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Experiential Learning to Promote Student Autonomy at Elementary Level

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Abstract
The primary objective of this research is to assess Learners' Autonomy by implementing Experiential Learning in a role-play activity among class 8 elementary students at a private-sector English Medium School. Experiential Learning, which is a learner-friendly approach, has not been extensively explored at the fundamental level. However, its importance, often referred to as "learning by doing" or "hands-on approaches," has been acknowledged in various writings and research. Over time, Experiential Learning has gained popularity among adult learners and is considered crucial in educational institutions. To conduct this study, a thorough review of the literature was conducted, leading to the development of a hypothesis. The research strategy involved the use of a survey, and the study's population comprised students from elementary private schools in Karachi. A straightforward random sampling design was adopted, resulting in a sample size of 118 students as participants. For data collection, two questionnaires were employed: the Experiential Learning Scale (ELS) by Clem and Beasley, and the Learner Autonomous Scale (LAS) by Fletcher and Averill. The data was then analyzed using SPSS, with inferential statistics, correlation, and linear regression methods. The findings revealed a strong correlation between the variables (EL) and (LA). Moreover, at a significance level of 0.05, the overall relationship between all Experiential Learning and Learner Autonomous categories was determined to be moderate. Based on the overall linear regression model, instructors and practitioners are encouraged to incorporate Experiential Learning into their teaching methodologies. Additionally, the study suggests further exploration of the concept of Autonomous Learning through this process, and proposes a comparative study to assess how this approach influences students' engagement in various curricula.

INTRODUCTION

The experiential learning approach revolves around the notion that learners acquire skills and knowledge directly through their experiences. It actively encourages learners to choose and engage in their own experiences, fostering learner autonomy (Atherton, 2009). Learner autonomy refers to the ability to learn independently and is closely linked to experiential learning, which emphasizes learning without direct teacher involvement (Benson, 2013).

Kolb (1984) developed the concept of experiential learning, viewing learning as a process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This transformation occurs by combining the grasping and transforming of experiences. Experiential learning helps learners memorize what they hear and do, facilitating the connection between theory and real-world applications, enhancing motivation, and improving learning retention. This process involves learners engaging in a concrete experience, reflecting on that experience and other information, developing theories based on experiences and knowledge, and then applying them to formulate conclusions or solve problems.

Experience plays a crucial role in problem-solving (Bernik & Žnidaršič, 2012), and students often view experiences as sources of knowledge to analyze and solve problems by combining theories with practical applications (Hawtry, 2007; Brickner & Etter, 2008; Bernik & Žnidaršič, 2012). Experiential learning goes beyond learning from textbooks and teachers; it involves a synergetic transaction between the individual and the environment.

Through experiential learning, students' personalities can change and their level of optimism can increase. They become better equipped to cope with adversity and perceive negative events as temporary, limited, and manageable, even when facing challenges such as receiving poor grades on exams or projects (Sheimaili, 2013). Experiential learning provides a pathway to explore and develop these skills. Adversity plays a vital role in keeping students actively engaged. When students take an active role in the learning process, their learning outcomes are optimized (Smart & Csapo, 2007). Students with high adversity quotient are more likely to believe in their ability to handle challenges during experiential learning, enabling them to navigate through problems effectively.

Research by Newsome et al. (2005) has shown that the experiential learning approach enhances various aspects of learning, including cognition, critical thinking skills, knowledge acquisition, retention, and retrieval, leading to improved overall achievement. Successful experiential learners tend to develop into autonomous learners who are capable of working independently or collaboratively (Moon, 2004). The process of reflection and application is crucial in ensuring a deeper understanding of abstract concepts, regardless of the specific activity being used.

According to the theory of Social Determination, individuals naturally have a propensity for learning, but autonomy and a conducive learning environment are necessary for effective learning. The transition from inexperienced learners to engaged and enthusiastic learners who enjoy both learning and interacting with their peers is of paramount importance (Dam, 2011). For students, autonomy in the learning process means taking ownership of their own growth and development, making choices that align with their goals, and transforming the role of the instructor from a traditional teacher to that of a facilitator (Ünal et al., 2017). Motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, plays a significant role in the learning process. While extrinsic motivation, such as grades, can serve as an initial impetus, intrinsic motivation is crucial for sustaining interest and long-term engagement (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009).

To encourage autonomous learning, instructors need to create an enabling environment. This involves allowing for maximum experience-based inquiry and active engagement of faculties, rather than merely passive listening (Dolotallas & Nagtalon, 2015). Assigning tasks that match the students' abilities and giving them the freedom to explore and engage with these tasks are essential elements in fostering autonomy. Instructors, in this context, act as facilitators, integrating autonomous learning into the curriculum and providing opportunities for tasks, pre-task strategies, and post-task reflection (Al Asmari, 2013).

The purpose of this research is to promote autonomy, facilitated by instructors, and encourage students to become self-learners in the most suitable learning environment. The use of role-playing as an activity offers the advantage of simulating real-world situations, allowing for experiential learning that fosters empathy and adaptability (Gerber, 2015). By incorporating such activities, educators can empower students to take charge of their learning journey and develop critical skills that are relevant both inside and outside the classroom.

METHODS

In this research study, a total of 118 students from a private sector English Medium school in class 8 were chosen through random selection to participate. To facilitate data collection and analysis, the students were divided into 8 sections, each consisting of approximately 15 students. As part of their curriculum, these students engaged in a role-play activity. The data collected from them was analyzed using statistical techniques such as correlation and regression to explore the relationship between experiential learning and learner autonomy.

To gather data, the students completed two questionnaires: the Experiential Learning Scale (ELS) questionnaire developed by Clem and Beasley (2014), and the Learner Autonomous Scale (LAS) questionnaire developed by Fletcher and Averill (1984). Both questionnaires had four dimensions, and the students rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale. The main purpose of these questionnaires was to assess the students' experiential learning and learner autonomy. In order to ensure objectivity and fairness in the data collection process, the study was designed to be gender-blind, including both male and female students. Additionally, as an ethical measure, the students were asked to sign consent forms before participating in the research.

Before the actual role-playing activity, the students were exposed to a preliminary role-playing exercise to familiarize themselves with the process. Following this preparation, they proceeded with the actual role-play activity, and data was collected after this final activity. It is worth noting that the students were granted complete autonomy in forming their groups and constructing the dialogues during the role-play. This autonomy allowed them to express their creativity and decision-making skills in the learning process.

An important aspect to consider was that the data collection process was time-limited due to the constraints imposed by the curriculum and classroom schedule. Despite this limitation, the study successfully explored the relationship between experiential learning and learner autonomy among the participants. This indicates that even with time constraints, valuable insights into the impact of experiential learning on learner autonomy were obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the link between Experiential Learning and Autonomous Learners. The findings from the data analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation between Experiential Learning (EL) and Learner Autonomous (LA)

	Pearson Value	Inventiveness	Assurance	Re-Assurance	Collaboration	Total
Experiential Learning	r	.782**	.678**	.567**	.809**	.989**
Authenticity	r	.793**	.568**	.679**	.887**	.746*
Active Learning	r	.561**	.401*	.712**	.676**	.549**
Relevance	r	.345*	.467*	566**	678**	.394**
Utility	r	.520**	.289**	.764**	.595**	.512**

Table 1 displays the correlation between four aspects of Experiential Learning and Learner Autonomous, along with all its functions, at a significance level of 0.05. The correlation coefficient between Experiential Learning and Learner Autonomous is recorded as 0.989, indicating a strong and positive association between these variables. Additionally, Active Learning and Utility demonstrate a moderately strong correlation with the total Learner Autonomous score, whereas Relevance shows a notably weaker correlation.

Overall, when considering all four aspects of Experiential Learning and their relationship with Learner Autonomous, the study reveals a moderate connection at the 0.05 significance level.

Table 2. Linear Regression analysis of Experiential Learning (EL) and Learner Autonomous (LA)

			Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient		
Model	R	R^2	B	std. Error	Beta	T	sig
(Constant)	.530[a]	.331	2.355			10.974	.000
Experiential Learning			.430	.530		7.858	.000

The results of the linear regression analysis for the Experiential Learning (EL) with Learner Autonomous (LA) score are shown in Table 2. According to the overall linear regression model, there

is only (R^2 =.331, P.05) variation in Learner Autonomy due to Experiential Learning. In other words, the results indicated that Experiential Leaning as perceived by students about 33% of the total variance in the Leaner Autonomous. According to the overall linear regression model, there is only (R^2 =.331, P.05) variation in Learner Autonomy due to Experiential Learning.

The research study reached a conclusion that there is a positive correlation between Learners' Autonomy and Experiential Learning. The study involved class 8 elementary students who engaged in a role-play activity as part of their curriculum at a private sector English Medium School. Data analysis included statistical techniques such as correlation and regression. The students completed both the Experiential Learning Scale (ELS) and Learner Autonomous Scale (LAS) questionnaires, and the Cronbach alpha value for both scales was 0.97, indicating high reliability.

The correlation coefficient (r) between Experiential Learning and Learner Autonomous was found to be 0.989, signifying a strong correlation between these two variables. The overall relationship between all categories of Experiential Learning and Learner Autonomous was determined to be moderate at a significance level of 0.05. The overall linear regression model indicated that 33.1% of the variation in Learner Autonomous can be explained by Experiential Learning.

Based on the study's findings, educators and practitioners are strongly encouraged to integrate Experiential Learning into their teaching methodologies. The positive impact of Experiential Learning on learners' autonomy and its potential to enhance individual learning awareness and decision-making capabilities (Cotterall, 2000) make it a valuable approach to adopt in educational settings. To foster reflective learning, it is important to design tasks and activities that prompt students to contemplate and evaluate their learning process (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2019). This can lead to deeper understanding and metacognitive development.

Considering the potential benefits of Experiential Learning, conducting a comparative study to assess its effects on students in different curricula is recommended. Such a study could provide valuable insights into the applicability and effectiveness of this approach across diverse learning contexts.

The success of the learning process is greatly influenced by creating a supportive and conducive environment that boosts participants' confidence in their abilities to achieve success. Facilitators can contribute to this success by adopting practices that go beyond traditional norms and promote innovative thinking patterns among students (Clements & Cord, 2013). By encouraging creativity and independent problem-solving, educators can empower students to become proactive learners.

The role-play activity used in the study proved to be a valuable tool to engage students in a novel learning experience. For many students, this activity was entirely new, generating interest and enthusiasm among participants. Additionally, engaging in activities that promote emotional and social development can positively impact students' overall well-being (Barry Clarke et al., 2018). As role-play often involves social interactions and shared experiences, it can contribute to the development of interpersonal skills and empathy.

The collaborative nature of the role-play activity further enhanced the learning experience. Active involvement in group tasks fostered a sense of belonging and self-esteem among the students (Van, 2011). The need for close coordination within groups to create synergy in constructing dialogues also encouraged students to work collaboratively and make decisions collectively. This process not only boosted their confidence but also helped them develop crucial teamwork skills.

The concept of students as researchers or explorers of classroom life, alongside teachers, aligns with the principles of Exploratory Practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Empowering students to act as co-researchers in the teaching context, as demonstrated by Pinter et al. (2016), can create a dynamic and interactive learning environment where students take an active role in their own education. This approach promotes a deeper understanding of concepts and encourages student engagement.

To facilitate such a cooperative-based learning process and establish an optimal learning environment, the role of the instructor is pivotal. Building trust and establishing positive relationships between the teacher and students are crucial aspects of this process (Gerber et al., 2015). When

students feel valued and supported, they are more likely to actively participate and take ownership of their learning.

In summary, the role-play activity not only provided a novel learning experience but also contributed to the development of collaborative skills, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging among students. The study's findings underscore the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment, where students are encouraged to actively engage in their own learning process. Adopting Experiential Learning methods and promoting collaborative and exploratory approaches can lead to more empowered and autonomous learners, preparing them for success in various aspects of life beyond the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the implementation of Experiential Learning-Based Teaching positively impacts learners' autonomy and leads to improvements in cognitive ability, collaboration, authenticity, and assurance among students. The study suggests that Experiential Learning (EL) fosters a safe, flexible, and engaging classroom environment, driven by social interaction, the sharing of experiences, and reflection.

Before experiencing the intervention tasks, students tended to view the teacher as solely responsible for their learning in the classroom. However, through engaging in Experiential Learning activities, their perspective shifted. They became more focused and accepted responsibility for their own learning. This transformation from dependency on the teacher to a sense of independence is crucial for preparing students for real-life situations where individuals must take the initiative to solve problems rather than relying solely on authority figures.

In summary, the study highlights the effectiveness of Experiential Learning-Based Teaching in enhancing learners' autonomy and fostering important skills such as cognitive ability, collaboration, authenticity, and assurance. By creating a dynamic and interactive learning environment, Experiential Learning empowers students to take charge of their own learning journey, preparing them to face challenges with confidence and independence in various contexts, including the workplace.

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