

EFL Learning Experiences Developed in Communicative Courses at Universidad Nacional

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Abstract

Learning experiences are those moments in which learners are involved in activities that promote thinking, doing and feeling as an integrated process to develop language learning. In order to achieve this main goal, the teaching-learning process should incorporate principles from the Humanistic, Constructivist and Holistic approaches which stress the importance of designing learning experiences. As research states, learning should be a process of comfort, pleasure and motivation for students to become independent and successful life-oriented learners.

Key words: learning experiences, humanism, holism and constructivism, foreign language teaching, learner-centered classes, integrated process, language achievement

Resumen

Las experiencias de aprendizaje involucran actividades que promueven el pensamiento, el quehacer y el sentir como un proceso integral para desarrollar el aprendizaje de una lengua. Para lograr esto, el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje debe incorporar principios de los enfoques Humanístico, Constructivista y Holístico, los cuales enfatizan la importancia de diseñar experiencias de aprendizaje. Investigaciones realizadas exponen que el aprendizaje debe ser un proceso de bienestar y motivación con el fin de obtener independencia y éxito.

Palabras claves: experiencias de aprendizaje, humanismo, holismo y constructivismo, enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, clases orientadas a los aprendientes, proceso integral, adquisición del idioma

This new educational era is guided by the humanistic educational paradigm in which learning experiences help students create their own understanding and use knowledge in order to learn how to learn, to solve problems, and to face the challenges of this century. Maturana (2003) defines learning experiences as the moments in which pupils process new information through their own

organization in order to learn. These experiences have the purpose to awaken the senses and pleasure to feel as active participants of their own learning. They feel very motivated and enthusiastic in taking part in activities designed to develop their language skills. In fact, these experiences promote learning for living since students become holistic individuals who view life with enthusiasm, curiosity and love for learning.

Learning experiences and dynamic activities promote the sense of pleasure and enjoyment when learning a foreign language. These feelings and emotions are part of the learning process since "learning just emerges in its revitalizing dimension when it is related to pleasure," according to Capra (2002, p. 28). As a result, all the activities organized in the classroom are meant to develop learners' sensation of satisfaction. This principle of carrying out activities for pleasure is also pointed out by Krashen and Terrell (1983) who state that learning activities should be designed for students' comfort and enjoyment to use the language in a natural and stress-free atmosphere.

Nowadays, humanity is immersed in a kind of world where reality is transformed daily; this demands new methodologies and strategies in language teaching for a more well-rounded education, which can satisfy the needs of the learners to adapt to the new changes and challenges of this century. Within the new humanistic paradigm, the approach followed by this proposed learning-teaching process stresses the use of both the left and right hemispheres of the brain and employs information from theories of multiple intelligences, suggestopedia, communicative language teaching and neuro-linguistic programming. These approaches view learners as creative and critical thinkers who use their own learning styles, develop metacognitive skills and use their potential for success.

Learning Experiences in the Holistic Paradigm

Learning experiences are holistic, enjoyable, meaningful, engaging, life enriching and useful. They also have a specific purpose for language development and improvement, motivation, attitude change, interaction and creativity. According to Gutiérrez (2003, p. 46-47), learning experiences have the following characteristics:

- They are part of life such as events, facts, anecdotes or testimonies.
- They stimulate all senses.
- They must be enjoyable as moments of satisfaction, accomplishment and fun.
- They must develop interest and arouse emotions.
- They must create and recreate relations within their social and cultural context.
- They must be related to personal experience.
- They must help transform reality.

Humanity has begun a new era that surpassed the old paradigm of fragmentation, control, regulations and schedules. Today educators believe and follow

the new holistic approach as an act of transformation which emphasizes that, “all living things and non-living things are connected: we are joined to others and to other nonhuman beings that surround us” (Gallegos, 1999, p. 28). Holistic education is essentially a democratic education, concerned with both individual freedom and social responsibility. It is education for a culture of peace, for sustainability and ecological literacy, and for the development of humanity’s inherent morality and spirituality. In a holistic environment, imaginative and original learning experiences allow students to enjoy self-creation since goals are achieved. As stated by Morin (2003, p. 45), “the human mind opens to the world. The opening to the world is revealed by curiosity, interrogation, exploration, search, and passion to know and learn.” Holistic learning is organized around relationships among students and their environment while empowering them to engage in the teaching/learning process. Stack (2008) summarizes that Holistic Education:

- is concerned with the growth of every person’s intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potentials.,
- is a quest for understanding and meaning. Its aim is to nurture healthy, whole, curious individuals who can learn whatever they need to know in any new context.,
- recognizes the innate potential of every student for intelligent, creative and critical thinking.,
- recognizes that all knowledge is created within a cultural context and that the “facts” are seldom more than shared points of view. It encourages learners to critically approach the cultural, moral and political contexts of their lives.,
- values spiritual knowledge. Spirituality is a state of connectedness to all life, honoring diversity in unity. It is an experience of being, belonging and caring.

Learning occurs when the pedagogical process is “meaningful for students just when there is a reconfirmation of the complex system of the brain/mind.” (Assmann, 2002, p. 40). Within this new paradigm, learning has become life; as a result, learning experiences help transform reality that turns into an atmosphere of freedom and love for learning, according to Gallegos (1999).

Humanistic Education

The purpose of humanistic education is to provide a foundation for personal growth and development so that learning will continue throughout life in a self-directed manner (DeCarvalho, 1991). With this perspective, the Universidad Nacional believes in this humanistic paradigm and its curriculum follows the principles of equality, sustainability, well-being and gender which permit human development. The language courses at this university have been designed with

this integrated view of education. Therefore, learners experience classes full of opportunities to develop language skills through activities that incorporate real-life situations and the principles mentioned above. These courses also follow the basic objectives described by Gage and Berliner (1991):

- promote positive self-direction and independence (development of the regulatory system),,
- develop the ability to take responsibility for what is learned (regulatory and affective systems),,
- develop creativity (divergent thinking aspect of cognition), curiosity (exploratory behavior, a function of imbalance or dissonance in any of the systems) and an interest in the arts (primarily to develop the affective/emotional system).

There is a variety of ways teachers can implement the humanist view towards education. They should:

- allow students to have a choice in the selection of tasks and activities whenever possible.,
- help learners set realistic goals.,
- have students participate in group work, especially cooperative learning, in order to develop social and affective skills.,
- act as facilitators for all the communicative activities.,
- be role models to foster learners' positive attitudes, beliefs and habits.

When educators and learners comply with this view of teaching and learning, they will develop values of understanding, respect and tolerance. This Humanistic perspective guides students to achieve language goals in a more social and emotional environment.

Constructivist Paradigm

The constructivist paradigm emphasizes that learning is building knowledge through collaboration and engagement in relevant tasks. Educators need to provide students with opportunities to learn collaboratively, perform learning activities relevant to their routines, and construct their own meanings. Moreover, learners develop self-confidence, high self-esteem, and appreciation for cooperation and collaboration. Constructivism states that learners attempt to foster understanding by doing, being involved in the process and accomplishing tasks. It places them firmly at the center of the learning experience, encourages them to play active roles, and makes sure that the learning situation is not abstracted from reality, but is placed directly in a real-world context.

Educators should implement a fundamental component of constructivist learning approach: the idea that a learner is challenged to construct his or

her own knowledge via an ‘authentic’ learning experience. Ann Carlson (2002) describes the pedagogy of authentic learning as one which values learner-centeredness, active learning, and authentic tasks in which the learning experience takes place in real world situations.

Experiential Learning Theory

According to Kolb and Kolb (2008), English Language Teaching integrates the works of the foundational experiential learning scholars around six propositions which they all share:

- **Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes:** To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning – a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts.
- **All learning is re-learning:** Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students’ beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas.
- **Learning is a holistic process of adaptation:** It is not just the result of cognition but involves the integrated functioning of the individual—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. It encompasses other specialized models of adaptation from the scientific method to problem solving, decision making and creativity.
- **Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment:** The way learners process the possibilities of each new experience determines the range of choices and decisions which to some extent determine the events they live through, influencing their future choices.
- **Learning is the process of creating knowledge:** English Language Teaching proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner.

Learning experiences go hand-in-hand with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), where according to Littlewood (1981), the following skills need to be taken into consideration (cited in Nunan, 2000, p. 13):

- The learner must attain as high a degree as possible of linguistic competence.
- The learner must distinguish between the forms he/she has mastered as part of his/her linguistic competence, and the communicative functions which they perform.
- The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in concrete situations.
- The learner must become aware of the social meaning of language forms.

With this experiential learning, the students become holistic individuals who develop their language and interpersonal skills to communicate naturally in encountered situations. Since learners participate actively in planned and spontaneous activities, they use the language creatively and successfully.

Teacher and Learner Roles

In this educational context, the instructor and learner develop a caring and professional relationship. Both of them keep learning since the instructor is constantly interested in students' backgrounds, needs and preferences. In addition, they keep a good and respectful communication with each other, which contributes to a relaxing atmosphere for clarifying questions, providing constructive feedback and sharing knowledge. Also, teachers have the role of counselors and friends; "They provide emotional support just when it is required and help learners feel secure and confident about second language learning" (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992, p. 5). At the same time, educators motivate learners to acquire the second language; they constantly assess students' interests and goals by providing stimulating and well-planned lessons that respond to the emotional, cognitive and linguistic needs of the learners. Moreover, playing a caring role is essential to guide the students in the process of discovering how the language works and performing tasks effectively. In this way, the learner becomes an active participant with a positive attitude and intrinsic motivation towards learning.

Authentic Learning Experiences

At Universidad Nacional (UNA), the EFL curriculum states that language teaching is viewed as a communicative process that involves learners actively to develop language skills in an integrated way. As a result, educators follow the mentioned approaches to meet the learners' needs and interests to succeed in their language and personal goals. The School of Literature and Language Sciences (ELCL, in Spanish) of the university offers the programs in English Teaching for Primary and Secondary Education, English, English for Computer Science and English for other majors. UNA also offers conversational English courses in the Conversational English Center (CEIC, in Spanish), which is an outreach program for the community. In all these programs, the main objective is to develop language proficiency through activities that integrate all the skills in meaningful and encouraging learning experiences.

Students enjoy activities which are communicative, motivating, creative, interesting, varied and meaningful. They like activities that challenge their intellect since they enjoy creating, discovering and doing. At the same time, they want to surpass their fears, anxieties and worries about learning a new language. Some of these activities include: role plays, simulations, prepared and impromptu speeches, debates, discussions, presentations, fairs, interviews, dialogues, problem-solving

activities, movies, information-gap activities, round tables, panels, songs, games, cultural encounters among others. As has been stated by Meyers and Jones (1993), learners would be able to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach course content through all of these activities. Moreover, they are meant to develop the following principles by Nunan (2000):

- **Authenticity:** To parallel the real world as possible since learners need to practice skills which will be useful in their daily encounters with the language outside the classroom.
- **Skill getting and skill using:** Learners' acquired knowledge of phonetics and grammar, for instance, is used in interaction in real communication to comprehend messages and conveying personal meaning.
- **Accuracy and fluency:** The teacher has to monitor the students' performance to use the right grammatical structures in role plays, for instance, where meaning is paramount to understand content.

Brookfield (1990, p. 50) points out,

teachers tend to be so concerned with presenting information that they overlook student needs to reflect upon it. Instead, he encourages 'praxis'... meaning that curricula are not studied in some kind of artificial isolation, but that ideas, skills, and insights learned in a classroom are tested and experienced in real life. Essential to praxis is the opportunity to reflect on experience, so that formal study is informed by some appreciation of reality.

Students need to have opportunities to practice authentic English input in a natural context. This can be done by inviting native speakers of English to class. This has been implemented in conversational courses at CEIC at different levels. Not only do students use acquired knowledge such as, expressions, idioms, and other informal words, but also they learn about different cultures. Themes like holidays are discussed, compared and celebrated for students to expand their knowledge and comprehension of other cultures. No matter the level of the students, either beginners or advanced, they can all contribute and take advantage of these cultural encounters. At first, some might not want to use the foreign language due to the fear of being embarrassed; however, this is part of real-life situations in which students may need to communicate with people from other countries. Another advantage of this contact with native speakers is the opportunity to have someone who can help them in the process of language learning, during which a nice friendship can develop. Therefore, educators should always think of all these good possibilities for providing more than mere instruction in class.

At English for Computer Science courses and beginning courses in the English teaching programs (Secondary and Primary Education), the planning of fairs (job hunting, holidays, cultures, food, employment, vacations and many others) is another activity that makes students get involved in the learning process. For

this activity, they have to conduct research in different sources, and with the information obtained, they work collaborately to put together the fair; they even have to interview people, go to embassies, design creative material such as posters, brochures, power point presentations, picture exhibitions, postcards, billboards, and so on. The day of the fair, students invite other groups of learners and instructors from the same programs, and even native speakers of English, to show their creation and to share what they have learned.

To illustrate, in a job fair held at an English for Computer Science course, the students had to create a company along with its name, logo, vision and mission, employees' profile and job requirements. The day of the presentation, they pretended to be the employers or owners of the company who promoted it and hired qualified employees.

Another example is a holiday fair in which the students had to choose a holiday celebrated in a country of interest. They first searched for information in the internet, magazines, books and other sources; they also went to embassies and shops and requested material (such as posters, magazines, brochures, flags, clothes, and others) for their presentation and exhibition to make it more vivid and realistic. In order to show their work, students dressed up and set tables with food, decorations and all the necessary visual aids to make the audience get involved in their performance.

To become more culturally aware, the students in all the English courses usually act out situations similar to the ones studied. For example, in the topic of food, students prepare the meals and practice functions, such as ordering in a restaurant, making recipes, going out to eat, buying food in the supermarket and other similar functions. The students dress up and set the correspondent scene with real food and props to make the situation as in real life. Learners always express their motivation, excitement and dedication in these kinds of activities to excel in their language proficiency and performance. Another illustration is a fashion show for the topic of weather and clothing; students wear real clothes according to the season and they describe it in detail. With this kind of activities, learners develop understanding of vocabulary and culture awareness that help them become more tolerant and knowledgeable.

In all the communicative courses at UNA, technology is used as a source to teach different skills. For instance, students watch movies, sitcoms, the news, talk shows and/or documentaries; they discuss the issue presented, search more about it and later on make something creative to summarize what they have learned. Some examples are writing a journal, participating on a debate, designing a campaign, making surveys and interviews, creating a newsletter and some others. Students find this kind of experience very similar to what they like doing, so they feel that the lesson meets their expectations.

Learners also use the Internet to develop linguistic competence. They can find virtual tours to learn about entertainment, cultures, museums, and sports, for instance. They access the information, read it and give a written report and/or a short speech about their findings in order to make use of the new vocabulary or language related to the issue. In addition, they can use a variety of websites to practice different skills. Pronunciation sites are available for any level; students

can listen to different kinds of accents and practice sounds by recognition, repetition and production. Moreover, they can access many kinds of videos, songs, the news and others for listening comprehension; note-taking, idiom recognition and new vocabulary. Besides, the Internet provides material to practice the language in an enjoyable way, such as games like crossword puzzles, hangman, trivia, word searches, memory and others.

Learners have also found the Internet to be an educational tool that supplies them with the necessary guidelines to create their own websites, brochures, magazines and advertising which is requested after studying a topic. For example, in the topic of clothing, after they search several websites that include all kinds of clothing items; they design their own with the information like price, size, color, description and accessories. This is always a collaborative assignment in groups where students learn to share and respect ideas.

Students read authentic material that comes from brochures, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, lyrics or any other product advertising from printed matter or the web. This material is more challenging, real and more accessible to be used in designing learners' own visual aids for presentation. Besides, it provides the language needed to communicate effectively. To illustrate, students are asked to visit a travel agency where they request information and material about a tour. Then they use this material to tell the class the information they were given and to promote it.

To conclude, students at UNA describe their language learning experiences as follows:

- The content is personally relevant, interesting, useful and meaningful.
- The work is well connected to other ideas and to the real world.
- Choices, shared authority, control, and responsibility are given.
- The learning is hands-on, experiential and shared.
- Support and guidance are given by the facilitator.
- There is a positive environment.
- The activities make the learners more aware of language strengths and weaknesses as well as ways for improvement.
- The tasks stimulate curiosity and permit learners to express their creativity.
- Every experience helps students foster positive relationships among themselves.
- Learners can use all kind of learning styles and strategies that can facilitate greater skills in language learning.

To sum up, activities bring the outside world into the classroom through language-rich experiences that give learners more exposure and opportunities for interaction. This allows them to be communicatively competent by working cooperatively, developing effective language skills and improving their interpersonal relationships. To make the learner a holistic individual who develops all personal and professional skills, educators should be aware of the importance of creating learning experiences in the foreign language classroom. Strong and

colleagues (1995) asked teachers and students what kind of work they found totally engaging. "Engaging work, respondents said, was work that stimulated their curiosity, permitted them to express their creativity, and fostered positive relationships with others. It was also work at which they were good."

UNA, with its humanistic curriculum, allows professors and learners to experience the enjoyment and effectiveness of learning and teaching a foreign language. The methodologies used, along with a variety of resources and innovative ideas, are essential to achieve acquisition and proficiency in language skills. For this reason, the communicative English courses at UNA are constantly reinforcing the use of the discussed approaches to succeed in curricular goals.

As an integrated process, learners not only acquire language but also become more life-oriented individuals. They experience learning through research, curiosity and desire to excel. In fact, learners construct knowledge for their own well-being as they are the actors in the learning and teaching processes.

Notes

1. Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje
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