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Enhancing Communication Skills through Experiential Learning

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Abstract:

Communication skills play a major role in the fields of academia and industry. Graduate students are expected to possess a certain competency in their communication skills whereby they can meet the ever-growing demands of the industry they choose to work in. As a person who has been in the field of education, I strongly feel that experiential learning is mandatory and it will help students experience authentic situations. The shift from the traditional rote learning is possible through Experiential Learning. Task based learning is the key here and its outcome is long-lasting. Collaboration of educators and learners advocates the interactive approach that in turn enhances communication skills for specific and general purposes. This paper attempts to explain what experiential learning is, and also highlights the inclusion of problem-solving skills that can be enhanced in the process. Critical thinking and reflective learning are also activated and the student is ready for the expectations of the 21st century.

Keywords: Communication skills, Experiential Learning, Problem solving skills.

Introduction

“Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself.” — John Dewey.

It is not enough to show people how to live better: there is a mandate for any group with enormous powers of communication to show people how to be better. -----Marya Mannes (American Journalist)

The new millennium in fields of academia and industry explicitly declare the significance of communication skills. This has led to a variety of courses under the category of English for

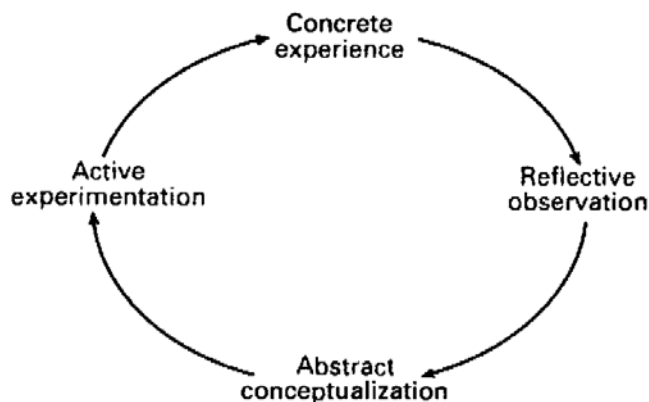
Specific Purposes. However, such courses only help students improve their specific vocabulary and communication skills required for their specific fields of study and work. But what we are interested in is the general communication skills that would be suitable for authentic life situations, in and out of the classroom. This gap ought to be bridged with a different approach to learning the skills, and this could be better handled through Experiential Learning.

Are students really proficient in their communication skills? A million-dollar question! Most employers complain of this lack of proficiency in the use of language to demonstrate and perform the various activities assigned to them in their different work places. We have a large number of degree holders but very few of them possess the efficacy in their communication. This is a growing concern to the employers. Whether in the different fields of teaching or in industries and other organizations, communication skills, both, oral and written have gained colossal importance, and today they need to transcend any particular discipline. The communication skills we need, have to be multi-faceted and help students rise above boundaries of their individual disciplines in which they graduate. Hence, we need to question ourselves as to whether we are ready to face the challenge and roll out students who are efficient and capable of expressing themselves, in turn, pushing their organizations to the peak of success. According to Tipu, S.A., & Ryan, J.C. (2011), the rate of success in any profession depends on the candidate's communication skills. Though this is said in the case of students who graduate from Business Schools, yet it holds true in all types of jobs and situations. In the same way, Gustafson's (1993) survey has ascertained that communication skills are the most imperative tools to realize any success in all fields of employment. Further, he has mentioned that those who are in higher levels are able to fulfill their responsibilities better because they have better communication skills that have been imparted to them in their graduate and undergraduate programs. This proves beyond doubt that, possessing only content knowledge is inadequate and we need the skills to communicate our knowledge. Most of the literature reviews indicate that there has been a shortage in the use of inventive and novel teaching methods. Most of our methods are traditional and thus our students are deficient in their required skills that would help them face the challenges of the corporate world in their places of employment. Our failure to produce competent candidates compels us to understand the absolute need of introducing modern methods in our teaching and learning process. This lack is quite conspicuous by its very absence among students of various professional courses and calls for our immediate attention towards

improving our approaches towards the enhancement of communication skills as inter cultural communication begins to play a dominant role in all spheres of our lives. Thus, one of the best methods to face this situation would be to emphasize experience-based learning, or experiential learning at all levels, beginning from the school level itself and up to the university level.

What is Experiential Learning and why it should be developed is the question relevant to the acquisition of effective communication skills in our present times. Experiential Learning helps elaborate our ideas and combines it with a focused reflection on such ideas. This understanding is in line with Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984; 2014), wherein, he states that experience has to be followed by reflection for learning to be consolidated. Further, he demonstrates four ways of learning, that is, concrete experience, followed by reflection that in turn leads to conceptualization and culminates in active experimentation. His theory is still among the most prominent theories related to experiential learning (as cited in Clevenger, 2015).

BOX 0.1: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING



(based on D. A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice Hall, 1984, p. 42)

The cycle begins with concrete experience that can be a result of keen observation of what is happening around in the classroom. The observation can be one in which the student is involved or one that is gained through vicarious experience. Personal and impersonal experiences influence our reflective processes. Sources of learning can be both, internal and external. The four ways that have been proposed by Kolb therefore, need to be augmented with as many external resources as possible. If and when such a view is accepted and implemented then we can begin with practice and finally evolve theories that would certainly enhance

learning. Such a learning would re-define our need to reflect and conceptualize what has been learned.

The teaching of language either as ESL or EFL is a complicated one that requires presentation and explanation of facts, intensive and extensive practice, and finally testing in the expected skills. This paper intends to establish a connection between experiential learning and enhancing of communication skills. In recent times, there is an exponential rise in the need to train students to become active participants in the teaching and learning process. Individual involvement is on the increase. Learning through experience helps students at all levels to improve their performance levels and take responsibility for their own learning.

If as said, in the previous paragraph, ‘that active involvement in one’s own learning is to be achieved’ then, the role of communication emerges as a predominant trait that needs to be cultivated. This is essential from the elementary level right up to the graduate level and later on manifests itself in the work place. Communication competency, thus, becomes the way to succeed, especially at the Managerial levels. Written and Oral communication has to be given equal importance. Developing these skills at the earliest possible stage is the need of the hour as it enriches and improves ‘soft skills’ necessary for professional and personal growth. Employers all over expect their employees to participate in managing office matters within and without the organizations they work for. Including tasks based learning through real life experiences will lead to a substantial development in communication skills.

Thus, we are now faced with the question of how do we improve the communicative competency of our students and later on our work force. One of the best methods would be to introduce the students to problem-based learning (PBL). This would provide a real hands-on experience to the learner or trainee (if employed). The problem should be an open-ended one which will provide an opportunity for the student to reflect and think critically using their own reasoning to build up their knowledge bank. The teacher, then becomes a facilitator who monitors the learning and doing throughout the activity. This is a genuine paradigm shift from traditional classroom teaching and asserts the need for an abundance of resources to help the learners.

Advantages of Problem Based Learning

Let's discuss a few of the prominent advantages of PBL. It provides an actual lifelong learning by prioritizing comprehension that supports collaborative learning and team work. It fosters interactive learning and motivates the activation of previous knowledge and finally helps increase one's conceptual knowledge. In educational institutions, students begin to take responsibility for their self-improvement and the same is transferred to the work space later on, thus increasing their work and people skills. In other words, they begin to freely communicate with others and are open to new thoughts and ideas. They are more sensitive to what is going on around them and this helps them to become more productive to their individual organizations. The transfer of academic learning to the workplace is what is expected for personal and organizational success. Interpersonal and Intrapersonal skills are naturally reinforced and finally produce a highly motivated employee with improved communicative competency and also the ability to manage any sort of critical situations that may occur in their workplaces. The final outcome is a higher level of learning, and a general improvement in their soft skills. However, in this particular paper, the focus is on communication skills as it tops the list of expected skills in any workplace.

Majority of the students are unable to use their classroom learnt language skills in real life situations and this is proved in different pedagogical researches around the globe. In such a situation, "Experiential Learning" is a useful tool that helps them. All the advantages of PBL can be achieved through such learning. This reminds us of Jim Cummins' BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) and the other related term Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). These terms are connected with language acquisition and learning. The highly conceptualized and abstract learning of the classroom does not always meet the real-life scenarios. In the actual situation, the employee needs to literally think on his or her feet. Critical thinking skills and potential to communicate effectively is all that matters. It is a variety of thinking pattern that makes us reflective. This thinking and reflection form an important aspect of Kolb's theory (1984).

Expression of thought requires effective communicative skills. Hence, both BICS and CALP are equally vital and need to be introduced at all levels of learning (elementary to university). Interpersonal skills together with Academic skills increase the potential of the

workforce. Our next question is how we should help improve these valuable skills. Hence, the focus is on English communication skills since English is now the language of globalization and has permeated all aspects of our lives, nationally and internationally, even locally also the use of English as an everyday language is widely understood and accepted.

John Dewey, a prominent educational theorist of the 20th century stresses the importance of learning through experience and experiment. His theory on education can be directly linked to the learning of communication skills that require real and meaningful situations that will expose the potential of the student to interact and express his or her opinions and views. Later on researchers like Piaget (1950), Kurt Hahn (1957), Paulo Freire (1970), Vygotsky (1978), Kolb (1984), Jarvis (1987), and many others have supported the issue of learning through experience making it more user friendly for general and academic purposes (Marlow MP and Brad McLain, 2011, University of Colorado Denver).

Experiential learning is a definite shift from the traditional rote learning. It promotes task-based learning and the outcome is long-lasting. Further, it advocates the collaboration of educators and learners who focus on an interactive approach to enhance communication skills through the creation of real-life situations in the classroom. Here, the learners are made to construct their own knowledge, skill and value directly from the real environment created. Such created situations should help the learners take responsibility for their own learning and motivate them to greater improvement.

Just being in the learning situation does not suffice, what matters most is what the learner has learnt from that real situation, and how he or she is able to reflect on his or her learning and thus conceptualize the learning and begin to implement and communicate it in different situations in general and in particular (work place). Thus, as mentioned by Clevenger, A. D. (2015), “learning must occur both in the classroom and outside the classroom.” As cited by Clevenger (2015) in his article, Fried (2006) argues that “students should be able to make meaning of their life experiences, in the classroom and in all daily interactions, including labs, plays, videogames, and employment.” According to Clevenger, (2015) a philosophy which provides for a strong theoretical background is Lewin (1946). Kurt Lewin, an experiential learning forerunner, appears in vast numbers of experiential learning studies (Kolb, 1984; Gentry, 1990; Beard & Wilson,

2006). Finally, Lewin suggests the following four conditions are necessary for an experience to be educative:

- 1) there must be a concrete experience, 2) observation and reflection must occur, 3) the learner must form abstract concepts and generalizations, 4) testing of implications of concepts must be done in new situations.

Conclusion

The above discussion clearly proves that learning communication skills through experience by participating in authentic and valid situations and regular interaction is highly productive and will enhance our personal communication skills and also impact our confidence levels. This in turn, leads to a potential work force. Individual ideas are refined by critical thinking and reflective learning, thus culminating in the student's ability to express his or her thoughts through effective communication skills. Hence, adopting the method of Experiential learning would be a boon to students and teachers and even the common people for their everyday activities in and out of the classroom.

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