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## Tracing the Influence of John Dewey's Experiential Learning Philosophy on Hands-on Approaches in English Language Teaching

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### Abstract

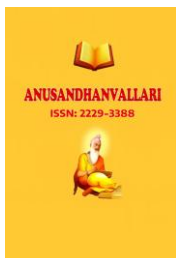
The research article investigates the foundational influence of John Dewey's experiential learning philosophy on the evolution of hands-on approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT). While David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a structured, cyclical model of learning, this article argues that Dewey's principle of learning by doing implies learning through experience, which serves as the epistemological foundation for contemporary communicative and task-based pedagogies (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). Employing a qualitative methodology that integrates historical analysis and systematic literature synthesis of indexed sources, the study traces the theoretical and pedagogical continuity from Dewey to modern ELT approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Gamification. The findings reveal that these approaches embody core experiential constructs such as experience, reflection, interaction, and application; thereby reinforcing learner-centred pedagogy. The study contributes a conceptual framework positioning Deweyan philosophy as the foundational driver of experiential practices in ELT and offers implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and future research.

**Keywords:** Experiential Learning Theory, John Dewey, David A. Kolb, ELT, Learn-by-Doing, Hands-on Approaches, Language Pedagogy, Experiential, Learner-centred, Experiential practices.

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### 1. Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone a significant transformation over the past century, shifting from traditional, teacher-centred methodologies to more dynamic, learner-centred approaches that emphasize active engagement, interaction, and real-world application. Earlier methods, such as the grammar-translation method, largely focused on rote memorization and passive reception of knowledge. However, contemporary pedagogical paradigms increasingly recognize that language acquisition is most effective when learners actively participate in



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meaningful communicative contexts. This shift has led to the emergence of hands-on approaches that prioritize experiential engagement and authentic language use.

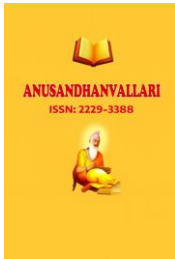
A major theoretical foundation for this transformation is the Experiential Learning Theory proposed by David A. Kolb, which builds upon the earlier educational philosophies of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. Kolb conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process consisting of four interrelated stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model underscores the idea that learning is not a linear transmission of knowledge but a continuous process of transformation through experience and reflection. The “learn-by-doing” principle embedded within this framework aligns closely with hands-on approaches in ELT, where learners engage in tasks that simulate real-life language use and subsequently reflect on their performance to refine their skills.

The growing emphasis on experiential learning has significantly influenced the development of communicative and task-based language teaching approaches. These approaches encourage learners to use language as a tool for communication rather than merely as an object of study. Activities such as role-plays, simulations, project-based tasks, and collaborative problem-solving exemplify how experiential principles are operationalized in ELT classrooms. Such approaches not only enhance linguistic competence but also foster critical thinking, creativity, and learner autonomy, which are essential skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational landscape.

This article addresses the central research question: How has the “learn-by-doing” principle of experiential learning shaped hands-on approaches in ELT? By tracing the historical evolution of experiential learning and examining its integration into language teaching practices, the study seeks to establish a clear theoretical and pedagogical linkage between these domains. The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to inform educators, curriculum designers, and researchers about the foundational role of experiential learning in shaping effective ELT practices. For educators, it provides insights into designing engaging and meaningful learning experiences; for learners, it highlights the benefits of active participation in language acquisition; and for researchers, it offers a framework for further exploration of experiential paradigms in language education.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach that combines an extensive literature review, historical analysis, and evidence synthesis. Drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal theoretical works, and contemporary case studies, the research systematically examines the evolution and application of experiential learning in ELT contexts. This integrative approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how experiential principles have been adapted and implemented across different pedagogical settings. This article argues that Experiential Learning (EL) serves as a foundational influence on hands-on approaches in ELT. Facilitating active engagement and iterative learning cycles enhances learner motivation, participation, and language proficiency. The study thus reinforces the relevance of experiential learning as a guiding framework for contemporary language teaching and underscores its potential for shaping future pedagogical innovations.

In ELT, this experiential paradigm is reflected in communicative and task-based approaches that prioritize authentic language use and learner interaction. Activities such as role-plays, simulations, collaborative projects, and real-world tasks embody the principle of learning through experience. Despite this alignment, the direct theoretical linkage between Deweyan philosophy and modern Language Teaching (LT) practices remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how Dewey’s experiential learning theory underpins hands-on approaches in English Language Teaching. It argues that contemporary approaches are not isolated innovations but extensions of a broader experiential tradition rooted in Deweyan thought.



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## 2. Research Questions

1. How does John Dewey's experiential learning philosophy underpin contemporary hands-on approaches in ELT?
2. In what ways do modern ELT approaches reflect the principle of "learning by doing"?
3. How can Kolb's experiential learning cycle be interpreted as an extension of Deweyan educational philosophy?
4. What pedagogical patterns connect experiential learning theory with communicative and task-based language teaching?

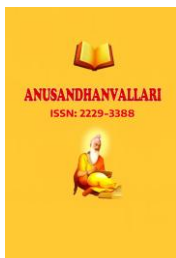
## 3. Research Objectives

- To establish John Dewey's experiential philosophy as the theoretical foundation of hands-on ELT approaches
- To analyse the evolution of experiential learning from Dewey to Kolb in language education
- To examine the alignment between experiential learning principles and modern ELT methodologies
- To synthesize indexed empirical and theoretical studies on experiential learning in ELT
- To propose a conceptual framework linking experiential theory with hands-on pedagogy

## 4. Review of Literature

Experiential learning has played a pivotal role in transforming English Language Teaching (ELT) into a more interactive and learner-centred discipline. The philosophical roots of experiential learning can be traced to John Dewey, who emphasized education as a process grounded in experience and reflective thinking. Dewey argued that learning occurs through active engagement with real-life situations, thereby laying the foundation for hands-on pedagogical approaches (Dewey, 1938). This perspective was further developed by Kurt Lewin, whose work on experiential processes highlighted the importance of integrating experience, reflection, and action in learning cycles (Lewin, 1951). Similarly, Jean Piaget contributed to this paradigm by asserting that learners construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, reinforcing the need for active participation (Piaget, 1950).

Building upon these foundational theories, David A. Kolb formalized the Experiential Learning Cycle, which consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This cyclical model has significantly influenced ELT by promoting instructional designs that prioritize engagement and practice over passive reception. Kolb's framework aligns closely with hands-on approaches, as it encourages learners to apply language skills in authentic contexts and reflect on their experiences to enhance understanding. The principle of "learning-by-doing," central to experiential learning, has contributed to the emergence of communicative and task-based approaches in ELT. These approaches focus on meaningful interaction, problem-solving, and real-world language use rather than rote memorization. According to Jack C. Richards, communicative language teaching emphasizes the functional use of language through activities such as role-plays, discussions, and simulations, which mirror experiential learning processes (Richards, 2006). Similarly, task-based language teaching involves learners in completing authentic tasks that require the use of language as a tool for communication, thereby reinforcing experiential principles.



Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing language proficiency. Learners engaged in hands-on activities exhibit higher levels of motivation, participation, and retention. Experiential approaches also facilitate the integration of cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, enabling learners to develop not only linguistic competence but also critical thinking and collaborative skills. Reflective practices, such as journals and peer feedback, further support learning by encouraging learners to analyse their experiences and refine their language use.

Contemporary developments in ELT have expanded the application of experiential learning through technology and contextualized pedagogy. Digital platforms, simulations, and project-based learning environments provide immersive experiences that align with Kolb's model. Moreover, culturally responsive teaching approaches integrate learners' social contexts into the learning process, enhancing relevance and engagement. Despite these advancements, critics argue that experiential learning may oversimplify complex learning processes and that its implementation requires careful design to ensure effectiveness. The literature indicates that experiential learning has significantly influenced the adoption of hands-on approaches in ELT. By emphasizing active engagement, reflection, and application, it has redefined language learning as a dynamic and participatory process. While challenges remain, experiential learning continues to provide a robust framework for fostering meaningful and effective language education.

## 5. Research Gaps in Literature

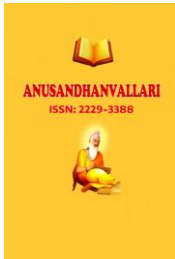
The article explores, addresses, and acknowledges the direct and indirect link between the ELT's learn-by-doing and the hands-on practices of approaches of the English language discipline in literature as a conceptual research gap that hasn't been acknowledged in academia through the existing gap by synthesizing theoretical and empirical evidence.

A comprehensive analysis of the existing hands-on approaches of the English language discipline has exhibited the characteristics of Experiential Learning Theory's learn-by-doing principle. Hence, tracing and synthesizing theoretical and empirical evidence was necessary to chart the influence made directly or indirectly by the principle of Experiential Learning Theory's learn-by-doing principle on the hands-on approaches of the English language discipline.

## 6. Hands-on Approaches to the English Language Discipline

Hands-on ELT approaches prioritize active, authentic, and learner-centred tasks. The following approaches are examined:

- **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):** Focuses on real-world communication (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).
- **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):** Uses tasks to drive language learning (Willis, 1996).
- **Project-Based Learning (PBL):** Engages learners in collaborative projects (Beckett and Slater, 2005).
- **Role-Play/Simulation:** Involves authentic scenarios for language practice (Knutson, 2003).
- **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL):** Teaches language through content (Coyle et al. 2010).
- **Flipped Classroom:** Applies content in interactive class tasks (Bergmann and Sams, 2012).



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- **Service Learning:** Combines community service with language practice (Furco 1996).
  - **Language Experience Approach (LEA):** Creates texts from personal experiences (Van Allen, 1976).
  - **Gamification:** Applies game elements to enhance engagement (Kapp, 2012).

## 7. Historical Context

The English language discipline had evolved from behaviourist paradigms in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to constructivist and learner-centred paradigms by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. ELT, formalized in the 1970s, coincided with the rise of communicative language teaching, followed by task-based, problem-based, and CLIL in the 1980s and 1990s. The emergence of the flipped classroom, Service-learning, and Gamification in the 2000s reflects a continued shift toward EL pedagogies. This historical convergence underscores the Experiential Learning Theory's principle of learn-by-doing as a fundamental function in shaping the hands-on approaches of the English language discipline.

## 8. Methodology

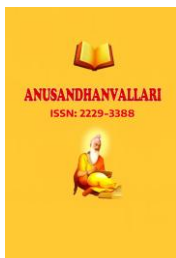
The study employs a qualitative approach, integrating:

- **Literature Review:** Analysis of scholarly sources on Experiential Learning Theory's principle of learn-by-doing and hands-on approaches of the English language discipline.
- **Historical Analysis:** Tracing the evolution of hands-on approaches of the English language discipline and Experiential Learning Theory adoption.
- **Evidence synthesis:** Compiling chronological case studies and empirical findings in parallel to trace the direct and indirect influence.
- Sources include peer-reviewed articles, books, and case studies from 1938 to 2024, ensuring a robust evidence base. The analysis focuses on aligning each ELT approach with ELT's four-stage cycle.

## 9. Key Hands-on Approaches in ELT

Each prioritizes active engagement over passive reception. The following approaches illustrate experiential integration:

- CLT: Real-world interaction via pair work and discussions.
- TBLT: Tasks (e.g., event planning) as primary learning units.
- PBL: Collaborative projects (e.g., newsletter creation).
- Role-Play/Simulation: Authentic scenarios (e.g., job interviews).
- CLIL: Subject content delivered through English.
- Flipped Classroom: Pre-class study followed by in-class application.
- Service Learning: Community service paired with language reflection.
- LEA: Text creation from learners' personal experiences.
- Gamification: Game mechanics (points, badges) embedded in tasks.



## 10. Historical Context and Evolution of Hands-on Approaches

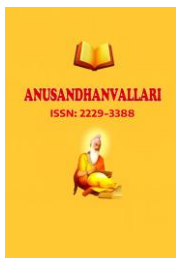
Mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century LT relied on behaviourist paradigms (grammar-translation, audio-lingual). The 1970s communicative revolution, coinciding with Kolb’s early work, introduced CLT. The 1980s-1990s saw TBLT, PBL, and CLIL emerge, followed by flipped classroom, service learning, LEA, and gamification in the 2000s-2010s. This timeline reflects progressive alignment with experiential principles, culminating in learner-centred, technology-enhanced practices by 2024 (Lac Hong University study).

## 11. Experiential Learning Theory’s Influence on the Hands-on Approaches of the English Language Discipline

### 1. Direct Influences

Dewey’s principle of “learning by doing” is directly reflected in ELT methodologies that engage learners in authentic tasks. Experiential Learning’s direct influences are as follows: CLT employs interactive tasks (concrete experience), peer feedback (reflective observation), rule analysis (abstract conceptualization), and new communicative tasks (active experimentation) (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2002). TBLT structures pre-task (experience), during-task, post-task reflection, and language focus, followed by new tasks (Willis, 1996; Nunan, 2004). PBL cycles through project creation, peer review, linguistic analysis, and revision (Beckett and Slater, 2005; Stoller, 2006). Role-play/simulation follows scenario enactment, debriefing, linguistic analysis, and repeated scenarios (Knutson, 2003; Ladousse, 1987). Gamification maps game challenges (experience), score feedback (reflection), strategy analysis (conceptualization), and escalating levels (experimentation) (Kapp, 2012; Reinhardt, 2019). Hence, EL directly shapes English Language Teaching approaches that follow its four-stage cycle, where learners engage in tasks, reflect, conceptualize, and apply language skills. The following table details these influences:

ELT Approaches	Description	ELT Connection	Evidence
CLT	Emphasizes real-world communication through interactive tasks (e.g., pair work).	Interactive tasks (CE), peer feedback (RO), rule analysis (AC), and new tasks (AE).	Richards & Rodgers [2001]: CLT’s communicative tasks align with ELT’s cycle. Savignon [2002]: CLT fosters experiential learning.
TBLT	Uses tasks (e.g., event planning) to develop language skills.	Tasks as CE, post-task reflection as RO, rule formulation as AC, and new tasks as AE.	Willis [1996]: TBLT mirrors ELT’s experiential cycle. Nunan [2004]: Tasks promote hands-on learning.
PBL	Learners create projects (e.g., newsletters) using language.	Projects as CE, peer feedback as RO, grammar analysis as AC, revised projects as AE.	Beckett & Slater [2005]: PBL enhances skills through experiential tasks. Stoller [2006]: PBL aligns with ELT.

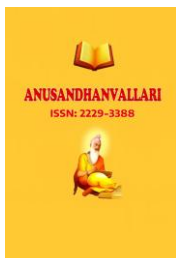


Role-Play/Simulation	Learners act out scenarios (e.g., job interviews).	Scenarios as CE, debriefing as RO, linguistic analysis as AC, and new scenarios as AE.	Knutson [2003]: Role-plays foster experiential practice. Ladousse [1987]: Role-plays are hands-on.
Gamification	Applies game elements (e.g., points, badges) to language tasks.	Game tasks as CE, feedback scores as RO, strategy analysis as AC, new challenges as AE.	Kapp [2012]: Gamification enhances engagement. Reinhardt [2019]: Games align with ELT.

## 2. Indirect Influences

Experiential Learning’s indirect influences are as follows: CLIL uses contextual content tasks, reflection on meaning, linguistic focus, and transfer tasks (Coyle et al. 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Flipped classrooms treat in-class activities as combined experience/experimentation with feedback and analysis (Bergmann and Sams, 2012; Hung, 2015). Service-learning sequences service (experience), journals (reflection), language analysis (conceptualization), and renewed service (Furco 1996; Perren and Wurr, 2015). LEA derives texts from lived experience, revision (reflection/conceptualization), and new writing (Van Allen, 1976). Hence, EL indirectly influences LT through its alignment with constructivist principles, shaping approaches that prioritize learner agency and context.

ELT Approaches	Description	ELT Connection	Evidence
CLIL	Teaches language through content (e.g., science in English).	Contextual tasks as CE, content reflection as RO, linguistic analysis as AC, and new tasks as AE.	Coyle et al. [2010]: CLIL’s contextual approach aligns with ELT. Dalton-Puffer [2011]: CLIL is experiential.
Flipped Classroom	Applies content in class tasks after home study.	In-class tasks as CE/AE, feedback as RO, and linguistic analysis as AC.	Bergmann & Sams [2012]: Flipped classrooms support active learning. Hung [2015]: Flipped ELT is experiential.
Service Learning	Combines service with language practice (e.g., volunteering).	Service as CE, reflection journals as RO, language analysis as AC, and new service as AE.	Furco [1996]: Service learning is experiential. Perren & Wurr (2015): Service learning enhances ELT.
LEA	Creates texts from personal experiences.	Experiences as CE, text revision as RO/AC, and new texts as AE.	Van Allen [1976]: LEA is experiential. Nessel & Dixon [2008]: LEA fosters hands-on learning.



## 12. Linking Experiential Learning Theory’s Learn-by-Doing Principle to Hands-on Approaches of Language Teaching Discipline

ELT’s “learn-by-doing” principle, rooted in Dewey and Kolb, posits that knowledge emerges from transforming experience (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). In Language Teaching Discipline, this translates to the approaches, where learners actively use language in authentic contexts, reflecting on and refining their language skills.

### Four recurring patterns connect Dewey/Kolb to hands-on ELT:

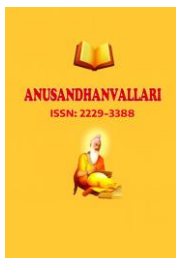
1. Constructivism - Learners build knowledge through experience (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984).
2. Reflection - Integral to every method via debriefs, journals, and feedback (Jeyaraj, 2019; Knutson, 2003).
3. Authentic Contexts - Concrete experience occurs in real-world or simulated settings (Coyle et al. 2010; Reinhardt, 2019).
4. Iterative Application - Active experimentation closes each cycle, promoting transfer.

### The following patterns link EL to hands-on LT approaches:

Pattern	Description	ELT Connection	Evidence
Constructivism	Learners construct knowledge through experience.	ELT and hands-on LT share constructivist roots.	Dewey [1938]: Experiential education underpins constructivism. Kolb (1984): ELT is constructivist.
Reflection	Learners analyse performance to improve.	ELT’s RO stage is integral to all hands-on approaches.	Jeyaraj [2019]: Reflection enhances ELT outcomes. Knutson [2003]: Reflection is key in role-plays.
Authentic Contexts	Learning occurs in real-world settings.	ELT’s CE aligns with LT’s authentic focus.	Coyle et al. [2010]: CLIL’s contextual tasks are experiential. Reinhardt [2019]: Gamified tasks are authentic.
Iterative Application	Learners experiment by exhibiting their competence through performance and active participation to improve.	ELT and hands-on LT offer an iterative juncture for learners to practice and demonstrate.	Ladousse [1987]: Role-plays, Furco [1996]: Service learning, Bergmann & Sams and Kapp [2012]: Active tasks and game elements reflect ELT

### Timeline of ELT’s Influence on Hands-on ELT

Year	Event/Development	Evidence/Trace to ELT’s Learn-by-Doing
1938	Dewey publishes Experience and Education.	Foundational “learn-by-doing” principle influences ELT’s experiential focus [Dewey, 1938].
1970s	Kolb develops ELT; CLT emerges.	ELT’s cycle supports CLT’s communicative tasks [Kolb, 1984; Richards & Rodgers, 2001].



1976	LEA was formalized by Van Allen.	LEA's experiential approach aligns with ELT [Van Allen, 1976].
1984	Kolb publishes Experiential Learning.	Formalizes ELT, influencing TBLT and PBL [Kolb, 1984].
1987	Role-play is popularized in ELT.	Role-plays reflect ELT's experiential cycle [Ladousse, 1987].
1990s	TBLT, PBL, and CLIL gain prominence.	ELT's cycle underpins task and project design [Willis, 1996; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Coyle et al., 2010].
1996	Service learning formalized in education.	Service learning aligns with ELT's experiential principles [Furco, 1996].
2012	The flipped classroom and gamification have been popularized.	Active tasks and game elements reflect ELT [Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Kapp, 2012].
2019	Jeyaraj compares experiential vs. traditional ELT.	Experiential practices, including CLT and TBLT, outperform traditional ones [Jeyaraj, 2019].
2024	Lac Hong University applies ELT to speaking skills.	ELT enhances speaking through tasks like role-plays [Lac Hong study, 2024].

### 13. Discussion

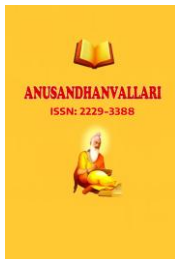
The synthesis reveals that hands-on language teaching approaches are not isolated innovations but extensions of Deweyan thought operationalized through Kolb's cycle. Experience supplies the entry point, reflection transforms it into knowledge, conceptualization yields linguistic insight, and experimentation ensures transfer precisely the sequence Dewey advocated. Reflection emerges as the critical differentiator; without structured debriefing, hands-on activities risk remaining mere entertainment.

### 14. Implications for Educators and Learners

- ELT's influence on hands-on ELT approaches offers practical implications:
- Curriculum Design: Integrate ELT's cycle into task-based curricula to enhance engagement and proficiency.
- Teacher Training: Equip educators to facilitate reflection and experimentation in approaches like TBLT and Gamification.
- Learner Engagement: Experiential tasks, such as gamified challenges or service projects, foster motivation and real-world application.

### 15. Limitations

The study relies on qualitative synthesis; large-scale quantitative validation across diverse contexts is needed. The study relies on historical references to validate the timeline, and by verifying secondary sources, rather than on classroom implementation with a larger group, and the constraints may hinder full implementation, and cultural factors affect service learning and gamification feasibility.



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- Resource Constraints: Hands-on approaches require time, materials, and technology (e.g., for gamification or flipped classrooms).
  - Reflection Dependency: ELT's effectiveness relies on guided reflection, which may be challenging in large classes.
  - Contextual Variability: Cultural and institutional factors may affect implementation (e.g., service learning's feasibility).

## 16. Future Research Directions

- Explore ELT's application in digital language teaching environments, such as virtual reality or gamified platforms.
- Investigate learner perceptions of hands-on approaches to assess engagement and efficacy.
- Compare ELT's impact across linguistic and non-linguistic disciplines to broaden its application.

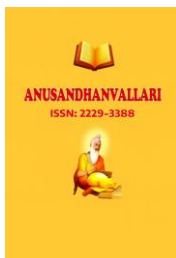
## 17. Conclusion

This article establishes that Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory is a foundational influence on hands-on language teaching approaches, including CLT, TBLT, PBL, Role-Play/Simulation, CLIL, Flipped Classroom, Service Learning, LEA, and Gamification. Each method aligns with ELT's "learn-by-doing" principle, engaging learners in authentic, reflective, and practical language tasks. While Kolb provides a structured model, the core principles of experience, reflection, and interaction originate in Deweyan thought. By tracing this intellectual lineage, the study offers a coherent framework linking experiential learning to modern language pedagogy. The findings underscore the relevance of experiential learning in fostering meaningful, learner-centred education.

Supported by historical analysis and empirical evidence, the findings underscore ELT's role in fostering learner-centred pedagogies. Educators are encouraged to leverage ELT's cycle to design engaging curricula, while researchers should explore its application in emerging digital contexts. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of experiential learning in the language-teaching discipline, offering a robust framework for language-teaching classrooms.

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