



Experiential learning?

Mark Feder explains the meaning behind having an experiential approach



“Skill to do comes of doing.” Ralph Waldo Emerson



Among the terms used to describe the educational philosophies of institutions these days, the word “experiential” pops up frequently. What exactly does it mean to have an experiential approach, why is it deemed important and what is its significance for language learners? These are some of the questions this article will explore.

Experiential education is frequently defined as “learning by doing.” Traditionally, the student’s role in learning has been a passive one – to absorb the information presented by the teacher or professor and the books used in the class. If one were asked to describe a typical classroom, regardless of subject or level, the picture likely to emerge is that of a teacher standing and speaking to a group of students who listen attentively and perhaps take notes. This is the conventional and predominant image of what a classroom looks like and what education is.

However, this is not the only paradigm for learning that has existed. Socrates used to engage his “students” in a dialogue in which they played an active role and had an opportunity to react to and question the teacher’s words. The scientific method, based on observation, experimentation

and formulation of hypotheses presents yet another alternative to the conventional educational model of taking in and digesting the information presented by an authority figure. In the non-academic realm of artisanship, the practice of learning a trade by observing a skilled professional and gradually developing one’s skills through “hands-on” experience has long been the norm.

For a variety of reasons, the alternative approaches to education portrayed above have infiltrated the academic realm and more and more teachers and institutions are viewing the student as an active participant in the learning process rather than just a passive recipient. Where the goal of education is to develop a skill, whether it be scientific reasoning, critical thinking – or language proficiency – many educators believe that the key to success is not for the student to accumulate information, but to engage directly in the activity.

Traditionally, the language classroom has consisted of the teacher providing information and explanations while the student’s activity was limited to memorization of words and rules and practicing structures through drills and exercises. There was little attempt to engage the student’s interest or foster participation by making lessons more relevant, and little scope for student creativity or discovery. At best, the student was given a chance to parrot phrases or sentences and give set responses to set questions. »



Developments in the field of linguistics, notably research into how human beings acquire their first language, as well as progress in understanding more about the psychology of learning and the role of the affective domain have shaken up conventional notions about language learning. Progressive teachers began to realize that they could better help students attain language proficiency not by teaching them about language but by involving them directly in language use. Their role began to shift from dispensing information to facilitating acquisition.

Georg Lozanov in his language instruction methodology called Suggestopedia, relies on sensory experience to help students retain linguistic information. The methodology called Community Language Learning is based heavily on the principles of psychologist Carl Rogers, a noted proponent of experiential learning. Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way bears a striking resemblance to the Socratic Method in that the teacher does not present information to the student

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but rather elicits responses that allow the student to make discoveries. Stephen Krashen's Natural Approach relies on comprehensible input and actual language use to develop second language skills in much the same way that we acquire our first language.

All of these contributions to language learning pedagogy have changed the look of the modern language classroom. Instead of a teacher standing in front of the room lecturing to class of students, the modern language classroom is more likely to have groups of students busily engaged in discussing a problem or working on a project while the teacher unobtrusively moves from

group to group, observing and facilitating. Students are more likely to be involved in role-plays and simulations than repeating formulations, memorizing lists of words and working through repetitive drills. All of this is a good sign that students are no longer just learning about language but actually learning how to use language as a communication tool. And it's about time. After all, it was 2500 years ago that Confucius said:

I hear and I forget.
I see and I believe.
I do and I understand. 📌

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