

# EMPLOYING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO TEACH WRITING FOR ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH A REFLECTION PROJECT

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## Abstract

Writing is a skill that helps English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners improve their English and also helps them to be exposed more to use English in their day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, writing has been considered as one difficult and boring subject since the learners are merely instructed to write about certain topics or write their daily experiences and past events without clear context and clear directions. Teaching writing has been a challenge since the method of teaching cannot be as various as teaching other competence like speaking or listening. In order to make writing interesting, an English teacher should relate learners' writing production to their experience. The exposure of experiential learning into some writing production like a weekly reflection or journal would encourage the learners to express more in the composition. This research tries to examine two problem formulations. First, what is the significance of experiential learning in teaching writing? Second, how is experiential learning implemented in the writing production of EFL learners? The objective of the study is to figure out the significance of experiential learning in teaching writing and to find out how experiential learning is implemented in the writing production of EFL learners. Library study would be employed in conducting this research, especially references relate to teaching writing and experiential learning.

*Keywords:* EFL learners, experiential learning, reflection project, teaching writing

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## INTRODUCTION

Since English has been widely used in many areas of living, most educational institutions like universities and schools has included English as one of the Subjects of their curricula. Many references used in non-English departments are in English and the learners are supposed to understand English with specific terminologies according to English registers in specific areas.

This demand of English makes English becomes one major concern in many areas and students in Indonesia have been learning English in their fourth grade of Elementary School. Regarding the length of time of learning English, Indonesian students are supposed to be ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, but many of them still consider English is difficult to be spoken in. The lacks of exposure to English in real situations leave the students as EFL learners.

According to Henrichsen (2010), EFL Learners have some characteristics such as: (1) They are not in an English-speaking Environment, (2) They do not speak English outside the English classroom. Once students leave class, they hear, speak, read, and write languages other than English, (3) They tend to be linguistically and culturally homogeneous. They generally speak the same native language and are accustomed to speaking it with each other and they generally share the same cultural background, and the target, English-language culture may be foreign for them, (4) They have a more artificial purpose, such as to earn a course grade or pass a test, and a lower level of motivation. (5) They are primarily oriented toward developing their reading and writing (and perhaps listening) skills.

The characteristics above might likely happen because of many aspects as well, such as: (1) English is learned in a big class with approximately 30 – 60 students with a wide range of English proficiency. This condition might result an embarrassment, faced by many students who do not have a high English proficiency level. (2) English class is only conducted once or twice a week. The students will not make much progress and the continuity in learning English is not maintained once the students are engaged in other activities and they tend to forget of what they learned in the previous class.

This condition encourages English teachers to apply some methods that make students exposed with English more so that they have sufficient knowledge of English in order to apply it in a real practice, involving productive skills like speaking and writing. One of the methods for encouraging the students to practice English is making

use of experiential learning into their learning process. Seen from its terminology, Experiential learning is obtained from learners' day-to-day experiences. By recalling their daily experiences, the students will obtain English elements such as vocabulary items, sentences forming, and telling what they feel as long as they are related to what they experience every day.

This experiential learning method is applied in teaching writing, in a project called weekly journal assignment. Weekly journal is a project that requires the EFL learners to compose one-page writing of their unforgettable experiences and their feelings toward the experiences every week. For EFL learners, writing is one skill that gives them time to bring together their learning cognitive and communicative skill. According to Crandall (2006), Writing is necessary to build the learners' proficiency since it is a means of building fluency and a way of developing accuracy (especially in grammar and vocabulary). Therefore, it is a medium for EFL Learners to incorporate their English knowledge and their daily experience through writing English Journal.

This research tries to figure out the significance of experiential learning in teaching writing and to find out how experiential learning is implemented in the writing production of EFL learners.

## A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Experiential Learning helps the students to understand English more

Experiential learning theory by Kolb (1984) defines learning as the process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, and the knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience. It has two modes of transforming experiences called Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC). In grasping experience, some of us perceive new information through experiencing the concrete and tangible characteristics of the world, relying on our senses, and immersing ourselves in concrete reality. Others tend to perceive, grasp, or develop of new information through symbolic representation or abstract conceptualization like thinking about, analyzing, or systematically planning.

Experiential Learning, developed by David Kolb in 1984, has two conditions. The first condition is that the learning is undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in a relevant setting and the learning situation is created by some institutions. The second learning situation is not created by any institution but by the students themselves. The learning process is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience. This research tries to combine the two conditions, because the weekly journal project was a part of the English subject but the content of the journal was based on their experiences in their day-to-day basis.

The cycle of Experiential Learning proposed by Kolb involves four stages as depicted in the picture below:

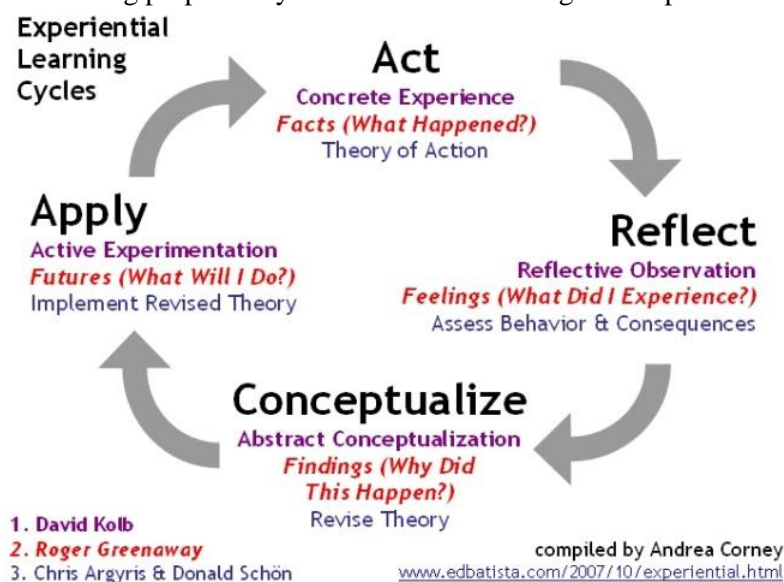


Fig.1 The Experiential Learning Cycle

According to the cycle, learners experience first what is expected to be learnt in the process and then they are asked to make reflection of what they have learnt or experienced. The next stage, the learners are expected to recall of what they have got from the external institution and implement their findings in the form of a creation or in this research, in the form of a journal writing.

Most references divide the cycle into five learning steps, they are: (1) Experience, where the learners encounter into some new actions and get new understanding about English proficiency, (2) Share, where the learners identify their feelings of the new experiences, identify more aspects related to their experiences and show their responds toward the experiences, (3) Process, where the learners identify the significance of their

experiences, (4) Generalize, where the learners draw the conclusion of what they have learned and experienced, and (5) Apply, where the learners actualize the things that they found from the experiences. The steps will be depicted into a picture below:

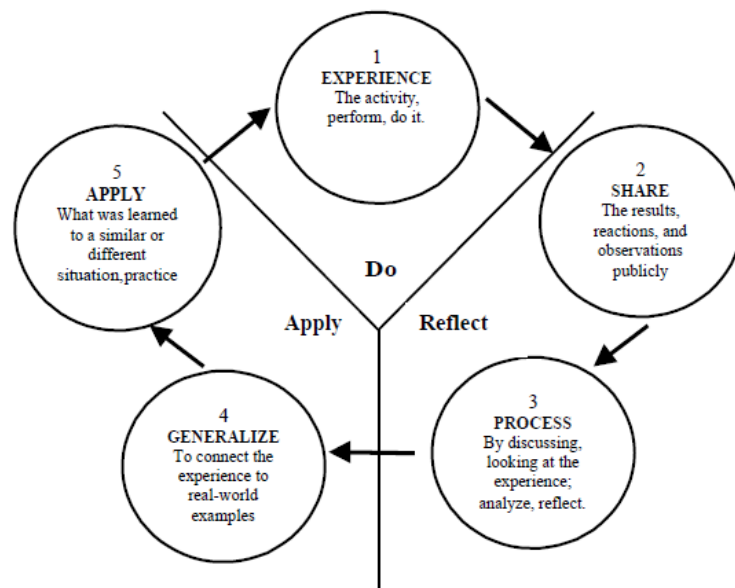


Fig.2 The Experiential Learning Model

This process engages the learners in the activity, encouraging them to think more and learn more. The most important outcome of an Experiential Learning process is that the learners show they have gained new knowledge and practiced the life skill and project skill targeted. Once the learners are engaged in a project, they will apply the four learning steps in the model and the projects are used as a way for the learners to practice and learn the target skills.

### Writing is one skill to expose EFL Learners with English more

Language is used in spoken and written and English writing competence is widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business and personal reasons and the role of English writing instruction is increasing in foreign language education. Writing Skill is needed to demonstrate the learners' understanding of the experiences or the courses. The skill requires the cognitive analysis and linguistics synthesis. The learners will be encountered difficulties in their own production as well as combining their knowledge on English and their experiences or their findings.

Writing is important in EFL Classes, since it is a means of building fluency and a way of developing accuracy for EFL learners especially in grammar, vocabulary, etc. According to Crandall (2006), Writing has more function in developing English proficiency. Writing is a way to demonstrate learners' proficiency and allow them to analyze and expand on what we know. The learners might discover and identify what they do or do not know.

There are many types of writing that can be used in assessing EFL learners' language proficiency and one of them is writing a journal or a reflection, in which writers keep a record of ideas, opinions, and description of daily life. Crandall (2006) also states that writing reflection or journal also builds learners' fluency. Journals help writers develop their creativity and help them write better day by day since it provides learners with more opportunities to write liberally about what they wish to whenever they feel like writing (Hamp and Heasley, 2006). The fact that students are given more chances to write about what is relevant to them is considered as a part of an active learning technique.

This is also used as an evaluation tool for reviewing the status of learners' progress and development. In a journal or a Journal or reflective writing, students can record their personal or life experiences. The learners can develop both writing skills and awareness of the learned language, they can develop greater awareness and interpersonal understanding, and also increasing the ability to relate to others through some feedback (Tuan, 2010).

Journal or Reflective Writing is appropriate for EFL learners in beginner level because it emphasizes on narrating and describing the learners' experiences without any particular restrictions. In a Journal or reflective writing, the learners are allowed to become aware of what they wish to communicate their ideas and to regard writing as not only a means of personal expression, but also a dialogue in written language with the reader. Therefore, the students are also required to have knowledge of the learned language so that they can convey what they have experienced to the reader or the language tutor.

Therefore, the Journal or reflective writing in this research becomes a production to reflect the learners' experiences as well as their English proficiency since they are required to convey the reflection in English.

## Research Method

This research is a qualitative research, conducted by applying content analysis and observational research. The research was conducted by involving 50 participants. They were the first-semester students of Biology Education who took English Subject as one of the compulsory subjects in Sanata Dharma University for non-English departments. The English Subject was compulsory since they are required to present and write some English essays in a biology context. They also have to pass Tes Kompetensi Bahasa Inggris (English Language Proficiency Test) as one of study completion requirements.

They had a wide range of English proficiency, from very basic to intermediate. Students have been learning English for six years, from Junior High School until Senior High School and also from English Courses. However, most learners could only produce words and they could not combine them into a meaningful sentence. Only a few learners could arrange words into some meaningful sentences with the helps from dictionary and some translator programs.

The weekly reflection project started from the first meeting of English lesson, starting on August 2012 until December 2012 and the students were required to make seven journals out of fourteen meetings. The journals were created after the students obtain new knowledge on one English elements like tenses or vocabulary, so they could practice to use the tenses or vocabulary what they had got into a piece of writing.

The data were gathered by compiling all journals, put the journals into order, from the first journal until the seventh journal, and make the data of the students' mistakes. There are some components than become the considerations of the weekly journals, namely: the sentence pattern in simple present and simple past tense, the diction (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions), and the time reference appropriateness.

## Discussion

The objectives of this research are to figure out the significance of experiential learning in teaching writing by conducting Journal or reflective writing project and to find out how experiential learning is implemented in the writing production of EFL learners. This research adapts the cycle and model of Experiential Learning and the figure below explains the steps taken to get the research results:

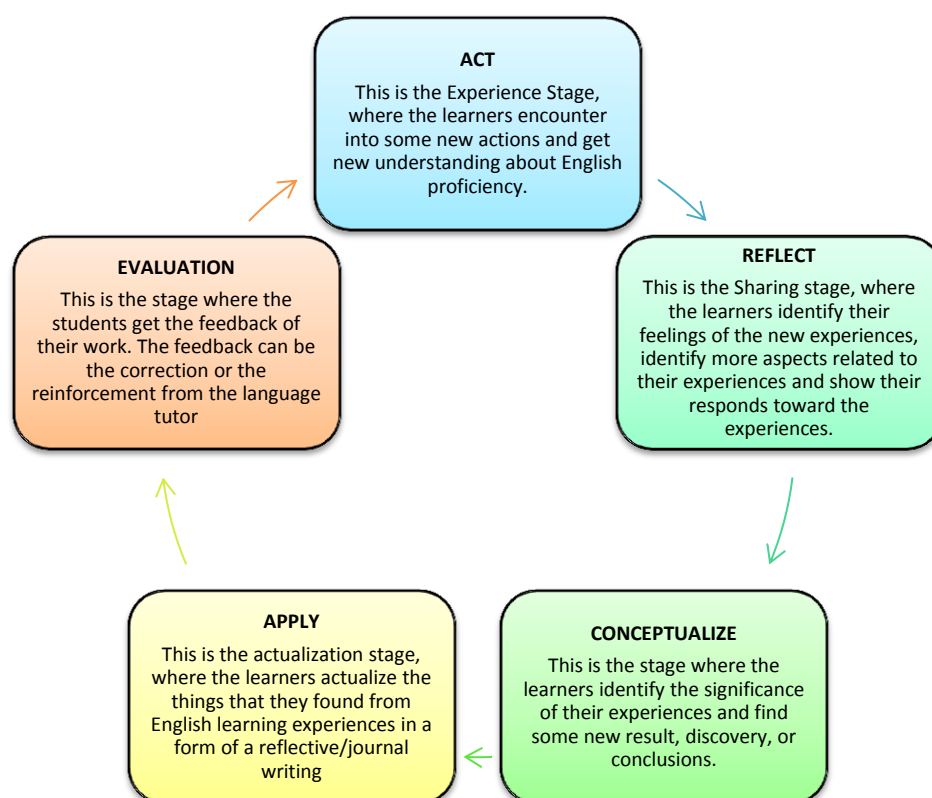


Fig.3 The Adapted Experiential Learning Cycle and Model

Every journal or reflective writing in this research has its own topic depending on the learning material that the learners had. The topics of every journal or reflective writing are shown in the following table:

Table 1: The Topic of Bi-Weekly Journal or Reflective Writing

	Date	Journal Topic	Objective
1 <sup>st</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	28 <sup>th</sup> August 2012 3 <sup>rd</sup> September 2012	Free	To apply their knowledge on the difference between Indonesian and English, especially to make verbal and non-verbal sentences.
2 <sup>nd</sup> Journal or Reflective Writing	4 <sup>th</sup> September 2012 17 <sup>th</sup> September 2012	Daily Activities	To practice using Simple Present Tense in describing their Daily Activities
3 <sup>rd</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	18 <sup>th</sup> September 2012 24 <sup>th</sup> September 2012	Free	To practice using Simple Present in a broader sense and using adverbs of frequency (describing events, lectures, specimens)
4 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	1 <sup>st</sup> October 2012 2 <sup>nd</sup> October 2012	Free	To Practice using Simple Past Tense in describing their last activity
5 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	8 <sup>th</sup> October 2012 23 <sup>rd</sup> October 2012	Free	To Practice using Simple Past Tense in a broader sense (describing Past Events, the history of one particular object in biology, their last gathering or faculty events)
6 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	22 <sup>nd</sup> October 2012 30 <sup>th</sup> October 2012	BEE MOVIE	To practice using Simple Present to describe a movie (the plot, the characters, the characteristics of the characters, and the moral values)
7 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	26 <sup>th</sup> October 2012 27 <sup>th</sup> October 2012	Their Feelings on Overall English Lesson	To Practice using Simple Present and Simple Past Tense in one piece of writing.

The English components than become the considerations of the weekly journals are: the sentence pattern in simple present and simple past tense, the diction (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions), and the time reference appropriateness. After completing seven reflective writings or journals, the learners' English proficiency was improving in terms of the length of writing, the sentence pattern accuracy, the diction suitability (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions), and the time reference appropriateness. However, some of the learners still did the mistakes on all components even though they had gotten the feedback from the language instructors. Every learner created approximately ten until twenty sentences on every journal and the mistakes still occurred randomly on every journal. A learner made mistake on sentence pattern in the first sentence, and in the fifth sentence, and the mistake on the diction (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions) occurred in the first sentence until the fifth sentence, but not in the rest of the paragraph.

The data below are taken from some research participants as the example of the findings. The research counts the mistakes they made on every component.

Table 2: Mistakes occur on every component in a learner's journals or reflective writings

Participant 1: Tresia Jawa

	Number of Sentences	Mistakes on Sentence Pattern Accuracy (in sentence)	Mistakes on Diction (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions) Suitability	Mistakes on Time Reference Appropriateness
1 <sup>st</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	3	1	2	3

2 <sup>nd</sup> Journal or Reflective Writing	7	5	1	4
3 <sup>rd</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	9	5	4	2
4 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	6	5	3	6
5 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	13	6	2	7
6 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	7	1	3	-
7 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	10	2	1	1

Table 3: Mistakes occur on every component in a learner's journals or reflective writings

## Participant 2: Rinanti Nugraheni

	Number of Sentences	Mistakes on Sentence Pattern Accuracy (in sentence)	Mistakes on Diction (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions) Suitability	Mistakes on Time Reference Appropriateness
1 <sup>st</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	11	2	2	-
2 <sup>nd</sup> Journal or Reflective Writing	20	5	5	4
3 <sup>rd</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	37	10	12	6
4 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	12	6	3	2
5 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	15	7	9	2
6 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	20	2	1	1
7 <sup>th</sup> Journal or reflective Writing	16	6	6	10

The examples above show that most learners were reluctant to write more or to produce many sentences to express what they felt. Only few learners could write more than 15 sentences on the first journal, the rest of them could only create less than ten sentences. The pattern of the sentences on the first journal was mostly literal translation from Indonesian sentences and most students ignored the English sentence pattern that had been taught.

On the following journals, the learners were more aware of the mistakes, especially on the sentence pattern and the time reference appropriateness. Some of them still made mistakes on the spelling, phrasal verbs, noun phrases and expressions.

However, some elements should be taken into account for further consideration. First, The number of the sentences should be determined. The research participants could produce as many sentences as they wanted so that the mistake ratio was difficult to calculate. The mistakes occurred arbitrarily and the mistake ratio was different from one journal to another.

Second, the learners did not have enough time to write the journals. In this research, three journals became the learners' homework and four other journals were written in the class. Writing in the class was not effective for some students since they still encountered some difficulties in understanding English sentence pattern and in writing their experiences.

Third, the learners were engaged in many activities. The learners told that they were involved in many tiring activities that made them tired. This factor might cause their reluctance in writing the journals and in recalling the English lesson.

The experiential learning method fits the process of English learning for the EFL learners since the stages in the cycle accommodate them to experience the process itself. However, some elements might affect the learning process and the evidence of the research result.

## Conclusion

The experiential learning approach is one effective way to make the EFL learners exposed with English. Even though they still made some mistakes, they had obtained the knowledge in the different level. They did not only learn about formula in the sentence making, but they had experienced English and use English as a medium to convey their experiences in their lives.

## APPENDIX

The example of the mistakes occurred on every component:

Participants' Names	Mistakes on Sentence Pattern Accuracy (in sentence)	Mistakes on Diction (including spelling, phrases, phrasal verbs, and expressions) Suitability	Mistakes on Time Reference Appropriateness
Tresia Jawa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'll told your all about...</li> <li>• But more specially, from the subjeck yesterday, I can learn about...</li> <li>• But I feel so nervously can reading in English nicely.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subjeck</li> <li>• Therefor,</li> <li>• Dear Jurnal,</li> <li>• I imagine,</li> </ul>	The time reference is 'yesterday' but the tenses are in present.
Rinanti Nugraheni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain Profit, The lecturer was not problem about the cover</li> <li>• Romo Sunu is teach our about tissue culture.</li> <li>• We studied how to sterilization instruments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain Profit → should be 'Fortunately'</li> <li>• More good</li> <li>• I get a group which is not <b>compact</b>. → should be 'solid'</li> </ul>	The time reference is 'yesterday' but the tenses are in present.

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