

Experiential Learning through “ReALItY” English

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What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is usually described as a process by which the experience of a learner is reflected upon and from which new insights and knowledge emerge. Experiential learning is a cycle which includes an experience, a reflection upon that experience, and an application of such experience, which adds a new meaning to a student's system of learning. It increases a student's knowledge, helps the recall of things learned, develops new skills and methods of learning, makes sense of the information learned, and promotes a better understanding of the experiential learning that the student went through. In order to help students with this new experience, the instructor in an elective class at an Intensive English Program carefully selected topics and units to include what foreign students really need to "experience" while they are pursuing their studies in the United States of America. Therefore, the units included topics as simple and practical as travel arrangements and as complex and confusing as understanding American humor and using idioms and slang.

Sample Units and Topics

The first unit in this elective class was "Travel and Excursions". This topic was carefully chosen because every semester there is at least one long weekend or a one-week or a two-week vacation. Most students do not know what to do during this time. Therefore, the instructor developed this unit to make students actually go to a travel agency and make travel arrangements to a destination of their choice. Clear guidelines were given and a sample assignment was shared with the students. To start, a list of travel terminology/vocabulary was given and explained to the students. This was followed by a short oral quiz. For example, students were asked to

identify terms associated with car travel, terms that require payment of fees, terms that are related to airplanes and airports, and terms that deal with hotel accommodations. Next, the instructor gave students a pair assignment which required them to choose a destination, visit a travel agency, and find a good deal for the specific destination. The students were also required to prepare an oral presentation to share the information with their classmates. Information from all the students was then collected and packets were given to all the students. In other words, everyone got information about everyone else's travel arrangements.

The next unit was "Theme Idioms". The instructor gave a sample lesson on theme idioms and then asked students to work in pairs and choose a theme for their idioms research and presentation. The instructor gave guidelines and a list of websites from which the students chose themes which included animal idioms, color idioms, number idioms, food idioms, money idioms, sports idioms, clothes idioms, and body idioms. Students were required to choose ten idioms and prepare a PowerPoint presentation to include the idioms, their meanings, and their correct use in sentences. Extra credit was given to students who prepared an activity or a quiz related to the idioms taught in their presentation. Students **were not required** to come up with their own sentences in order to avoid usage errors. The PowerPoint presentations were amazingly creative.

The above unit was followed by a "How To" unit. Because new students are always asking how to do things, the focus of this unit was to address students' needs for successful experiential learning. The instructor gave students a form on which they, in mini groups, had to come up with five things they needed information about. Their requests included information on how to get a driver's license, how to apply to the university, how to find good deals on used cars, how to find good cakes in Long Beach, how to find work on campus, how to find good bike routes in Long Beach, and how to have fun on the weekends if one doesn't have a car. Clearly, a

lesson could not be planned for each of these units. Therefore, some questions were answered orally during the following period, and others were given more attention and instruction. Because many of the questions were related to “good and inexpensive deals”, the instructor introduced the “PennySaver” to the students as an excellent free source of information for miscellaneous items at good prices. Students used the “PennySaver” to find specific information using a skimming and scanning handout. For experiential learning purposes, the students had to write their own ads to be placed in the “PennySaver”. This exercise provided valuable experiential learning by teaching the students how to find good deals, how to understand abbreviations, and how to place ads in case they need to sell or buy items.

A unit that was very popular and which proved to have provided an excellent source for experiential learning was the one on “Resume Writing and Mock Job Interviews”. This unit gave the students the chance to write a good resume by following instructions to write a sample resume, to observe three volunteers being interviewed, and to go through mock job interviews themselves. For this activity, the instructor solicited the help of conversation partners, office personnel, colleagues, and previous students. During one class session, the students had to observe three applicants being interviewed and had to take notes on what the applicants were doing right and wrong. The volunteer applicants were instructed to be excellent, average, and bad. Naturally, the students chose the good applicant for the job. When it was their turn to be interviewed, the students had to do their best to get the job. This unit was the highlight of the semester because it provided the students with almost authentic experiential learning regarding job interviews.

Since many holidays occur during each semester, a unit on “Holidays” was included in this class. The origins, customs, related vocabulary and activities about holidays were included

in the curriculum of this unit. During the fall semester, the instructor gave information about Halloween, Thanksgiving, Veterans' Day, Christmas, Hanukah, and Kwanzaa while during the spring semester, information regarding Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Presidents' Day, April Fools' Day, Easter, Passover, and Memorial Day was included. The students had a lot of fun doing the Valentine's Day activity. After learning love and heart idioms, the students had to make Valentine's Day cards. They had to create a secret Valentine card using idioms they learned. During class, they exchanged cards and enjoyed their experiential learning.

Understanding the underlying cultural messages in "American Advertisements" was another unit covered in this class. The instructor shared samples of advertisements with cultural messages and idiomatic expressions with the students. This was followed by the students, in pairs, creating their own advertisements for fictitious products. They had to use idioms in their ads and had to present their ads to the rest of the class. Their creativity and imagination were obvious as they put their experiential learning to practice.

The above unit on advertisements was followed by a lesson on "Newspaper Terminology". Students learned about the key parts of a newspaper and specific newspaper terminology. They had to find examples of each term and assemble them into a news book. The highlight of this unit was a visit to our campus newspaper, "The Daily 49er", where they learned how articles are written, how ads are placed, and who the reporters and editors are. It was a great field trip promoting experiential learning.

The final unit covered was about "Sitcoms and American Humor". Students were introduced to the different kinds of humor, i.e. pun, satire, parody, irony, understatement, paradox, and cartoons. The instructor shared examples of each type with the students. This

was not an easy topic since it is hard for foreign students to understand American humor. To demonstrate this, the students heard a joke that does not include any cultural nuances or idiomatic expressions. Obviously, everyone laughed. They were then shown cartoons containing irony and understatements and, not surprisingly, none of them laughed. This learning experience was followed by watching a sitcom and analyzing the cultural aspects and humor included. It was clear that the physical comedy in sitcoms helped their understanding although some cultural aspects and humor needed to be explained.

As a culminating project replacing a final exam, students worked on a “ReALItY English Newsletter”. In pairs or alone, students reported on one unit covered in this class. They had to include the unit covered, the steps and activities which were needed for its completion, the end result, and their personal opinion about the specific unit. This was a valuable activity for experiential learning because the students had to use what they learned in the newspaper unit and became reporters for this newsletter. Their reports were assembled into a newsletter by using Microsoft Publisher. Needless to say, the instructor had to be the editor of this newsletter. Copies of the newsletter were made and distributed to every student, faculty member, and staff in our institute. It was a great way to show what the students have gained through this class incorporating experiential learning, and to promote the class for future students.

I highly recommend incorporating such an elective class in the curriculum of an Intensive English Program in order to fulfill the need for experiential learning among foreign student population. This would be an adequate class for students in the intermediate and high levels of such a program though it can be adjusted to fill the needs of lower level students.