

The Effectiveness Of The Experiential Learning Activities In Developing English Speaking Skills For Students At Thai Nguyen University Of Economics And Business Administration - TNU

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Abstract: In recent years, with the rapid development of the economy in Vietnam, English language is considered as an effective tool to help students find a good job with high income. Many studies on how to improve learners' speaking skills have been carried out among educational researchers in the world and Viet Nam. However, whether these innovative activities really improve students' speaking skills at Thai Nguyen University has not been fully investigated. Therefore, this study paper introduces a study on the improving students' speaking skills through experiential learning activities of the academic year 2016-2017. The experimental learning, a method was used since it involved the gathering of information about the present conditions. It described the nature of the situation as it existed at the time of the study. It aimed to determine the effectiveness of using experiential learning activities in improving students' speaking skills at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA). The main source of data was the questionnaire and observation to be developed by the writer.

Keywords: speaking skills, communication, experiential learning, experiential learning activities and communication skills.

Date of Submission: 10-09-2017

Date of acceptance: 06-10-2017

I. Introduction

Nowadays, English has become one of the most common languages in most developing countries, especially in Vietnam. The proficiency in English – an international foreign language not only helps the life and work of each person to have new steps in the future but also bring countless exciting experience.

Everyone knows that in this era of globalization, most reputable companies, large corporations require their candidates to be proficient in English communication skills. The English communication fluency not only brings greater chances for students to enter large popular corporations or leading international companies but also provides them various opportunities in new working environment, which requires high competition of promotion and training opportunities.

However, English Language Teaching and Learning in Vietnam is still far from being satisfactory, and unable to suit the needs of the political and economic development of the country. It is not at all exaggerated to say that the majority of secondary school learners, including those who always get good marks in their English examinations, find it hard to communicate even in simple English. The causes of such situation are many, one of which is that they are not given enough time and opportunities to practice speaking English in classes, so they neither are not used to speaking in English or do not know how to communicate effectively or how to use appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions. Moreover, they used to study traditional grammar-based courses so they were structurally competent but communicatively incompetent.

Experiential learning has a different view on a learning process than have most of the traditional methodological theories which have its focus on ratio or on the empirical knowledge. Having 'experience' at its center determines the main difference from the more traditional methods.

Choosing effective methods to develop and improve students' speaking skills is very difficult, but it is at the same time very necessary.

II. Literature Review

Broadly, experiential learning is any learning that supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding to real-world problems or situations where the instructor directs and facilitates learning. The classroom, laboratory, or studio can serve as a setting for experiential learning through embedded activities such as case and problem-based studies, guided inquiry, simulations, experiments, or art projects

(Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

Experiential learning involves observing the phenomenon and doing something meaningful with it through an active participation. It emphasizes learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the phenomenon being studied, rather than just watching it or reading, hearing or thinking about it. Although there is no agreed definition, we can conclude that experiential learning comes from the notion that learners are at the center of the learning process, and that learning is a process of self-discovery.

Experiential learning is learning through reflection on doing. Here, experiential learning focuses on the learning process for the individual. Ambrose (2010) states: "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 contact with them as part of 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 Bound (1993) 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 language, rather than observing the demonstrative behavior of a teacher. Because experiential learning is active learning where 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. In this paper the researchers recommended the use of such learning which may involve one or more of the following instructional strategies: Experiments, Games, Role plays, Discussions, Debates, Picture description, Story retelling, Brainstorming, etc.

The most comprehensively formulated model of experiential learning is that of Kolb (1984). He, together with Roger Fry, created his famous model on experiential learning out of four elements: concrete experiences, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing in new situations.

III. Subject and Methodology

This study was conducted in the second semester of the college year 2016-2017 in Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration, from which the writer is full time lecturer. It is a university where English is taught as one of the main subject in the national curriculum.

The respondents in this study were 55 students from 1 selected faculty of TUEBA. These students came from Faculty of Accounting. Most of the first year students came from northern mountainous provinces. Their ages were between 18 and 21. Their level of English was elementary. They had 3 fifty-minute periods of English per week, one of which was dedicated solely to the speaking skill.

The experimental design, a method type of research was used since it involved the gathering of information about the present conditions. It described the nature of the situation as it existed at the time of the study. It aimed to determine the effectiveness of using experiential learning activities in improving students' English speaking skill of the TUEBA.

The main source of data was the questionnaire and observation to be developed by the researcher. The use of questionnaires is one of the most common research methods because it can produce a large amount of information about many different issues such as communication difficulties, preferred learning styles, preferred classroom activities, attitudes and beliefs (Richards, 2001). And Richards (1994:12) suggests observation is a way of gathering information about teaching, rather than a way of evaluating teaching, although generally observation is associated with evaluation. In his book, Richard discusses two kinds of observation: observation by student teachers of a cooperating teacher-class, and peer observation, in which one teacher observes a colleague's class.

A researcher-made questionnaire prepared and organized as a major tool for some specific questions. The questionnaire consisted of five questions to investigate how students speak English in class and ask for the students' opinions about the necessity of practicing English much more to become good English speakers.

In order to collect data to monitor the desired change, it is impossible for the teacher to record what exactly the students have spoken because during pair and group work, more than one student speaks at a time. Non-verbal gestures and facial expressions used by the students which communicate without the use of words cannot be recorded, either. Consequently, observation is a must for the researcher to fulfill this study.

The research instrument, a researcher-made questionnaire, was prepared and submitted for content validation by two reputable experts in the field of study. After the researcher had the content validation of the questionnaire, she had an official communication with Rector of Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration to ask permission to conduct the study. Then the questionnaires were given to the students, collection of data was made possible. After that the researcher carried out sample activities for students to find out the best ways to improve students' speaking skill through observation.

IV. Findings and Discussions

In this section, the researcher would like to present some results which were collected from the research.

4.1. Students' views on the oral exam of English

Table 1: Students' attitudes towards the English speaking test

Attitude	Rate (%)
Being shame when speaking English because they are afraid of making mistakes in grammar, or vocabulary in the process of speaking	24
Use Vietnamese when being assigned to work in pairs, groups	60
Do not have enough information on assigned topics	44
Lack of vocabulary, grammar to solve questions related to assigned topics	68

(Source: Questionnaire)

According to the survey, in Table 1 we found that the problems of students in Thai Nguyen University of Economics Business and Administration could be divided into four main groups:

- Students felt embarrassed to speak English because they were afraid of making mistakes in grammar or vocabulary in the speaking process. It is often seen at the elementary level students are afraid of being criticized by teachers and other students.
- When assigned to work in pairs (or groups), students usually use their native language. They often use Vietnamese to explain to each other or express ideas when they do not know how to use English vocabulary.
- Students often feel that there is not enough information on the topics discussed even in Vietnamese.
- Students feel lack of language and verbal resources to solve assigned tasks. In that case, the teacher should create a friendly atmosphere of cooperation so students will not have to fear admit their mistakes and will accept the criticism.

4.2. Students' views on the causes leading to their mistakes in the English speaking process

Table 2: Student's view of the causes of the error when speaking English

Causes of Error	Rate (%)
Being afraid of the speaker / lecturer	76
Voice, phonetic, intonation of the judges / lecturers and students themselves	64
Lack of background knowledge, limited vocabulary	100
Speed of speaking is fast, slow or pronounced incorrectly	58
Strange topics, or not yet learned	44
The level of concentration is not good	22

(Source: Questionnaire)

According to the data shown in Table 2, there were many causes, including both subjective and objective causes, which led to errors that students often encounter in the English speaking process. Most students claimed that the lack of background knowledge and vocabulary were the main reasons leading to difficulty in expressing the topics. The pronunciation which was not similar, and the natural speaking pace of native speakers and Vietnamese people also caused great difficulties for students to listen to questions and answered. In addition, many topics that were unfamiliar to students, lack of knowledge and vocabulary also significantly affected to the content that are needed presenting on the topics, although it had been assigned to the students before their English oral test.

Based on the interviews, all respondents indicated that lack of vocabulary as well as phonetics, natural intonation caused many difficulties for students during the process of presenting topics. Some students said that they had difficulty not only in the vocabulary required for the topics, but also the sentence structures. They were unable to translate themselves so they did their task through Google translation. Moreover, students borrowed the materials of the ex-student and tried to remember, or memorized before one or two days before the exam though they didn't understand the content of the topics which they have to present.

Especially, all surveyed students indicated that subjective reasons, such as lack of background knowledge, limited vocabulary and lack of communication skills, had the greatest effect on the accuracy of the answers. On the other hands, objective factors such as voice, phonetics, the intonation of the judges / lecturers and the students themselves were the factors that led to mistakes they made in English speaking exam.

4.3. Strategies applied during the English proficiency test

Table 3 below shows the strategies students usually use in the English oral test

Table 3: Strategies used in the oral test

Strategies	Rate (%)
Use small reactions: Yes / No / Uhm ...	100
Understand the script (using what were given in the curriculum, or suggested)	100
Do not want to use complicated vocabulary, complex grammar structures	78
Use intonation to make the speech more natural and inspirational	54

Listen carefully to the question and identify the keywords in the sentence	50
Do not answer too long	58
Look at the examiner when speaking and feel confident when answering questions	18
Ask the examiner to repeat the question if it is not clear	25
Do not revise too many sentences when it comes to grammatical errors	70
Abuse of existing sample sentences or memorize sample answers	78

(Source: Questionnaire)

According to the results of the survey, all students had the habit of selecting topics that had been prepared in advance or could be found on the Internet. In other words, they try to understand the "script" available for their topic's presentation.

100% of surveyed students used strategies such as using small responses, 78% of students did not use various vocabularies, complicated grammar structures, and 54% of them focused on using intonation to make their speaking become more natural and inspirational.

18% of students felt confident when looking at the judges/lecturers and answer questions confidently. 25% of students felt compelled to ask the examiner to repeat the questions if they did not know. And 70% of them did not know how to revise sentences when they had grammatical errors. 78% students used vocabulary or patterns of sentences which were provided before to memorize sample answers.

4.4. Effective activities found by the students when participating in experiential learning

Experiential learning was introduced in the course taught in English module 2 K13-grade 14. The survey results were collected and analyzed to find out the errors and problems that students were likely to meet during the learning process as well as during the English oral test.

Due to the fact that English speaking skills in the syllabus were mostly role-plays, the author aimed to take on various creative experiments during the experiment. The Table 4 below shows the average percentage of activities which students found effective when participating in experiential learning.

Table 4: Average rate of activities that students feel effective when taking part in experiential activities to develop speaking skill

Activities	Rate (%)
Students give their thoughts on topic assigned by teacher	57%
Students listen to classmates' thoughts and respond	70%
Oral diary; oral weekly report	65%
Group presentations on a topic	72%
Picture description	80%
Story telling	66%
Chained story telling	67%
Creating riddles	56%
Role play	68%
Debates	75%
Dramatic monologues	60%
Jazz chants	55%
Going picnics and in role of a tour guide	85%

(Source: Questionnaire)

The results of a specific analysis of the average activities that students felt effective when taking part in experiential activities of English speaking skills directly involved in the activity they were interested in. Particularly, the students were most interested in the field; in fact 85% students chose the tour guides and considered it to be the most effective. When describing the pictures, 80% of the students considered this activity to be positive activity to help them more actively participate in English speaking activities. 75% of the students considered discussion activity as a topic between groups, which was an active activity that helped them much in speaking skills. 72% of students found that group presentations on a topic also helped them a lot in reinforcing vocabulary and grammatical structures to complete a presentation on a given topic. Other activities also attracted the attention of the students, such as storytelling, drama monologue, making quizzes... However, during the process of taking the quiz, students still make mistakes in the process of speaking English.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

The research topic was conducted on a small issue but initially pointed out the errors that students at elementary level of Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration often had when learning to speak English and the causes of these errors. According to the results of the analysis, errors caused by both objective and subjective causes from the external impact. However, subjective factors related to lack of background knowledge and poor level of English listening and speaking skills were the main factors leading to

poor results of oral exam. At the same time, the study also outlined the strategies that students could use to practice in the practice speaking English. From that fact, the writer proposes some solutions to increase vocabulary, general listening comprehension and English speaking skills in particular, specifically how to build vocabulary, where words can be derived, where to focus the content, how to identify in pronunciation, pronunciation, intonation, and content. Learning through the given topic, etc., is indicated in the solution. These suggestions not only help students improve their English speaking skills but also help them develop their listening comprehension in general to better serve their practical communication.

5.2. Recommendations

School administrators should organize seminars that will accustom teachers on how to use experiential learning to develop English speaking skills and other methods in teaching their respective subjects. English teachers should assess and evaluate their present methods of teaching if these are still effective and integrate the experiential learning in their present style of teaching.

They should take note of their differences and then assess their students' performance in their respective subject to determine if they are copying well and then try to motivate themselves and their students using modern approach to make teaching and learning English become more effective.

Other researchers should compare the English performance of students who are exposed and treated with experiential learning and other modern ways of teaching with those who received the traditional method of teaching.

They should make further intensive and extensive studies should be made regarding the use of effective methods in teaching speaking English and other subjects as well and propose a study on the same topic.

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Duong ThiHuongLan. "The Effectiveness Of The Experiential Learning Activities In Developing English Speaking Skills For Students At Thai Nguyen University Of Economics And Business Administration - Tnu." *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)* , vol. 7, no. 5, 2017, pp. 83–87.