Part I   Focus on learning

The chapters in this section of the collection all focus primarily on the learner, although there are extensive cross-references to teachers and researchers.

The initial chapter, by Kohonen, is an important position statement on experiential learning. A central notion in this theory is learner education, which emphasises the importance of helping learners to develop an awareness of their learning in terms of three types of knowledge: (1) their self-concept and view of their role as a learner; (2) the process of learning; and (3) the learning task. It thus belongs within the philosophy of learner-centred instruction which advocates a twin focus on the language content and the learning process. Focussing on the learning process through awareness-raising tasks can empower learners by helping them to identify their own preferred ways of learning, and also assisting them to monitor their own learning. Cooperative learning in mixed-ability teams provides a major pedagogical structure for working toward such goals. This orientation entails a paradigmatic shift from the transmission model of teaching to a process-oriented, participatory model, seeing learners as active agents in their learning and teachers as researchers of their work.

The study by Heath picks up and extends some of the themes and issues articulated by Kohonen. In particular, it illustrates the enormous potential which is released in teachers, students and researchers when they work together toward a common goal. The body of the chapter is devoted to two case studies which show how the combined talents of teacher, student and researcher redefine our notions of literacy. Jerome Bruner reminds us that 'Learning is most often figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you currently think' (1983a: 183). In this study, students, teachers and researchers working together play out Bruner's insight into learning. The author argues that the attempt to reduce students' uncertainties about language should not come through teacher imposition of rules of grammar and occasions for practised drills of decontextualised and depersonalised tasks. Instead, together, students, teacher, and researcher can focus on what students already know to accomplish a joint reduction of the uncertainties of language. With such collaborative work, we can all better appreciate that a single piece of evidence of language use touches a world of

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antecedents and assumptions; if we follow these beginnings, they will lead us to the centres of social and cognitive worlds about which we can best learn together.

The chapter by Freeman is a valuable addition to the language teaching literature because it represents a genuine process study of a classroom in action, and such studies of learning processes, rather than outcomes, are difficult to find. Freeman began with the question: 'How does the teacher define what can or cannot go on in her teaching – how are the boundaries of possibility constructed and negotiated through the talk and activity of the teacher's work?' During the course of the investigation the focus shifted, and the question became: 'How are authority and control distributed, through pedagogy and interaction, to build a shared understanding of the target language?' This shift in focus reflected the interaction of data and analysis, and is not untypical of qualitative research (Kirk and Miller 1986). Through his interpretive analysis of the data, which consist of lesson transcripts, field notes and interviews with teachers and learners, Freeman is able to demonstrate how collaboration and self-regulation are important constructs in building an understanding of the ways in which learners come to control the target language. In keeping with most of the papers in this volume, Freeman's study highlights those social and interpersonal aspects of language learning which are often randomised out of the language learning equation in psychometric research. In addition, it provides an excellent model of the collaborative relationship between teacher and researcher, and demonstrates how, through the provision of multiple perspectives on the teaching/learning process, the teacher's and learners' voices can be added to that of the researcher.

Mohan and Smith investigate how a group of Chinese students manage to succeed in a graduate education program, despite the fact that their language proficiency is below the required level. Like the study by Freeman, this investigation shows the importance of 'language socialisation' to language development, and underlines the inadequacy of language models which fail to incorporate a social dimension. It also provides an alternative conceptualisation of 'task' to that normally provided within the second language acquisition literature. In keeping with the central theme of this volume, the study demonstrates the way in which the cooperative interaction between instructor and learners enables the learners to 'outperform their competence'.

In the final contribution to this section, Murray looks at collaborative writing as a literacy event. The chapter is based on a descriptive and interpretive account of a group of ESL professionals going about the task of producing texts about their professional work. This provides a basis, and a rationale, for the teaching of second language writing. In particular, Murray questions the notion that learning to write must necessarily

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be an isolated, individual process, and proposes an alternative strategy in which learners are required to collaborate, in the same way as the native speaker model, in order for the writing task to be completed successfully. The chapter concludes with suggestions for implementing real collaborative writing in the ESL classroom. These include group report writing, jigsaw writing, teacher-mediated joint-text construction, and collaborative writing conferences.

Despite their diverse contexts and concerns, a number of common themes emerge quite strongly from these chapters. In particular, the studies reported in this section show that:

– learners are an important resource for their own collective learning, and this resource can be accessed through collaboration, cooperation and experiential learning;
– learning is a social as well as a psychological process;
– interpretive, ethnographic accounts provide rich data on language learning and teaching;
– collaborative learning can help learners use what they already know to go beyond what they currently think.

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1 Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education

Viljo Kohonen

Motto: Anything that a child should do and
can do, and we do for them takes away an
opportunity to learn responsibility.

Gene Bedley

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical and empirical justification for experiential language learning, and to justify the incorporation of cooperative learner education into language programs. In the first part of the chapter a theory of experiential learning is presented. This is followed by a detailed justification for the adoption of an experiential approach to language learning. The chapter then deals with learner training, and its incorporation into language programs. In the final part, principles of cooperative learning are set out and discussed.

An outline of the theory of experiential learning

What is experiential learning?

The foundations of experiential learning can be traced back to Dewey's progressive approach, Lewin's social psychology, Jean Piaget's work on developmental cognitive psychology, Kelly's cognitive theory of personality, and to humanistic psychology, notably the work of Maslow and Rogers.

In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is seen as the focal point for learning, giving 'life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process' (Kolb 1984: 21). But experience also needs to be processed consciously by reflecting on it. Learning is thus seen as a cyclic process integrating immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and action.

A good starting point for the discussion of experiential learning is provided by Kelly's theory of personal constructs (1955). Kelly's basic

This chapter is based on an earlier publication (Kohonen 1989).

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assumption is that individuals make sense of the world through con-structs which they have developed for themselves over a long period of time. People function in terms of their expectations about future events, making plans on the basis of expected outcomes. They are active and responsible participants, not passive responders, making choices based on reality as they perceive it. Personal constructs thus suggest a proactive rather than a reactive system.

The importance of personal experiences for the growth of personality is similarly prominent in humanistic psychology. Thus Rogers (1975) argues that the individual's self-concept is a social product that is shaped gradually through interaction with the environment. It is an organized, integrated pattern of self-related perceptions, which become increasingly differentiated and complex. The development of a healthy self-concept is promoted by a positive self-regard and an unconditional acceptance by the 'significant others'. In an environment of unconditional positive self-regard, the individual can progress towards becoming a fully function-ing person. This process of change is characterized by a widening range of human experience: an awareness of one's own feelings, an openness to new experiences, tolerance, a basic trust in others, and an ability to listen to them empathically and perceive their feelings.

Rogers argues, like Kelly, that one responds to events in accordance with how one perceives and interprets them. This thinking entails what have been called 'self-fulfilling prophecies' (cf. Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Rosenthal and Rubin 1978): anticipations of future events will affect one's choices and may thereby lead to anticipated outcomes. In order to break a negative chain of anticipations, one needs help to enhance one's self-concept and thereby change one's perceptions of the future.

In the light of this discussion, the importance for personal growth of learning experiences in school deserves serious attention. Emphasis on the learning process is not, of course, a novelty in education. Good teachers have probably always realized the importance of the process for the product. Experiential learning theory, however, invites conscious attention to the importance of the learners' subjective experiences, attitudes and feelings about their own learning. As learners undertake learning tasks, they compare their task performance with the projected outcome. Such comparisons yield learning experiences, which may be positive or negative. The learning experiences gained in the process of learning will have a cumulative effect on the development of the learners' cognitive and affective characteristics, their views of themselves as learners. If we can help learners to improve their views of themselves as learners they may become better learners, able to utilize their learning potential more fully.

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A model of experiential learning

Kolb (1984: 42) advances a general theoretical model of experiential learning as follows:
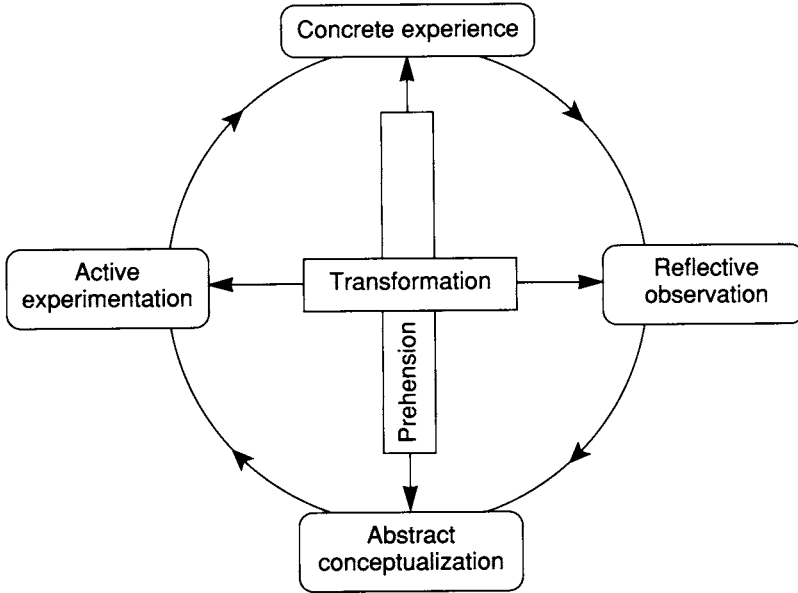

Figure 1   Model of experiential learning

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

1. The *prehension* dimension refers to the way in which the individual grasps experience. This dimension can be seen as two modes of knowing, ranging from what Kolb calls grasping via 'apprehension' to what he calls grasping via 'comprehension'. Apprehension is instant, intuitive knowledge without a need for rational inquiry or analytical confirmation. The other end of the dimension, grasping via comprehension, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of conscious learning, whereby comprehension introduces order and predictability to the flow of unconscious sensations. This dimension is thus concerned with the ways of grasping reality through varying degrees of emphasis on unconscious and conscious learning.
2. The *transformation* dimension, on the other hand, refers to the transformation of experience by an orientation towards reflective observation as against action and active experimentation. An indi-

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vidual with an active orientation is ready to take risks, attempting to maximize success and showing little concern for errors or failure. An individual with an excessive reflective orientation, on the other hand, may be willing to sacrifice successful performance in order to avoid errors, preferring to transform experiences through reflective observation.

(Kolb 1984: 42–60)

The polar ends of the two dimensions will thus yield four orientations to learning:

1. *Concrete experience*, with an involvement in personal experiences and an emphasis on feeling over thinking. This is an 'artistic' orientation relying on intuitive decision-making.
2. *Abstract conceptualisation*, using logic and a systematic approach to problem-solving, with an emphasis on thinking, manipulation of abstract symbols and a tendency to neat and precise conceptual systems.
3. *Reflective observation*, focussing on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by careful observation, being concerned with how things happen by attempting to see them from different perspectives and relying on one's own thoughts, feelings and judgement.
4. *Active experimentation*, with an emphasis on practical applications and getting things done, influencing people and changing situations, and taking risks in order to accomplish things.

(Kolb 1984: 68–9)

Experiential learning is seen as a four-stage cycle combining all of these orientations. Thus simple everyday experience is not sufficient for learning. It must also be observed and analyzed consciously. Only experience that is reflected upon seriously will yield its full measure of learning, and reflection must in turn be followed by testing new hypotheses in order to obtain further experience. It can be argued, in fact, that theoretical concepts will not become part of the individual's frame of reference until they have been experienced meaningfully on a subjective emotional level. Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge, as it were, between experience and theoretical conceptualization. The process of learning is seen as the recycling of experience at deeper levels of understanding and interpretation. This view entails the idea of lifelong learning.

Self-directed learning

An important notion in experiential learning is that of intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning. Learners are encouraged to see

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themselves as increasingly competent and self-determined and to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning. Intrinsic motivation:

1. satisfies needs such as belonging, acceptance, satisfaction from work, self-actualization, power and self-control;
2. manifests itself primarily in the form of feelings, e.g. feelings of success and competence;
3. is connected with work, involving feelings of relevance of work, satisfaction derived from work, feelings of progress and achievement, and feelings of growth as a person.

By designing learning experiences that can promote such feelings it is possible, at least to some extent, to enhance learners' feelings of self-direction.

Accordingly, learners will find school motivating to the extent that it satisfies their needs. Satisfying work gives them feelings of belonging, sharing, power, importance and freedom regarding what to do, and it is also fun. If they feel no sense of belonging to their school and no sense of commitment, caring and concern, they lose their interest in learning. Glasser (1986) notes that discipline problems are less likely to occur in classes in which learners' needs are satisfied and where they have a sense of importance allowing them to feel accepted and significant. This suggests that school learning might be structured in a way that is conducive to learner commitment and is need-fulfilling for them. As a pedagogical solution he suggests the use of cooperative learning techniques, or learning teams as he calls them. A well-functioning team is a need-fulfilling structure that leads to successful learning.

Why experiential learning?

The justification for experiential learning can be based on the following arguments: (1) it facilitates personal growth; (2) it helps learners adapt to social change; (3) it takes account of differences in learning ability; and (4) it responds to learner needs and practical pedagogical considerations. These arguments are examined briefly in this section.

AN AID TO PERSONAL GROWTH

Becoming a person entails an increasing capacity to assume responsibility for what one does. Personal awareness and responsibility are also necessary for the development of self-directed, autonomous learning. Autonomy can be defined as a willingness and ability to make up one's mind about what is right or wrong, independent of external authority, but it does not mean individualism and a neglect of the social context.

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Personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is, being responsible for one's conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways. Its development can be seen as an open-ended dimension involving both personal, social and moral education. The task of education is to facilitate the development of the learner towards being a 'fuller' person with the capacity to reason, to feel and to act responsibly. The capacity to understand others and relate to them in meaningful ways is an integral part of personal growth (cf. Pring 1984: 72–5).

ADAPTING TO SOCIAL CHANGE

As education is also future-oriented it is important for educators to have a vision of the demands of social developments on school education. It is advisable to ask what kinds of skills and knowledge the school might aim to give learners during their obligatory education in order to prepare them to live in a society about which we can only make some predictions at the moment. What we do know is that Western society has undergone a rapid social and technological change during the past few decades, and the process is likely to continue.

The implications of change for school education have been outlined in the following manner by Wragg (1984):

– While we cannot know everything, we must know something. This implies an idea of a core of knowledge.
– With regard to knowledge expansion and the possibility of multi-media libraries, it will be important to be able to utilize existing information services and discover things independently. This emphasizes the importance of being able to use information by making critical choices and fostering a spirit of inquiry and independence.
– People must learn to work in teams and pool their expertise for common benefit. If a great deal of human endeavor involves collaboration, we might make sure that children learn to help each other in group work and share out the work and responsibility fairly, learning to get along with their fellows.
– Increasing leisure time will necessitate new demands for personal creativity, imagination and inventive thinking. This means an emphasis on developing one's personality in the spirit of lifelong education and using leisure time in humanly valuable ways.

Consequently, social, interpersonal and learning skills and attitudes will become increasingly important. To serve such needs, Wragg suggests a multi-dimensional view of the curriculum which will foster:

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- – creativity: capacity for imaginative and inventive thinking;
- – social and interpersonal skills: ability for cooperative work;
- – learning skills: capacity for autonomous learning.

It is thus interesting to note that the educational values and attitudes that seem to be conducive to a healthy personal growth also seem to be appropriate to the new developments in society.

DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING ABILITY

It is a commonplace that children without any severe learning impediments will become functionally competent in any second language, given sufficient exposure to it in a naturalistic environment in which it is used as a medium of communication. They can thus become bilingual without formal school instruction. In classroom-learning situations, however, there appear to be great differences in the talent for second (or foreign) language learning: some learn languages quite easily and rapidly, while others need more time, and some seem to have little ability even if they make a serious effort.

Since the mid-1970s, with the advent of cognitive psychology, there has been a shift of attention away from seeing individual differences as relatively stable genetic differences to seeing them largely as differences in information processing. Cognitive psychology is concerned with the mental processes that contribute to cognitive task performance: information processing in memory, how knowledge is stored and retrieved, what strategies are employed when solving problems, and how such strategies can be learned and monitored consciously.

Comprehension is regarded as an active process of constructing mental representations of meanings by anticipating message contents. The models of communicative competence generally include the notion of strategic competence, referring to the ability to process language data in real time and under the constraints of a limited short-term memory. An important way of saving time is to anticipate what will come next in discourse by making quick meaning-based predictions. Such predictions are based on schemata, which can be understood as configurations of interrelated features that define concepts, and which provide a generalized framework to which new information can be integrated. Schemata consist of more situation-specific scripts that contain knowledge of goals, participants and procedures in various real-life situations (e.g. expected ways of behaving in school, home, supermarket, restaurant, etc.).

Fluent language use requires the ability to identify and select suitable schemata and scripts in communication. The learner is seen as an active organizer of incoming information with a limited processing capacity. He or she imposes cognitive schemata on the data in an effort to organize it. But the development of fluency also requires that low-level

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