers’ and students’ styles” (Reid, p. 99). One thing I learned from researching this topic is that most educational institutions talk about the way the students learn, but do not concentrate on the style of the teacher and potentially matching their styles to students. This is a great concept. Further, “context and task influence the learning styles of native speakers of English; many individuals can change their strategies in response to the unique contextual demands of instruction, the context, and the task” and that “age and prior work experience influence learning styles, and their data indicate that the adult, especially after age 33, learns better by doing” (Reid, pg. 101). However, “In bicultural and multicultural environments, Tarone (1979) found that style shifting occurs when the same person responds to different contexts, and Cohen (1984) indicated that second language learners can use strategies which have been shown to be successful to accelerate learning” (Reid, pg. 100-101).

Propositions of ELT. To recap what I have said thus far, the basic propositions for Experiential Learning are:

Field trips are an excellent supplement to lessons, testable experience, basis for learning trades, learning builds understanding, immediate practice-concrete experience, and learning from mistakes. Now combine these reasons to use them to teach English Language Learners, and you can see that since there is a language barrier, it is a great style for ELLs to use in the classroom to learn.

Oppositions of ELT. Testing can be self-reported, different students will have different results which renders the testing unmeasurable, to support ELT fully would be to support Learning Style Instruments (LSI), which is almost impossible since LSI is virtually unmeasurable, and it has no known research or studies to support it, and test subjects are so drastically different that depending on an undergraduate or graduate student's level, major, etc. can render testing unmeasurable.

Back up for a second to Learning Style Instruments. LSI is a term used for a learning strategy. A learning strategy can be visual, auditory, or hands-on. Those are some examples of LSIs.

In Freedman's article, he accuses Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory of being bipolar:

“Kolb indicates that the four dimensions can be conceptualized as a four-stage model of the problem-solving process. The four dimension scores are used to compute two additional scores.....these two difference scores represent Kolb's (1971) operationalization of a two-bipolar-dimension learning style theory” (Freedman, pg. 276).

Counter-Propositions. The arguments against Experiential Learning Theory are so weak that they bear no power to sway one away from the technique. The only real argument opponents have to lean on is that the method is unmeasurable for data purposes. Kolb's response to Freedman and Stumpf's oppositions are that “Their questions concerning the reliability of the LSI stem from a lack of understanding of the role of variability and situational adaptation in the experiential learning process. Similarly, their criticism of the forced-choice format of the LSI fails to recognize the theoretical rationale for the LSI instrument structure” (Kolb, pg. 289).

English Language Learners and Experiential Learning Theory. “The ESL educator needs to provide the situation and structure for the experience, but also facilitation for students’

reflection on the process and even on the cultural difficulties of teamwork, the lesson plan needs to reflect this” (Teacher, pg. 2).

Some experiential activities in the ESL classroom can include: Making a poster, conducting an interview, teaching the class, puppet show, role-plays, journaling, making a video, debates, creating a trip itinerary, and writing a research paper (Teacher, pg. 3).

Some examples of ELT in action are: 1). An adult ESL learning and business professional, participates in a classroom simulation—he’s bringing an important new client to a restaurant for small talk and a casual meeting. The students have key topics they’ll need to discuss, but mostly the conversation is unprompted. The teacher has set up a mock restaurant scene in the classroom to help them feel they’re really in the scene. They’ll video-record the simulation, watch it, and reflect upon the process with the facilitation of the teacher. They’ll hand in one page of reflective writing to the teacher next class. 2). A class of university students has been divided into small groups that have each been given a profession to explore and research—lawyer, doctor, anthropologist. The class is going to give a mock job fair....(Teacher, pg. 3-4).

Other researchers on this topic are two that I found whose paper precisely identifies the reasons that English Language Learners need to learn experientially. Fatemeh Mollaei and Hamidreza Rahnama realize that “Conventional teaching and training are based mainly on knowledge/skills transfer, but this does not address individual growth and potential particularly well” (Mollaei and Rahnama, pg. 268). On page 275, Mollaei and Rahnama “suggest six ways in which a teacher can set up their classroom so that they can integrate Experiential Learning:

1. Set up the experience by introducing learners to the topic and covering basic material that the learner must know beforehand (the video in the above scenario as well as discussion)” (Mollaei and Rahnama, pg. 275).
2. Engage the learner in a realistic experience that provides intrigue as well as depth of involvement (mock trial).
3. Allow for discussion of the experience including the happenings that occurred and how the individuals involved felt (discussion afterwards).
4. The learner will then begin to formulate concepts and hypotheses concerning the experience through discussion as well as individual reflection (discussion afterwards, but also could be done with journaling).
5. Allow the learners to experiment with their newly formed concepts and experiences (interpreting current conflict and conflict resolution scenario).
6. Further reflection on experimentation (discussion, but could also be done with journaling).

Simulations and gaming within instruction also involve direct experience and thus are valid examples of experiential learning (Mollaei and Rahnama, 275).

I, like many researchers I have read about during this research for my topic, find a common theme for assignments. That is, field trips. Field trips are a huge supplement to any class, as I have state previously. One assignment that stands out in my mind was from an English class I had taken during my undergraduate academic career. Instead of lecturing us on critical analysis, my professor had the class meet at a local museum. Our assignment was to look at a particular painting and describe what we think was going on in the picture. As a picture speaks a thousand words, it was interesting to hear what other students came up with.

Our comments were wildly different. I will never forget the experience. I do love museums, and that experience made me love English literature a little more. I will draw upon that experience and use it in my future teaching. “The English-as-a-second-language trip serves both a linguistic and an experiential function” but, “as an experiential function of language learning, the ESL trip stimulates the student’s awareness of himself in a second culture and acts as a foundation for succeeding in-school and out-of-school experiences” (Wissot, pg. 165). Wissot further gives examples such as going to the store and that a store field-trip can teach a lesson in past and present tenses, and also it could teach a lesson in currency handling. On page 166, Wissot reminds us that “ESL trips don’t necessarily have to go as far as the community at all. There are a multitude of correlated learning patterns and experiences to be gained from the school building alone.” Wissot wants us to know that:

Two criteria for selection should precede each excursion: the applicability and relationship of each trip to the language development taking place in the classroom and the relevancy of the trip to the individual age, social, and economic needs of the participating class group. The trip should not be viewed as a relief from the daily classroom pattern, but rather an extending of the four walls of the classroom to the less restrictive atmosphere of the societal environment (Wissot, pg. 166).

Conclusion: There are other ways in which to successfully teach an ELL class. A teacher can make sure she is clear about the expectations of the assignment; there can be classroom discussion; teacher can give feedback constantly; you can set up your classroom to be a welcoming environment—for example, make sure your classroom is culturally welcoming; know your students; respect them enough to display items from their culture around the class; be culturally competent; As a teacher, you can be willing and open to being a good learner, too.

With that said, I still encourage teachers to try this theory out in class. Even though you are most likely a fine teacher, I wanted show the positive outcomes of the Experiential Learning Theory for English Language Learners. In my experience, the ELT has worked. However, in order to be successful at implement the Experiential Learning Theory, “it is essential for the teacher to develop a learning community in the class that enables the participants to open up their thinking to others in the dialogic process” because “personal growth, . . . , develops through social interaction between the participants” (Kohonen, pg. 6). It is time to dethrone the old, antiquated ways of teaching that have been mandated since the beginning of schools. Long before we recognized learning disabilities, diagnosable behavioral issues, and caring about a student’s background, we had lecturing only one way; that way is the teacher was always right, you do not question the teacher, and there was no such thing as a learning disability. Today, learning disabilities are recognized, behavioral issues are being diagnosed, and teachers are open to learning from students just as much as the students are learning from teachers. Giving students the lead on their own education is empowering, and it can be the best education to pass on to a person.

Works Cited

Cooper, Sunny. "Theories of Learning in Educational Psychology." *Www.lifecircles-inc.com*.

Sunny Cooper, 2009. Web. 5 Oct. 2016. <www.lifecircles-inc.com/Learningtheories/constructivism/kolb.html>. This article talks about Kolb's learning styles. McCarthy (1987) developed the 4Mat system based on Kolb's learning types. Characteristics of the four learning types are Diverger, Assimilator, Converger, and Accommodator. McCarthy recommends certain teaching processes that match these learning styles. For each lesson, the teacher should answer "why," "what," "how," and "what if?" about the lessons to be sure each student with their learning style has learned.

Freedman, Richard D. "What Can One Learn from the Learning Style Inventory?" *The Academy of Management Journal* 21.2 (1978): 275-82. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Oct. 2016. This article explains what the Learning Style Inventory is, which is a set of instruments used in experiential learning about whose measurement properties little is known. The authors explain that while a useful too, the LSI is not studied enough, and there is too much unexplained variance which can lead to misleading results.

Halbert, Harold W. *Strategies for Working One-on-One with ESL Adult Literacy Writers*. *Adult Literacy Independent Learning Packet*. Rep. Washington, DC: Dept of Education, 1996. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 81180. *ERIC [EBSCO]*. Web. 5 Oct. 2016. Special problems faced by ESL adult literacy students are examined. Here the reader can learn strategies for working one-on-one with ESL adult literacy writers. Speaking strategies, before-reading dialogues, reading strategies, and revision negotiation are some of the strategies the reader can learn from this article. Long but worthy.

Kaufman, Dorit. "Constructivist-Based Experiential Learning in Teacher Education." *ERIC*.

N.p., 1996. Web. 20 Oct. 2016. This article examines how when teachers are taught to do experiential learning, then they are more adequate to use the method in their teaching. If teachers are not prepared in their schooling to deliver this method, just like any other method, then they won't be doing a service to their students. This article talks to the reader about a program for teacher preparation in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Kohonen, Viljo. "Learning to learn through reflection—an experiential learning

perspective." Online: <http://www.ecml>.

[at/mtp2/Elp_tt/Results/DM_layout/00_10/05/Supplementary% 20text% 20E. pdf](http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/Elp_tt/Results/DM_layout/00_10/05/Supplementary%20text%20E.pdf) (2007).

This article discusses Experiential Learning Theory. I looked specifically at the part entitled “2. Experiential learning in Foreign Language Pedagogy.” This section talks about the different approaches to foreign language instruction using ELT. Topics are: Grammar-translation method, audio-lingual method, communicative approaches, intercultural learning approach, and intercultural communicative competence.

Kolb, Alice Y. "Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in

Higher Education." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 4.2 (2005): 193-212.

JSTOR. Web. 03 Nov. 2016. This article was written drawing on the foundational theories of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin where they think there is a need of forming a theory of experience in order that education may be intelligently conducted upon the basis of experience. Alice Kolb illustrates the use of the learning space framework in three case studies of longitudinal institutional development.

- Kolb, David A. "Experiential Learning Theory and the Learning Style Inventory: A Reply to Freedman and Stumpf." *The Academy of Management Review* 6.2 (1981): 289-96. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Oct. 2016. This article is a reply to Freedman and Stumpf whose criticisms argue against the Experiential Learning Theory. Kolb defends the ELT by stating that Freedman and Stumpf's findings were based on small, partial studies without research on literature for ELT.
- Mollaei, Fatemeh, and Hamidreza Rahnema. "Experiential Education Contributing to Language Learning." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2.21 (2012): 268-79. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*. Web. 21 Nov. 2016. This article delves into what it takes to apply ELT to a language learning classroom. The authors provide criteria, philosophy, steps to integrating ELT into the classroom, and even provides criticisms, strengths and weaknesses of the theory.
- Reid, Joy M. "The Learning Style Preferences of ESL Students." *TESOL Quarterly* 21.1 (1987): 87-111. *JSTOR*. Web. 03 Nov. 2016. This article talks about the results of a questionnaire that asked 1,388 students to identify their perceptual learning style preferences. It notes that modifications and extensions of ESL student learning styles may occur with changes in academic environment and experience. Covers the statistical analyses of the questionnaires.
- Saul McLeod Published 2010, Updated 2013. "Kolb - Learning Styles." *Kolb's Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle*. Simply Psychology, 01 Jan. 1970. Web. 05 Oct. 2016. <<http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>>. I just looked at pages 9-10 of the 21-page article. These two pages show and explain Kolb's four stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. Experience, Reflection, Conceptualize, Test.