

## Testing ERE Cycle in Teaching Business Communication Courses: Experiential Learning Strategies

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### Abstract

*Effective communication skills demonstrate the capacity and efficacy of any business graduate; however, the business industries have continuously raised their concerns on the lack of effective business communication (BC) skills, to serve the requirements of rapidly growing communication within and outside the organizations. Among many factors, teaching methods at higher education have been identified as a major factor that does not allow working skills to be developed. Scholars and researchers have tried to explore and test Experiential Learning (EL) techniques in teaching different courses of business administration programs. EL theory presents a playfield where learners can learn the best by doing (Kolb, 1984). Although business education around the world has already inculcated EL strategies into its system, in Pakistan EL theory is at its initial stage. In this regard, the researcher developed an ERE cycle which was based on Kolb's (1984) EL theory and tested its impact on the grades of the students of oral and written communication skills. The study was conducted using one sample t-test in the paradigm of quantitative research. Three classes of BBA and MBA from oral and written communication courses were selected for this study. This research compared mean scores of these classes with the population mean over the last three years. The results showed a significant positive difference between the sample mean scores and population mean. The study proved that EL based ERE cycle could prove very effective in the enhancement of the skills of business communication students that were reflected in their performance in exams. The study aimed to provide communication faculty, trainers and institutes the opportunity to explore and utilize the effectiveness of the ERE cycle and perform further researches to extend the utilities of EL based teaching methods.*

**Keywords:** business communication, business administration, ERE cycle, experiential learning, higher education

### **Introduction**

Effective business communication skills help individuals and their respective organizations to grow and succeed in the competitive world. The organizations which do not have skilled employees in communication, have been facing a number of challenges and more often sit back in the race towards success. To provide the skilled graduates as better future employees, the responsibility lies with the business schools and faculty members of communication courses. These skills have become enlivening phenomena, which open the doors to success and researches have proved that skills are more important than possessing degrees. After conducting a survey, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2013) recommended that to communicate clearly, think critically and to be able to handle complex issues are more important skills than the degree of a business graduate. According to Tipu and Rayan (2011) the ratio of success in any profession after the completion of graduation programs in business administration depends on the candidate's communication skills. Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth and Marcia (2012) have found that communication and its demands in the business world have changed rapidly with the arrival of new technologies. Waldeck et al. (2012) concluded that the corporate world including scholars, corporate recruiters, research firms and business writers for many years have been suggesting that Business Communication (BC) skills are the leading factors to succeed professionally. Likewise, Gustafson's (1993) survey has established that communication skills are the most important tools to achieve any success in the field of business; the alumni who are performing higher level of responsibilities have established the fact. These studies confirm that communication skills are at the top of those skills which are required to be successful in workplace.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study was aimed to explore and test Kolb's (1984; 2014) EL method in teaching BC courses in business schools of Pakistan. It was sought to find out the impact of EL method on the grades of oral and written BC students. Experiential learning (EL) theory in the last few decades has served to the business world as a successful method of learning. Although this paradigm has continuously been explored and tested around the world in the field of business education, there have been minimum researches conducted in Pakistan to explore and test the effectiveness

of EL in the various fields of learning. Recently, Javed (2015) and Noman (2018) conducted their PhD researches to explore the effectiveness of EL in business education. However, no direct research has been conducted to the guidelines of applying EL theory in teaching communication courses in the local context. Owing to this fact, the present study served its purpose and accommodated an EL based ERE cycle that was investigated in teaching communication courses. Literature review shows that due to lack of innovative and modern teaching methodologies and adhering to traditional methods of teaching, students lack required skills and the current demand of the corporate world. This failure and incompetency in employing modern teaching techniques effectively was one of the foremost reasons, which became the barrier for all the fresh graduates who entered their professional lives. There was a dire need to introduce and test modern methods in teaching, especially for business students who had to deal with the real business world scenarios and reflect upon what they learned and practically experienced. Nevertheless, over the last few centuries, contemporary business schools and institutes have explored and tested numerous learning methods that would help the teachers to develop effective communication skills in students and cater to the needs accordingly. Such business schools aspire to produce fresh graduates who would possess theoretical knowledge along with practical experiences and effectively deal with the real business world problems.

### **Hypotheses**

The undermentioned hypotheses were decided before the start of the study:

H1:  $\mu \neq x$ : There is a significant difference in the grades of oral communication students after applying EL teaching method and the traditional teaching method.

H2:  $\mu \neq x$ : There is a significant difference in the grades of written communication students after applying EL teaching method and the traditional teaching method.

### **Literature Review**

Many studies on the topic have endorsed the fact that better communication skills have become a necessity to succeed at workplace (Cappel, 2002; McPherson, 1998; Plutsky, 1996). Other studies by mainstream researchers on communication

skills have established repeatedly that modern day recruiters and employers are seeking and expecting highest standards of both written and oral communication skills among their future employers. This has been observed during interviews and the hiring process. The highest value is given to those candidates who possess a good command over language and present excellent communication skills (Chandler, 1995; Epstein, 1999; Locker, 1999; Stowers & White, 1999). Similarly the studies of Swanson and Swanson (1990), through a brief survey confirmed that alumni have prioritized communication skills as the key to success and most demanded skills by the corporate world.

Business communication is considered the foundation course in all business management programs. According to Zhao and Alexander (2004) and Pittenger, Miller and Allison (2006), the curriculum of business communication helps a great deal to prepare the students for the workplace. Many business executives and educators agree that excellent skills of communication have become primary and pre-requisite to enter into the corporate world and to seek jobs. This developing trend puts BC skills as the key skill for the organizations. As such, the organizations expect their employees to have good communication skills which they develop during their academics. Maguire Associates (2012) claim that oral and written communication skills among the future employees is the primary responsibility of colleges and universities. According to Sharp and Brumberger (2013), while developing communication curriculum to meet the requirements of the business industry, many business schools have failed to develop essential business communication skills among their graduates. Buckley, Peach and Weitzel (1989); Thompson and Smith (1992) have pointed out while referring to many research articles and surveys that many of the business schools and colleges have failed to develop the required oral and written communication skills among students, which are being demanded by the industry. Gray (2010) indicates an urgent requirement to improve oral communication skills among the students, which has a great deal of room for upgrading and business schools and colleges are lacking to enhance sufficient communication skills.

National Business Education Accreditation Council (NBEAC) of Pakistan has focused on improving certain skills among the business students. It has demanded from the business schools to develop communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making in the business students. This also

indicates in a way, that formal methods of teaching may have failed to satisfy the needs of modern business industry.

In order to integrate the essential BC skills in students, conventional teaching approaches have been found insufficient and the scholars agree that new issues and challenges which have emerged in the last 20 years, have brought many changes that demand our students to be taught the way they are supposed to get exposed to the 21st century's challenges of the business world. Syed, Abiodullah and Yousuf (2014) have concluded in their research that traditional pedagogies in Pakistan have proved unsuccessful to develop critical and creative thinking in the students. The pedagogical aspects have also been questioned by many researchers in Pakistan who feel a need of shift from teacher centered to student centered teaching. Khan (2005) has concluded that after many years of reforms in education and rapid researches on effective modern teaching methods, teachers in Pakistan are still practicing teacher centered and traditional methods in education. Karim (2007) recommends a dire need to include experiential models in education to impart quality education and learning according to the needs of industry. Traditional method of teaching is mostly based on student centered activities and approaches. Dewey (1938) believed that traditional method is an imposed way of learning. He called the method as imposed from above and from outside where learners get less chances to explore and express. Dewey further adds that the traditional method revolves around the phenomena that the students will docilely and obediently receive the instructions and will conclude fixed ways to answer. Traditional method revolves around the teachers are the instruments to communicate and transfer the knowledge without much involvement of the students. Robert (2009) gives a historical overview of traditional approach and he found that the primary or traditional approach had been a simple recitation. A teacher translates and explains what a student recites and the rest of the class acts as passive listeners. The primary responsibility of a teacher is to assign the reading tasks and take formal exam at the completion of the session. The method does not allow the students to learn applying their own critical and analytical thinking, which does not help many students to shine and express the talent they possess. These conclusions reflect that the traditional method may be one of the reasons that fails to allow students to enhance their BC skills according to the market demand. Although using a traditional method, teachers teach BC skills through their personal experiences, ICT assisted lectures and other strategies however, many contemporary educationists claim that these are less effective

teaching practices in the absence of EL theory.

According to the Experiential Learning (EL) theory of Kolb (1984; 2014), learners learn best from their experiences. The use of EL strategies in teaching has revolutionized the teaching practices and it is taken for granted to use these strategies in business education. Miettinen (2000) claims that EL has become an established approach, when it comes to adult education and the focus of the business education has shifted towards EL theory to meet the desired standards demanded by the industry. This decreases the gap between the acquired skills at business schools and the required skills for the business world. Datar, Garvin and Cullen (2010) research shows that the heads of business schools in the USA, Europe and some parts of Asia indicate a decline in business education enrollment. The study recommends bridging the gap between the desired competencies and skills by the business sector and the academic practices at business schools. EL theory has been considered to link the actual practices of the business world with the academic practices because the theory is established on the model of learning through personal experiences. In many European, American and Australian educational institutes, EL theory has become an important approach and its theoretical frameworks are being used in higher and adult education (Boud, 1985; Boud & Miller, 1996; Weil & McGill, 1989). Miettinen (2000) indicates that EL theory has two major concepts without doubt and they are characterized as experience and reflection, which bring learning to the top. Likewise, Gustafson's (1993) survey establishes that all stakeholders and alumni consider that any success at the higher level and responsible position demands a higher level of communication skills. These studies and researches authenticate and endorse that the corporate sector and business world demand communication skills among their employees for success.

Many of the leading business schools around the globe are putting their efforts to bring in EL strategies into the teaching practices. Stanford University introduced a course on Critical Analytical Thinking (CAT) to put the EL theory into practice. The Design School of Stanford emphasizes on learning by doing and their aim is to produce thinkers and doers which would become more effective citizens. Extensive literature in the past few decades recommends that using EL strategies to teach business students can help to meet the corporate requirement; however, in Pakistan sparse work has been done to explore the effectiveness of EL theory. According to Javed, Hussain and Karim (2014), teachers in Pakistan want

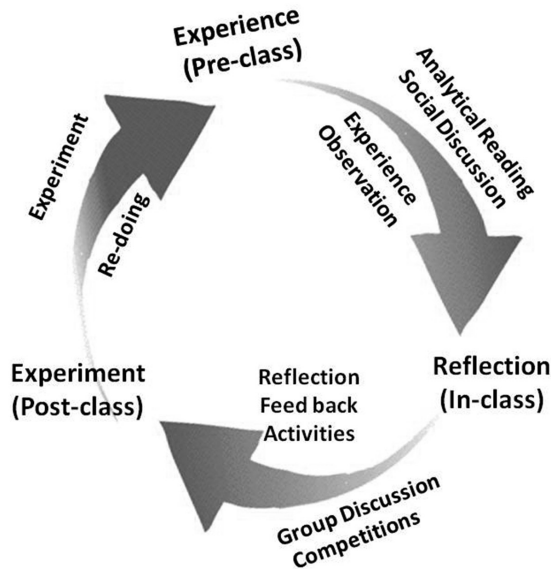
their students to get prepared for the corporate world, but they do not include EL strategies in their teaching. This study was conducted in a business college which advocates the use of EL strategies in teaching and the findings show that only 12% of teaching methodologies were experiential in nature. According to Javed (2015), Kolb's (1984) model has been used and applied in top universities worldwide and it is being discussed in other countries where its practice is yet to be planned, but in Pakistan experiential learning has yet not paved its way to a greater extent. Teacher centered learning is practiced in most of the Pakistani business schools and experiential learning is avoided. Although an effort to carry out project based learning and research oriented task is being made at various levels, there is still a need to measure and test the effectiveness of experiential learning in teaching different courses. There is a scarcity of research on the utilization and practical nature of the theory which needs to be explored (Javed, 2015).

Kolb and Kolb (2008) have also claimed that EL practices are being carried out in many developed countries, but some developing countries including Pakistan have not included the theory in their educational system. According to Javed (2015) there has been no research on experiential learning and its implementation in Pakistan. A research was conducted by Javed based on her Ph D dissertation on experiential learning in business subjects in 2015, but she has not explored and tested the impact of EL in teaching communication courses. Kolachi and Wajidi, (2008) have given the reasons for the job market being reluctant to hire fresh graduates based mainly on the lack of communication skills. These researches show that the traditional teaching methods may be one of the reasons to cater for the needs of the industry.

### **ERE Cycle**

For this study, the researcher developed an EL based ERE cycle that could serve utilizing EL practices in the local context. In this cycle, E refers to 'experience', R refers to 'reflection' and E refers to 'experiment'. This cycle was utilized in the classroom where the aim was to make students learn using a holistic process of learning. The role of the instructor was to employ an ERE cycle effectively and to facilitate students with real life phenomena so that they could gain new experiences and knowledge. The objective was to enable the students to have productive, meaningful and long-lasting learning. Those reflections were then absorbed and derived into unique ideas from which new implications for activities

were extracted. The implications were then utilized for dynamic assessment in the final step which prompted new and concrete experiences. This process encompassed learners to acquire real experiences and collect information. It also enhanced their reflective learning and critical thinking.



*Figure 1: EL based ERE Cycle*

### **Experience (Pre-class)**

The first step of this cycle was named ‘experience’, which demanded reflective and preparatory practices as it laid emphasis on concrete experiences in order to assess abstract conceptualization. EL cycle is defined as a process that undergoes learning by doing and grabbing concepts through direct experiences (Lewis & Willaims, 1994). The first phase was vital to uncover and utilize the prior experiences of the students. Learning that can be acquired through self-experience might be termed as nature’s way of learning along with education that occurs with spontaneous reflection in a series of events (Howle, 1980 as cited in Smith, 2001). EL practices require students to come up with knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that have been gained through daily life experiences. Through learning from previous experiences that lead to a choice of and/or placement into jobs and on the job learning to meet job demands, managers achieve a fit between their skills and their job demands which in turn produces effective performance (Sims 1981; 1983). The Learning Skills Profile (Boyatzis and Kolb 1991; 1995; 1997) was developed as a



holistic typology of learning skills associated with the phases of EL cycle to assess skills and job demands in commensurate terms.

### **Reflection (In-class)**

Most of the EL practitioners agree that reflection is the core of any EL process and almost all the cycles have included reflection in their different stages of learning cycles. Dewey (1897; 1916; 1938) was also a firm believer of the fact that unless we do not reflect on experience, learning would not take place. Reflecting on what we do or try to learn, helps a great deal to enhance the knowledge and improve the skills. In many of Dewey's works, he emphasized on a compulsory element of reflection in any learning process. He (1910) declared reflection as a fundamental aspect of the learning cycle, which allows the learner to ponder on what mistakes he has committed and what knowledge he has gained which might be used in active world experiences. Similarly, Pfeiffer and Jones (1985) also include reflections in their learning cycle. Schon (1983) was mainly influenced by Dewey's concept of reflection in action. Moreover, from this discussion it can be assumed that reflection can occur at the end of each learning activity, which helps the learner to ponder on his learning experience.

In the present study, the researcher devised many strategies that would provide learners an opportunity to reflect upon their experiential activities. Learning needs the tenacity of conflicts between dialectically contrasting styles of adaptation to the world and these conflicts, differences and disagreements are what drive the learning process. In the process of learning, one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). During the in-class learning phase, the learners were involved in various activities which included role playing, group discussions, presentations, arguments, quiz competitions and writing reflections on the whole learning process.

### **Experiment (Post-class)**

The final step of EL based ERE cycle is to experiment and test the results of the whole learning process. Once the learners gain the experience and have reflected upon it, they are prepared for assessments to administer their learning professionally. Here the participants tend to apply new and advanced skills and knowledge in a new setting that comes under performing experiments. They apply

their learning in the final evaluation, which they have acquired through their previously gained experiences and in-class activities that have sharpened their skills. Kolb (1984) suggests that this phase of experimentation enables students to apply the learning that took place and test the effectiveness of the learning process. The fair results of any learning can only be monitored once the desired skills or knowledge is tested in real world situations. The effectiveness of this process will depend on the learners having developed the required skills and whether they are ready to test these acquired skills and ultimately apply them successfully. If these skills are not tested, the whole process will prove futile and it would not enable both the learners and teachers to appraise the differences of this model of teaching and other traditional approaches. Summing up, learning from our experiences involves the key element of reflection. Obviously, most people fail to theorize about their learning in this way, but in their learning they unconsciously follow Kolb's cycle.

### **Methodology**

To test the effectiveness of the ERE cycle it was important to see its impact on the academic results of the students. The study included three classes of undergraduate and graduate programs from one of the leading business colleges of the country. The participants were from both oral and written communication courses which helped the researcher to find out the impact of teaching business communication courses using experiential learning method. Twenty six students of undergraduate program who were registered in 'business and professional speech' course and forty five students of other two classes of graduate program who were enrolled in 'persuasive and analytical writing business communication' course participated in this study. For this purpose a one sample t-test within the paradigm of quantitative research was used to answer the hypotheses of this study. To test the performance of the treatment groups with the previous results, one sample t-test was used to determine whether a sample of observations could have been generated by a process with a specific mean. This study applied one sample t-test using SPSS considering necessary reliability and validity aspects of it. This method helped to compare the mean scores of the treatment groups with the population mean to test the effectiveness of the experimented method.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

A group of 26 students of an undergraduate oral communication class

participated in this study. The average score of the last three years in oral communication classes was calculated as 79. Table 1 shows N= total number of participants is 26 while the mean score of the treatment group is 81.6538.

Table 1

*One Sample T-Test Mean Score of Oral Communication Group*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Oral Communication Group</b>	26	81.6538	3.91859	.76850

Table 2 shows the significant value of one sample t-test of the oral communication group. The mean difference of the treatment group is 2.6538 greater than the population mean. This significant value of .002 proves that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of treatment group to the population mean. The results enabled the researcher to answer and discuss the objectives of this study. One of the objectives of this study was to test the impact of the ERE cycle on the performance of oral communication students which was reflected in their grades in this course. Previously, the researcher had taught the same course to a similar level of students using traditional pedagogies. The average score in the last three years was calculated as 79. Using the EL based ERE cycle, the overall score of the students increased significantly. Table 2 also reflects the mean score of the treatment group raised to 81.65, which is 2.65 greater than the population mean. The participants not only developed effective oral communication skills, but they also performed better in the assigned activities which were assessed to accumulate their grades.

Table 2

*P Value of One Sample T-Test of Oral Communication Group*

	Test Value = 79					
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
<b>Oral Communication Group</b>	3.453	25	.002	2.65385	1.0711	4.2366

## Written Business Communication Group

Two groups consisting of 45 students enrolled in written BC courses participated in this study. The average score of the last three years was calculated as 76. Table 3 shows N= total number of participants is 45 while the mean score of the treatment group is 80.2667.

Table 3

### *One Sample T-Test Mean Score of Written Communication Group*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Written Communication Group</b>	45	80.2667	4.36098	.65010

Table 4 shows the significant value of one sample t-test of the written BC group. The mean difference of the treatment group is 4.26 greater than the population mean. This significant value of .000 proves that there is a highly significant difference between the mean scores of treatment group to the population mean. Another objective of this study was to compare the mean score and significant difference between the treatment group of written communication class with the population mean using the ERE cycle. The average score of written communication groups in the last three years was calculated as 76. Using the EL based ERE cycle, the overall score of the students increased significantly. As Table 3 reflects, the mean score of the treatment group was raised to 80.26, which is 4.26 greater than the population mean. This increase was consistent and the improved performance of the students. The consistency was also observed during hourly exams and final exams where the results were better than previously recorded results, when the students were taught using other traditional methods.

Table 4

### *P Value of One Sample T-Test of Written Communication Group*

	Test Value = 76					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Written Communication Group	6.563	44	.000	4.26667	2.9565	5.5769

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concludes that EL though a relatively new concept in the field of business education in Pakistan, has found its ways and established its foundation in the learning framework. The present study also concludes that EL has played a vital role within the theoretical background of adult education in Pakistan. This approach can also be seen as an ideology where intellectual enterprise has become the prime function in the field of business management and technology. Students who were taught utilizing this learning approach benefited from it which improved and enhanced their skills and capabilities. These skills included formulation of conceptual ideas and theories, creative, analytical, imaginative and emotional thinking, self-confidence, time management, logical reasoning and sense of responsibility, practical application, laboratory assessment and simulation. Hence, the study clearly indicates that EL drove the learners to skill development, which was considered as the most essential trait in business graduates when it came to professionalism and future employability. Finally, the positive impact of the ERE cycle was clearly seen in the overall final grades of the participants at the end of the study. The significance of the study lies in the skill development and career growth of the students using EL based ERE cycle in teaching BC courses. Based on the findings and results, the study presents some of the recommendations which are as follows:

1. Experiential learning is widely used in top business institutes globally; therefore, Pakistan should think on those lines as well. A wide variety of researches should be carried out to promote experiential learning practices and encourage students to learn by doing and reflecting upon it, instead of relying on the traditional teacher centered approach.
2. It is strongly recommended that teachers and facilitators should take initiatives to widely promote experiential learning in every educational field and make the learning environment favorable for the students. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the business educationists to diminish a teacher centered approach and introduce new teaching methodologies and effective learning strategies to make the learning environment conducive, where students' written and oral communication skills are noticeably focused and enhanced.

3. It is also recommended that if business students are enriched with enhanced thinking competencies as a result of the use of experiential learning method, this could develop their cognition skills to improve their critical thinking. This will help students to take appropriate business decisions, boost their performance, enlighten their imagination in the global market and elevate the economic condition of the country as well as its reputation.

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