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Learning to learn through reflection – an experiential learning perspective

1. What is experiential learning?

Recent approaches to foreign language education emphasise the significance of the *students' own contributions* to their language learning through initiative-taking and active involvement. Students need to take charge of their learning in order to enhance their autonomy as students and language users. This shift in the research has brought an increased interest the *students themselves* as learners in general and as language learners in particular. Students need to be facilitated to develop a basic reflective orientation by working on their experiences, beliefs and assumptions of language and learning. (Breen (ed.) 2001; Jaatinen 2001; Johnson 2004; Kaikkonen 2002; Kalaja and Barcelos (eds) 2003; Kohonen 2001, 2004; Lehtovaara 2001; Little 2001, 2004; Watson-Gegeo 2004; van Lier 2004.)

Experiences of language, communication, culture and personal learning processes are essential for foreign language learning – but they need to be processed consciously for learning to take place. Learning requires an explicit awareness and understanding of what it is that needs to be learned (metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness), and why such learning is necessary. Learning is the process of creating new knowledge and understandings through the *transformation of experience*. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualisation.

The *experiential learning* is an educational orientation which aims at integrating theoretical and practical elements of learning for a whole-person approach, emphasising the significance of experience for learning. The approach is well-known in various settings of informal learning, such as internships in business and service organisations, work and study assignments, clinical experience, international exchange and volunteer programmes, etc. However, the principles and practices can be used both in formal learning (institutional) contexts and in informal learning. Experiential learning techniques include a rich variety of interactive practices whereby the participants have opportunities to learn from their own and each others' experiences, being actively and personally engaged in the process:

- personal journals, diaries
- portfolios

- reflective personal essays and thought questions
- role plays, drama activities
- games and simulations
- personal stories and case studies
- visualisations and imaginative activities
- models, analogies and theory construction
- empathy-taking activities
- story-telling, sharing with others
- discussions and reflection in cooperative groups

All of these contain a common element of learning from immediate experience by engaging the learners in the process as whole persons, both intellectually and emotionally. Experiential learning involves observing the phenomenon and doing something meaningful with it through an active participation. It emphasises 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 (Kolb 1984; Kohonen 2001).

Experiential learning consists of the following four components (Woolfe 1992, 1): 1. The student is aware of the processes which are taking place, and which are enabling learning to occur. 2. The student is involved in a reflective experience which enables him/ her to relate current learning to past, present and future, even if these relationships are felt rather than thought. 3. The experience and content are personally significant: what is being learned and how it is being learned have a special importance for the person. 4. There is an involvement of the whole self: body, thoughts, feelings and actions, not just of the mind; in other words, the student is engaged as a whole person.

In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is the focal point for learning. As pointed out by David Kolb (1984, 21), personal experience gives the “life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts”. At the same time it also provides “a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process”. Experience alone is not, however, a sufficient condition for learning. Experiences also need to be processed consciously by reflecting on them.

Experiential learning is a cyclic process that integrates immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and action. As Leo van Lier (1996, 11) points out, learning something requires that one *notices* it in the first place: “This noticing is an awareness of its existence, obtained and enhanced by paying attention to it. Paying attention is focusing one’s consciousness, or pointing one’s perceptual powers in the right direction, and making mental ‘energy’ available for processing”. To learn something, one has to notice it and be motivated to do something about it through a conscious effort. This integration of cognitive, affective and

volitional components of personality means a holistic, whole-person approach to learning.

David Kolb (1984, 42) advances a general theoretical model of experiential learning as shown in Figure 1.

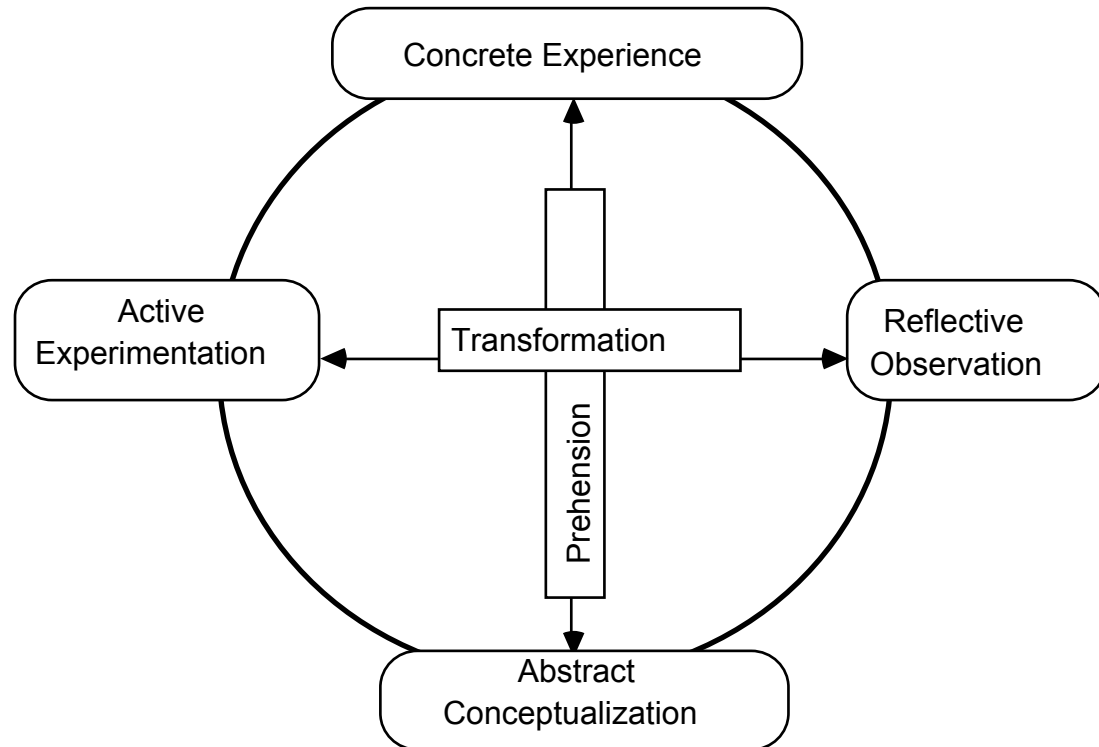


Figure 1. Model of Experiential Learning.

According to the model, learning is essentially a process of resolution of conflicts between two dialectically opposed dimensions, the *prehension* dimension and the *transformation* dimension.

(1) The *prehension dimension* explores the ways in which the individual grasps experience. The dimension includes two polar ends of the *ways of knowing*, ranging from unconscious, intuitive experience (involving tacit knowledge) to a conscious comprehension of the experience. Abstract conceptualisation structures and organises the flow of unconscious sensations. Reality is thus grasped and made sense of through varying degrees of unconscious and conscious learning.

(2) The *transformation dimension* entails the transformation of experience through reflective observation and active experimentation. An individual with an active orientation is willing to take risks and has little concern for errors or failure. An individual with a reflective orientation, on the other hand, may withdraw from such risks, preferring to transform experiences through reflective observation.

The polar ends of the two dimensions thus yield four orientations to learning (Kolb 1984; Kohonen 2001):

(1) *concrete experience*, learning by intuition, with an emphasis on personal experiences, belonging and feeling. The instructional activities that support this aspect include small group discussions, simulation and drama techniques, and the use of videos, films, examples and stories.

(2) *reflective observation*, learning by perception, focuses on understanding the ideas and situations by careful observation. The learner is concerned with how things happen by attempting to see them from different perspectives and relying on one's thoughts, feelings and judgement. The instructional techniques include personal journals, reflective essays, observation reports, thought questions and discussions.

(3) *abstract conceptualisation*, learning by rigorous thinking, using a systematic approach to structure and frame the phenomena. Emphasis is placed on the definition and classification of abstract ideas and concepts, aiming at precise conceptual categories. The instructional techniques include theory construction, lecturing and building models and analogies.

(4) *active experimentation*, learning by action, emphasises practical applications in real work life contexts. The learner attempts to influence people and change situations as necessary, taking risks in order to get things done. The instructional techniques include fieldwork, various projects, laboratory work, games, dramatisations and simulations.

Experiential learning thus consists of a four-stage cycle combining all of these orientations. Experience gives food for reflective thinking, which in turn leads to abstract conceptualisations and hypotheses to be tried out through active experimentation. Practical action, in turn, yields concrete experiential material for reflection. I wish to argue further that theoretical concepts will become part of the individual's frame of reference only after he has experienced them meaningfully at an emotional level. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge, as it were, between experience and theoretical conceptualisation.

In traditional teacher-directed approaches using structured lesson or lecture formats and teacher-initiated decisions, learning takes place mainly at an intellectual level. The students remain more or less passive recipients of information that does not require them to examine their own emotional responses to the subject material. They can thus remain personally unaware of the effects of their own response to the subject material on themselves or on other people, and the intensity of such responses. This can lead to an *inadequate application* of knowledge in the use of the subject material in authentic real-life occasions.

Tony Hobbs gives a good example of the problem. If student nurses or doctors are taught about how to encounter dying patients or

their relatives and the information is imparted to them in a teacher-directed mode, they do not have the necessary opportunity to reflect on their own thoughts and possible fears of death and examine such deep feelings together with their peers in the first place. In such cases they do not learn how their own fears of death might affect the quality of their work with such people (Hobbs 1992, xiv).

I wish to argue therefore that theoretical concepts will become part of the individual's frame of reference only after he has experienced them meaningfully at an emotional level. Experiential learning aims for a qualitatively different degree of learning from that resulting from teacher-directed learning. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge, as it were, between experience and theoretical conceptualisation.

From the teacher's point of view, experiential learning means that opportunities are provided for the full development of the cycle. Different instructional techniques promote different aspects of learning. The traditional academic setting has tended to emphasize reflective observation and concept formation at the expense of practical action and immediate concrete experiences. The model also cautions against the opposite extreme, the assumption that any experience leads automatically to learning. Only experience that is reflected upon seriously yields its full measure of learning. Reflection needs to be followed by the framing and conceptualising of the phenomena through appropriate theory-building.

2. Experiential learning in foreign language pedagogy

I find it interesting to relate the four learning orientations to the historical developments in foreign language pedagogy. The *grammar-translation method* was obviously strong on the abstract conceptualisation of the linguistic system of the target language, at the expense of spoken fluency. This is because it focused on explicit grammatical rules and categories, analysing texts to consolidate grammar and fine-tune vocabulary, and translating texts for accuracy of expression.

The behaviouristic approaches, such as the *audiolingual method*, were strong on concrete experience. They emphasised oral communication skills which were build up in a careful progression of syntactic structures using a variety of pattern drill exercises. It was argued that grammar was best learned inductively from actual examples of use, and the purpose of the extensive drills was to automatise the structural patterns. The method deliberately avoided giving grammatical rules and theoretical explanations as these were perceived to interfere with the unconscious learning cycle leading to habit formation and automatisation. The necessary new vocabulary was similarly introduced through

demonstrations and visuals, relying on active learner participation and experience.

The *communicative approaches*, on the other hand, have shifted attention somewhat back on abstract conceptualisation, aiming at a conscious understanding of the linguistic system as a condition for an effective communicative use of language. Affective factors are also taken more into consideration, with an emphasis on learner initiative and meaningful communication in social contexts.

In the current *intercultural learning approach*, emphasis is clearly shifted further towards reflecting on the personal, emotional and social elements inherent in authentic communication. Whereas communicative competence related primarily to the individual's knowledge and skills in communicative situations, intercultural competence also focuses on the learner's personal identity, social abilities and attitudes, such as risk-taking, ambiguity tolerance and respect for cultural and individual diversity. It further emphasises the importance of a reflective awareness of language use and cultural elements in intercultural settings. It thus aims at an integrated and a more balanced view of the different learning orientations discussed in experiential learning theory.

Intercultural communicative competence is an action-oriented concept, suggesting the importance of relating to otherness and foreignness in human encounters. As intercultural communication is also a question of attitudes and emotions, becoming an intercultural language user clearly emphasises the central role of the affective elements in foreign and second language education. It entails an element of personal growth as a human being and a language user.

Personal growth, however, develops through social interaction between the participants, as noted in recent *sociocultural theories* of language learning (Lantolf 2000; Little 2001, 2004; Johnson 2004; Watson-Gegeo 2004; van Lier 2004). The quality of the interaction between the participants shapes the individual construction of the meanings. To foster interaction, 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 a dialogic process.

Dialogue essentially entails a respect for the other person, encountering him or her as a unique person and being ready for genuine interaction and sharing of meanings. It also means an openness to the subject matter at hand, aiming at understanding the diversity of views and opinions. Building a community of learners is fostered by the use of *cooperative learning* techniques (Kohonen 1992; Sharan (ed.) 1994). Cooperative learning groups provide a supportive affective environment for the development of belonging and new understandings. Student talk can be harnessed to the exploration of dawning understandings and new

learnings. At its best it can lead into something quite different from authoritarian, teacher-directed classroom discourse.

Working towards a dialogue in teaching means meeting the student as a partner in a reciprocal relationship. The teacher encourages her students to strive for authenticity in their language use and learning experiences through her genuine presence in the class. This involves consistency, integrity and respect, and the recognition of their achievements (van Lier 1996,19). Experiential learning aims at integrating linguistic and learning theories into a holistic and an internally consistent educational approach to language teaching. It provides useful pedagogical concepts and tools for developing language teaching as *foreign language education*.

3. Experiential learning through transformative teacher growth

Developing foreign language teaching towards language education is very much a question of the teacher's professional growth and a new collegial institutional culture. Student development needs to be accompanied by and consciously linked to the *teacher's professional growth* towards an ethical, educational stance. Further, teacher development needs to be embedded in the context of a purposeful *staff development towards a collegial institutional culture*, connected with the society developments at large (Kohonen 2003, 2004).

The ways of supporting the growth processes through preservice and inservice teacher education are discussed in recent literature with reference to *transformative learning*. Essential in this concept is that the teachers emancipate themselves from their constraining educational beliefs and assumptions and work towards a professional identity as an educator, designing new pedagogical solutions as appropriate. The change is an experiential process that integrates the cognitive, social and emotional aspects of professional learning.

Transformative learning includes the following properties (Askew & Carnell 1998; Darling-Hammond 1998; Edge 2002; Kohonen 2001; 2003; 2004; Huttunen 2003):

- 1 Realising the significance of *professional interaction* for growth
- 2 Developing an *open, critical stance to professional work* and seeing oneself as a continuous learner
- 3 Developing a *reflective attitude as a basic habit of mind*, involving reflection on educational practices and their philosophical underpinnings,
- 4 Developing *new self-understandings* in concrete situations,
- 5 Reflecting on *critical events or incidents* in life and work history and learning from the personal insights

6 Conscious *risk-taking*: acting in new ways in classes and in the work community

7 *Ambiguity tolerance*: learning to live with uncertainty concerning the decisions to be made

The approach emphasises the teacher's self-understanding, based on pedagogical reflection in concrete situations with the students. Linda Darling-Hammond points out that teachers learn by observing and listening to their students carefully and looking at their work thoughtfully. This develops their understanding of how their students see themselves as learners, what they care about, and what tasks are likely to give them enough challenge and success to sustain motivation. Teacher learning therefore needs to be connected with actual teaching, supported by ongoing reflection and theory building: "Teachers learn best by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see." (Darling-Hammond 1998,8).

To develop curriculum, teachers need to share their ideas, insights and uncertainties with each other. They need to clarify and redefine their educational beliefs, images and assumptions. They need to work towards increased reflectivity by considering their goals and practices, judging their findings against empirical classroom-based evidence. The purpose of the reflective work is to integrate their professional beliefs and theoretical knowledge into new professional meanings and concrete practices for the benefit of student learning. Transformative teacher learning thus entails that teachers move from the role of being consumers of outside expert knowledge towards taking an active role as curriculum developers and researchers of their work.

Transformative teacher learning requires time for thoughtful reflection, collegial discussions and planning for site-based pedagogical action. Teachers also need time for collecting their observations, reflecting on them and modifying their action, based on the findings. This is a question of time, effort and commitment. This is why transformative learning should not be pushed through too hastily in the interest of efficient school management. Changes of the magnitude of paradigmatic shifts in teacher thinking, pedagogical action and school culture do not take place overnight. They are inevitably a function of time and explicit concrete support in any profession.

Besides, the students are similarly in need of time, guidance and support in their process of assuming a more autonomous role as learners. Self-directed language learning poses great demands on the students' ability to cope with the uncertainties in developing their skills of reflection and self-assessment. Taking charge of their learning as socially responsible members of the classroom community is similarly a new

learning culture for many students. Students can take control of more and more aspects of the learning process only to the extent that they assume the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and engagement for the new goals and ways of organising their work and working together (Kohonen 2003, 2004; Little 2001; 2004).

Margarita Limón Luque discusses professional learning as a matter of integrating the intellectual, emotional and behavioural components of personality development into a conscious capacity for action. She points out that the following three conditions are necessary for a conceptual change (Luque 2003, 135–140): (a) knowledge and understanding of what it is that needs to be changed (*metacognitive/-linguistic condition*), (b) motivation for the change (*volitional condition*: engagement, commitment), and (c) self-regulation of the change process (*condition of self-regulation*: goal-setting, monitoring, self-assessment).

An *intentional conceptual change* becomes possible when the person understands the reasons for it and is facilitated to plan, monitor and evaluate the change processes. As the skills of self-regulation develop, the person gets positive rewards from the process and becomes more motivated for the changes, with proper support and encouragement. Reflection is an essential element in all of these conditions, and it needs to be facilitated explicitly (Kohonen 2005).

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