TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVES ON INTEGRATING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INTO CLASSROOMS TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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Abstract: The skills gap is a noticeable issue in many countries, including Vietnam, a developing nation in Asia, where intellectual knowledge gaining seems to be a dominating objective of undergraduate students. To equip students with necessary practical skills for work after graduation, new courses have been developed at a language university in Vietnam. The courses are Presentation Skills, Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution, English for Career Development, and English for Business and Entrepreneurship. All the courses are taught in English and teachers apply Kolb's experiential learning cycle model to develop activities in these classes. The study describes this application and investigates lecturers' experience in integrating experiential learning into their classrooms to find out benefits and challenges of this process, especially when the teachers were trying to develop students' employability skills - an important goal of the courses. Analysis of qualitative data from interviews with nine lecturers showed that teachers used a wide variety of experiential learning activities to motivate students as well as assist them to gain knowledge and practical skills. Moreover, with these activities, students were believed to develop important employability skills such as sense making, collaboration or communication skills. The findings suggest that experiential learning is a promising approach to equip students with employability skills before graduation and getting ready for future work.

Keywords: experiential learning, skill development, skills gap, employability skills

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QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN VỀ TÍCH HỢP HỌC TẬP TRẢI NGHIỆM NHẰM PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG LÀM VIỆC CHO SINH VIÊN

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Tóm tắt: Rèn luyện kỹ năng cho sinh viên là một vấn đề đáng chú ý ở nhiều quốc gia, bao gồm cả Việt Nam, một quốc gia đang phát triển ở châu Á, nơi việc tiếp thu kiến thức dường như là mục tiêu chủ đạo của sinh viên đại học. Nhằm trang bị cho sinh viên những kỹ năng cần thiết cho công việc sau khi tốt nghiệp, các khóa học mới và chuyên biệt đã được xây dựng tại một trường đại học, bao gồm: Kỹ năng thuyết trình, Giao tiếp liên văn hóa và giải quyết xung đột, Tiếng Anh phát triển nghề nghiệp và Tiếng Anh kinh tế và doanh nghiệp. Tất cả các khóa học đều được giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh và giảng viên đã áp dụng mô hình học tập trải nghiệm của Kolb để phát triển các hoạt động trong các lớp học này. Nghiên cứu này mô tả việc áp dụng mô hình học tập trải nghiệm vào các khóa học mới này và tìm hiểu kinh nghiệm của giảng viên trong việc tích hợp học tập trải nghiệm vào lớp học để tìm ra những lợi ích và thách thức của hướng tiếp cận này, đặc biệt là khi giảng viên đang cố gắng phát triển các kỹ năng nghề nghiệp cho sinh viên - một mục tiêu quan trọng của các khóa học. Phân tích dữ liệu định tính từ các cuộc phỏng vấn với 9 giảng viên cho thấy các giảng viên đã sử dụng đa dạng các hoạt động học tập trải nghiệm để tạo động lực cho sinh viên cũng như hỗ trợ sinh viên tiếp thu kiến thức và kỹ năng thực hành. Hơn nữa, với những hoạt động này, sinh viên được phát triển các kỹ năng nghề nghiệp quan trọng như: sáng tạo, kỹ năng hợp tác hoặc kỹ năng giao tiếp. Những phát hiện này cho thấy học tập trải nghiệm là một phương pháp đầy hứa hẹn để trang bị cho sinh viên các kỹ năng việc làm trước khi tốt nghiệp và sẵn sàng cho công việc trong tương lai.

Từ khóa: học tập trải nghiệm, phát triển kỹ năng, khoảng trống kỹ năng, kỹ năng nghề nghiệp

1. Introduction

One of the most significant missions of higher education is to provide a high-quality labour force for society (Miller et al., 2013). This mission is becoming more urgent given the rapid changes in the labour market due to advancement of technology (Ra et al., 2019). This dynamic state of the labour market requires job seekers to quickly adapt to a fully volatile situation (Schwab, 2016). This ability is made up of the possession of both specialized knowledge and essential employability skills. Employability skills, defined as non-technical skills allowing job seekers to acquire, maintain and develop in different types of jobs, are more important than ever before (Romanova, 2022). Therefore, universities which desire to create a high-quality labour force should not only focus on equipping students with technical skills and knowledge but also employability skills (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Experiential learning has long been considered as an effective approach to boost students' performance and motivate students to actively gain knowledge for themselves. In addition, studies have also proven that teachers can help students develop significant

employability skills by following experiential learning theory and conducting activities of the experiential learning cycle such as internships and work placements (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Boahin & Hofman, 2013; Reedy et al., 2020); role-play (Guachalla & Gledhill, 2019; Huertas-Valdivia, 2021); task-based programs (Lu, 2021); mock job interviews (Lord et al., 2019); simulation (Dowling et al., 2015; Pal et al., 2005); community service (Chan, 2012).

The urge to provide students with necessary working skills or employability skills is also witnessed in the Vietnamese context (Tran, 2018). While experiential learning has been recognized as a suitable approach to enhance the learning process, few studies have been conducted to examine the application of the experiential learning theory into the teaching and learning process, especially to develop employability skills (Nguyen et al., 2024). The current study aims at examining how lecturers at a Vietnamese university implemented experiential learning activities to develop employability skills for their students. The study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the learning and teaching situation in Vietnam, especially the effort of universities to enhance students' employability skills so that they can live up to requirements of the market after graduation.

The study is to answer the following questions:

1. How do lecturers implement experiential learning activities in the class to develop students' employability skills?

2. What employability skills, as perceived by lecturers, can be developed by their experiential learning activities?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Experiential learning is defined as "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills and value from direct experiences" (Jacobs, 1999, p. 51). When these experiences are created for a certain educational purpose, they are not always the same as real-life experiences, in the way that an educational experience should be meaningful and relevant to what students are learning and used to enhance students' learning process and performance (Rutland & Gross, 2017).

The experiential learning theory, described in the book "Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development" of Kolb (1984), is based on the combination of work implemented by notable researchers such as John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers, and Mary Parker. This theory is constructed on six propositions:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.

2. All learning is re-learning.

3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.

4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.

5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.

6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

(Kolb et al., 2014, p. 212)

Kolb (1984) believes that learning is the process of grasping and transforming experience into knowledge. Central to the experiential learning theory is the experiential

learning cycle first proposed by William James. The cycle is a spiral process with four successive steps: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. In this cycle, students ideally first have a concrete experience (CE) of a thing or learning subject. They then observe and reflect on that experience (RO – reflective observation). In the next step, what they have reflected is turned into abstract concepts (AC- Abstract Conceptualization) which they can base on to conduct practical actions later (AE - Active Experimentation). The actions may then continue to create new experiences for them, and a new learning cycle is started.

Based on the experiential learning cycle, educators can choose suitable activities for each stage (Svinicki & Dixon, 1987, p. 142). Specifically:

Figure 1

Suggested Experiential Learning Activities for Each Stage of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Svinicki & Dixon, 1987, p. 142)
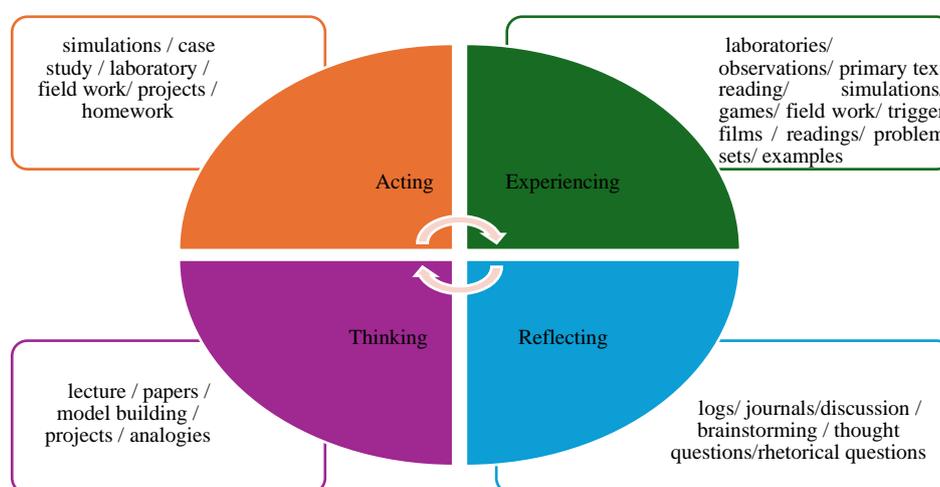
Another angle to look at when designing activities for ELT is considering the setting in which the activity is conducted. Accordingly, there are two approaches: "live" approach and "classroom-confined" approach to design activities (Chiu & Lee, 2019). While the former includes experiences taking place in a real-life context (i.e. in a certain community), the latter is the implementation of experiential learning within the classroom. Following the two approaches, experiential learning activities can come into various sizes and shapes. Recently, with the facilitation of technology, teachers now can also design activities in virtual environments. Kwon (2019) proved that with the use of Authentic Virtual Reality (AVR), the level of experientiality was increased, compared to using images from books in the simulated stage and also high order thinking skills were developed.

In this study, we investigated types of activities that lecturers used to apply the Experiential learning theory into their teaching practice. Activities for each stage of the learning cycle would be identified, and the setting of these activities is expected to be clarified.

2.2. Experiential Learning and Employability Skills

The benefits of experiential learning have been well documented by a large number of studies. Baldwin and Rosier (2017) listed several advantages of this approach:

- improving learning outcomes

- enhancing the relationships between students, faculties and communities

- improving student retention

- providing students with knowledge about the real world

- developing essential transferable skills like communication, problem-solving, teamwork, presentation, networking, etc.

- developing students' attributes like social consciousness, responsibility, self-confidence

Our research focused mainly on how teachers develop experiential learning activities to improve students' employability skills; therefore, the following part will further clarify the use of ELT to enhance those skills in the extant literature.

According to Sarfraz et al., (2018) employability skills are:

"...personal skills and attributes demonstrated by an individual that distinguish one job seeker from another in their field of specialisation and help them to secure gainful employment, sustain them in that job and progress in their career to achieve their maximum potential and contribute towards their personal goals and that of their organization."

(Sarfraz et al., 2018, p. 66)

Experiential learning theory is practiced through a wide range of activities such as internships, work placements, role play, games, simulations, and so on. Specifically, internships and work placements which are activities taking place outside classrooms are chances for students to apply what they have learnt at university and develop work-readiness skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Boahin & Hofman, 2013; Reedy et al., 2020). Jackson (2015) found that planning, goal setting, self-refection on achievement, group work or role-play in the classroom and observing, evaluating or team meetings of on-the-job training and placements were able to enhance students' problem-solving skills, critical thinking, communication and teamwork skills. Likewise, Doolan et al. (2019) and Reedy et al. (2020) discovered that non-placement work-integrated learning activities could strengthen communication skills, planning, organizational and problem-solving skills, teamwork and creativity. In Vietnam, not many studies investigating the relationship between internships and employability skills have been conducted. Tran and Nguyen (2018) was among that small number. This study showed that the internships had benefited Vietnamese interns of Tourism and Hospitality field in some ways: (1) helping students gain new knowledge as well as apply it into practice; (2) developing necessary professional and soft skills relevant to interns' future work; (3) changing learning attitudes and behaviours positively and (4) providing some information for students to identify their future career path.

Role-playing is also a common experiential learning activity in the classroom. In the field of hospitality and tourism, the activity is supposed to familiarize students with the real situation, provide them with necessary skills to gain job and apply learnt knowledge into practice, in addition to boosting students' confidence (Guachalla & Gledhill, 2019; Huertas-Valdivia, 2021).

By participating in task-based programs, students in the sport management course in Taiwan can develop various employability skills such as communication skills, teamwork, creative thinking, writing and problem-solving skills, which are important in increasing students' employability in the future (Lu, 2021). In the same field, Lord et al. (2019) indicated that mock job interviews could help students improve their communication and organisation skills.

Another popular activity is simulation which has been claimed to foster students' employability skills (Dowling et al., 2015; Pal et al., 2005). For example, when combined with ICT (information and communication technology), the simulation of the international

workplace brought Australian students experiences that helped them improve most of the 10 core skills in the Developmental Framework such as researching skills, computer literacy, decision making, planning and organising skills, etc. (Schech et al., 2017). Recognizing some drawbacks of simulations, Canhoto and Murphy (2016) integrated simulation design with other experiential learning activities to form an integrative approach, which is in the form of The Google Online Marketing Challenge. The study provided students with a chance to develop employability skills like communication, negotiation or time management skills when they had to work with clients and teams.

With the use of experiential learning projects as a form of community service, Chan (2012) also found benefits of these activities in enhancing students' transferable skills by describing what students had experienced and their feedback. For example, by solving real problems related to solar energy, the team developed problem-solving skills and communication skills. Tackling unexpected issues was also time for the improvement of creativity and collaborating skills.

While there are numerous studies in different parts of the world that have been conducted to investigate the application of the experiential learning theory into teaching and learning process, especially to develop employability skills, similar ones are rarely found within Vietnamese context (Nguyen et al., 2024)., which is witnessing graduates' lack of real life experience and employability skills to find and maintain jobs in the future (Tran, 2018; Tran, 2015). Also, the implementation of experiential learning activities in Vietnamese classrooms is inadequately reported. Among the very few is Cao et al. (2017), which described experiential learning activities in each stage of the learning cycle suggested by Kolb (1984) that were conducted by students in the chemistry class. However, the study did not mention employability skills that could be developed by those activities. Therefore, the current study is expected to provide a look at the application of experiential learning activities in Vietnam to bridge the skills gap.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The aim of this study is to examine how lecturers applied the experiential learning theory into their classrooms and the way they developed activities to enhance students' employability skills. To address this aim, the study adopted a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for providing an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of educational practices as perceived and interpreted by participants (Creswell, 2002; Lapan et al., 2011, p. 243).

This design ensures alignment between the research objectives and the choice of semi-structured interviews to access lecturers' pedagogical reasoning. Each lecturer was treated as an individual case situated within their authentic teaching context. The credibility of the findings is further supported by data triangulation across multiple participant accounts (Lapan et al., 2011, pp. 99, 251), allowing for the identification of consistent patterns in how these skills are conceptualized and integrated within the specific Vietnamese socio-educational context. This design aligns with the exploratory nature of the research questions and supports the generation of rich, trustworthy qualitative data.

3.2. Participants

We sent invitations to 14 university lecturers who were teaching new courses of the faculty, including: Presentation Skills, Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution,

English for Business and Entrepreneurship, English for Career Development. Nine among those lecturers agreed to participate in the study. All of them had been teaching English for several years before being assigned to teach those courses, which were designed for first-year students who already had a certificate of B2 (CEFR) or above. All the courses were approved to be taught at that university from September 2022. This means that those lecturers were the very first lecturers of the courses, with little or no previous experience in teaching such skills.

After accepting to join interviews, all the teachers were informed and explained about experiential learning theory by the research team. They also had experience in organizing experiential learning activities in their English language classes previously, but they had not been aware that those were types of experiential learning activities. Activities that they had done were discussion, games, role-plays. The information about the lecturers is presented in the table below:

Table 1

Teachers' Information

Teacher	Educational Background	Teaching experience	Courses	Previous knowledge/ experience of
Teacher A	M.A.	5 years	English for Career Development	Yes
Teacher B	M.A.	15 years	English for Business and Entrepreneurship	Yes
Teacher C	M.A.	12 years	Presentation Skills	No
Teacher D	M.A.	22 years	Presentation Skills	Yes
Teacher E	M.A.	17 years	Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution	No
Teacher F	M.A.	12 years	Presentation Skills	No
Teacher G	Ph.D.	15 years	Presentation Skills	Yes
Teacher H	M.A.	11 years	English for Career Development	Yes
Teacher I	Ph.D.	12 years	Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution	Yes

Regarding the four new courses that the lecturers taught, they were designed for first year students who had English proficiency level of B2 or above. When entering the university, students could provide a certificate of their English proficiency or take English language courses until they get to B2 level. Students with adequate qualifications would take two of the new courses instead. The purpose of the courses is to provide students with skills that are necessary for their future study at university and jobs. The Presentation Skill course aims at helping students develop the ability to deliver presentations in the public confidently. The English for Career Development course equips students with English language skills as well as other practical skills to find a good job (e.g. creating a C.V, cover letter or joining a job interview). The course of English for Business and Entrepreneurship supports students who are interested in doing business and have start-up ideas. Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution course brings students knowledge about diverse cultures, skills to act in an intercultural environment and solve problems caused by the mismatch between different cultures. All the courses were taught in English and English skills were not the focus but practical skills were; therefore, these courses should be considered as EMI courses (English as a medium of instruction), instead of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses. The courses were taught in 15 weeks, 3 periods each week with 30-40 students in each class.

Before teaching those courses, all the teachers were trained in terms of the course

objectives, policies, teaching approaches and assessment. However, in practice, lecturers were free to choose suitable activities for their classes provided that they could complete the objectives of the lessons.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

To ask for voluntary participation, two of the researchers who were working at the same university as the lecturers sent emails or Zalo messages to invite participants to join the interview. 14 lecturers who had taught the course were invited but only 9 of them agreed to participate in the project. After that, a document providing information on the study, including the purpose, the theory and the way data is stored and processed was sent to each participant. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the participants because the data gained from this technique could help the researchers understand the way lecturers applied the experiential learning cycle in reality and their perception about how employability skills were developed along with the main skills taught in the course. In fact, to investigate activities used or employability skills improved, the researchers could have used a survey. However, this tool tends to be powerful in listing the activities or skills, which is not the objective of the study. We wanted to dig deeper into lecturers' perspectives and actions while applying the experiential learning theory. Therefore, a semi-structured interview should be a more suitable tool (Cohen et al., 2017).

Interviews with Teacher A, E and I were conducted face-to-face while the others via Zoom. All the interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews prolonged 50 to 60 minutes. After the interviews, all the audio files were uploaded on the website memobot.io to get the transcription. The transcriptions were then checked and corrected by the researchers. The questions of the interviews were those to investigate how lecturers organized experiential learning activities for their classes and employability skills that they believed were developed thanks to those activities. When asking about employability skills, Singapore's Critical Core Skills framework (2019) was shown to interviewees so that they could recall and draw conclusions about the skills that they had helped students improve.

3.4. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was used to analyse data to answer the research questions. The data analysis followed a three-step coding process to ensure analytical transparency. First, open coding was used to identify initial concepts and keywords from the interview transcripts. Second, axial coding was performed to group these codes into broader categories based on shared characteristics (e.g., grouping specific classroom tasks under certain stages of Kolb's cycle). Finally, these categories were synthesized into themes that align with the research questions, specifically focusing on experiential learning stages and their corresponding employability skills. Kolb's learning cycle (1984), Svinicki and Dixon's framework of experiential learning activities (1987), Singapore's Core Skills framework were guidelines for the analysis of the data.

Table 2

Example of The Coding Process and Thematic Development

Raw Data / Quote	Initial Code	Category	Theme
"Students listened to her and then made questions based on their needs. They just asked questions and reflected on what they thought about the talk and what they had learnt."	Industry expert guest talk	Reflective observation	Bridging experience and insight (Experiential learning stage)

"A girl asking for money from her parents... students had to play the right role."	Role-play scenarios	Classroom simulations	Active experimentation (Experiential learning stage)
"They knew how to divide tasks among members and avoid conflicts..."	Managing team dynamics	Teamwork proficiency	Collaboration (Employability skill)
"In week 5, students had to make a video introducing themselves."	Video production task	Digital content creation	Digital Fluency (Employability Skill)

4. Results

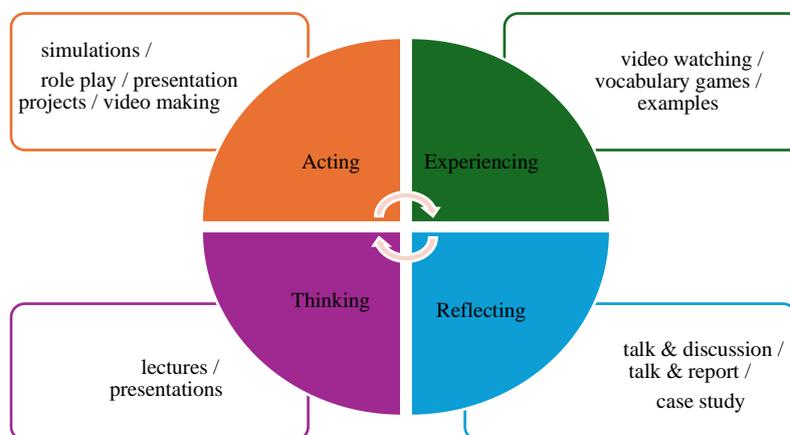### *4.1. Experiential Learning Activities*

One of the objectives of the study is to find out what experiential learning activities educators used in their classroom and how they conducted those activities in their classrooms in reality. The study used Kolb's learning cycle (1984) and activities suggested by Svinicki and Dixon (1987) to analyse data from interviews.

4.1.1. Students as Facilitators at the Experiencing Stage

The activities that participants used while applying experiential learning theory are illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 2

Actual Experiential Learning Activities for Each Stage of the Experiential Learning Cycle

As can be seen from Figure 2, participants employed a variety of activities to support students' learning. At the experiencing stage, teachers may use video watching, games on vocabulary of the topic, and example presentations. One of the common approaches to the new lesson was to get students to watch examples of the subject matter in the real world. For example, in the Presentation skill classes, teachers provided sample videos of presentation for students to watch and then give comments or reflections after watching those videos:

"...I also found videos (to illustrate the theory I presented) or examples in the form of a speech." (Teacher C)

However, a teacher realized that watching sample videos might have a negative influence on students in the way that they could "frame" students' minds. It means that students just followed what was on the sample and did not think of creating something new:

"Watching samples has a shortcoming… Students just follow them. For example, I used to send a sample set of slides which I thought was the most perfect to students. Then my students tend to imitate those slides… They did not have creativity." (Teacher G)

Therefore, instead of videos, she asked students to perform parts of a presentation (the introduction or body or conclusion parts) as examples and other students in the class would watch and give comments on that performance. After that, they would draw theoretical points based on that, with the help of the teacher. Finally, the class (in groups) would practice presenting using those points. In this class, a full cycle of experiential learning was completed in a lesson.

Vocabulary games or mini tests were used as a regular activity in classes of English for Career Development, Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution or English for Business and Entrepreneurship. These games were prepared and delivered by groups of students to help their classmates revise what they have learnt or get familiar with a new topic:

"(mini-tests) are to revise the previous lesson or introduce the new content, but they are not like tests… there is a group delivering this activity every lesson." (Teacher H)

"This course has three important components. The first one is a word game. Students do this as a warm-up activity." (Teacher I)

"Students join in vocabulary games to review what they have learned. They are not too stressful. Actually, they are relaxing moments…Students create vocabulary games to interact with their classmates." (Teacher B)

4.1.2. The Reflecting Stage: Bridging Experience and Insight

At the reflecting stage of the cycle, students had the chance to go to talks, attend seminars, or discuss cases and then write reports, reflect or make decisions. These activities should be seen as the combination of experiencing and reflecting. In the Presentation skill course, students would complete their Progress test by going to a real presentation or talk, observing and writing reports. The reports would mention what they had learnt from the talk or presentation, the good and bad points, and suggested ways to improve them.

"They participated in the talk themselves. The teacher suggested some talks for them to attend beforehand. Then they discussed in their group and reported in the form of a presentation after coming back. The presentation should be the analysis and evaluation of the talk." (Teacher D)

"They have to show pictures or videos to illustrate their points. For example, if they think the slide has too many words, they will have to show that slide to prove that." (Teacher G)

To help students gain more insight into the subject matter, teachers also invited speakers to share their practical experiences related to job seeking or start-up. Students participated and made questions to the speaker to discuss what they were concerned about.

"I usually invited speakers or asked for help from my friends to come to the class. They gave comments on students' CV, cover letters or shared experience when they were recruiting new employees." (Teacher H)

"I invited a professional in the field of human resources. She was my old student. She was very enthusiastic, and my students also sent CVs to her after the talk. … Students listened to her and then made questions based on their needs. They just asked questions and reflected on what they thought about the talk and what they had learnt." (Teacher B)

Teacher B also believed that talks were precious experiences to students as at their university, students *"had few chances to be coached like this"*.

4.1.3. The Thinking and Acting Stages: Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation

At the thinking stage, most of the teachers gave lectures after giving examples or letting students reflect on their experience. However, in the Presentation Skills class, it was students who delivered the main content of the lesson. They were assigned reading materials to read at home and then when they came to class, they presented what they had read:

"They (students) will read the materials. I will not require all groups to present (the content of the reading materials) but three or four groups only. If the content is very clear and easy to understand, just two groups will present. Others will do the practice part." (Teacher F)

The acting stage includes various activities like role-play, simulations, or projects. Among these activities, role-play and simulations were used quite often during the course to practice in class while projects were used as an end-of-term assessment. Specifically, when teachers wanted students to have awareness of using the knowledge in the context properly, they would use role playing. Students of Presentation skill classes had role playing when they had lessons about voice techniques:

"When practicing voice techniques, the activities became more fascinating. I put students in a particular context. For example, a girl asking for money from her parents should use a kind of voice to persuade her parents. It means that students had to play the right role." (Teacher D)

"I required students to play the roles of the Queen or Little Red-Riding Hood (to teach voice technique" (Teacher G)

Simulations were conducted in themes. For example, in the course English for Career Development, teachers organized mock job interviews (Teacher A, Teacher H); in Presentation Skills course, it was a seminar with the participation of the university leaders (Teacher G); in English for Business and Entrepreneurship, it was a game show on TV – the Shark Tank (Teacher B).

Making videos was only used in the course English for Career Development. It was the practice after students learn about the way to promote their self-image:

"In week 5, students had to make a video introducing themselves. The video must be vivid and lively, like a student in the form of pictures" (Teacher A)

Presentations were the practice in the course Presentation Skills. This was the time for students to apply what they have learnt in the lesson.

The projects at the end of the course can be classified into two types: the projects that integrate all knowledge and skills taught during the course (Presentation Skills and English for Business and Entrepreneurship courses) or the projects to present students' knowledge about a particular topic that students learnt during the course (Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution).

4.1.4. The Macro Learning Cycle of the Course

The application of experiential learning activities in the classrooms in this study is illustrated in Figure 4. The whole course is like a large learning cycle with three steps: (1) Experiencing, (2) Reflecting & Thinking, (3) Acting:

(1) The Experiencing step prolongs a period of time and composes smaller experiential learning cycles. Specifically, in each lesson, the teacher uses various experiential learning activities, following the original four-step learning cycle by Kolb (1984). Each lesson then becomes an experience for students.

(2) Then comes the next step of the large learning cycle: Reflecting and Thinking. This step goes parallel to the first one. Students have experience and they will accumulate necessary skills and knowledge for themselves on the way.

(3) With those skills and knowledge, students will conduct the final projects as required by the course. This is the Acting step. Such projects can then be used as examples for the next course and the whole big cycle will continue.

This model shows the link between each lesson, and each experience that students have during the course. By following this model, teachers were able to provide students with advantages of experiential learning during the whole course and allow them to have a systematic view of what the course aims to bring to them.

Figure 3

The New Experiential Learning Cycle
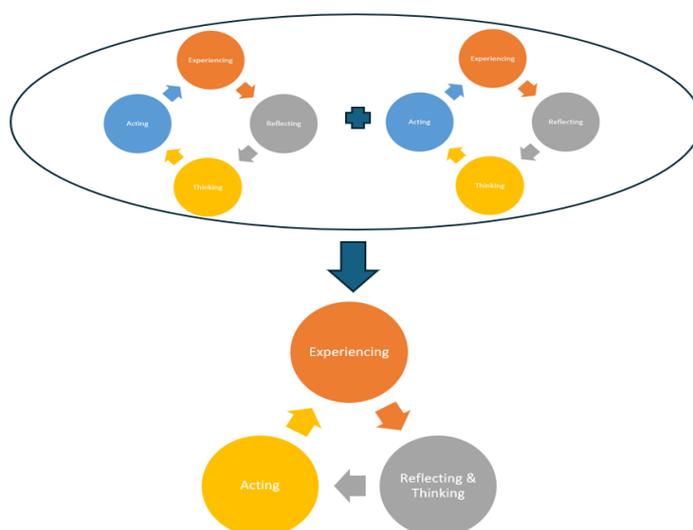
In short, the analysed data show that educators in this study were flexible and creative in applying experiential learning theory into their teaching practice. They tried to bring different activities for students so that they could get a *"better understanding of the real world, especially the labour market"* (Teacher H). Besides, all the activities were to help students gain knowledge and practice skills to complete one big project at the end of the course, showing the connection between lessons of the course.

4.2. Employability Skills Developed by Experiential Learning

In the absence of a nationally established framework for employability skills in Vietnam, this study selected the Singapore Critical Core Skills (CCS) framework to inform the analysis. The framework was chosen because it represents a recent articulation of employability skills (revised in 2019) and originates from a Southeast Asian context, suggesting potential shared regional orientations toward education and work. While the CCS framework has been institutionalized within the Singaporean policy context, its conceptual foundations are not limited to a single national setting. Rather, the framework synthesizes a broader body of international scholarship on transferable and generic skills, including the CORE skills framework proposed by Parlamis and Monnot (2019) in the United States and earlier work on employability and generic skills (e.g., González & Wagenaar, 2003; OECD, 2003; Partnership for 21st Century Skills [P21], 2007) (Bi & Boo, 2025; Bi et al., 2023).

In this study, the CCS framework is therefore used as an analytical and sensitizing lens rather than as a prescriptive or directly transferable model. It provides a structured vocabulary to examine how lecturers articulate and interpret employability skills in relation to their experiential learning activities, without assuming the wholesale applicability of the framework across national systems. The analysis foregrounds lecturers' locally situated interpretations within the Vietnamese socio-educational context, and findings are presented as perception-based insights rather than claims about enacted practice or policy alignment. According to the CCS framework, employability skills that a job seeker or employee should possess can be divided into three main groups: (1) Thinking critically; (2) Interacting with others and (3) Staying relevant. Each group includes five to six skills as illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 4

Singapore' Critical Core Skill Framework (2019)
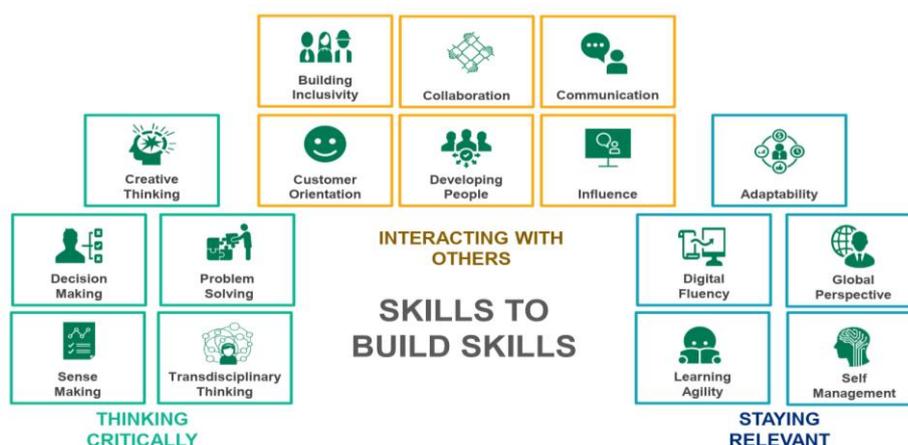
The data show that all teachers had recognized different skills that students could improve through their experiential learning activities. The most noticeable skills are Problem solving, Decision making, Sense making, Collaboration, Communication, Digital fluency and Global perspective. Other skills were identified by one or two teachers only. The following table will show learning activities that developed students' employability skills as perceived by participants:

Table 3

Employability Skills Developed through Experiential Learning

No.	Skills	Teacher	Activities that develop
1	Creative thinking	H, F	Group work, Presentations
2	Decision making	B, F	Case study
3	Problem solving	C, G, H	Presentation, Group work, Mini test
4	Sense making	D, E, F, G, I	Peer assessment, Talk & Reflection, Word game
5	Transdisciplinary thinking		
6	Building inclusivity	B	Group work
7	Customer orientation	D, F	Presentations
8	Collaboration	All	Group work, presentations, word game
9	Communication	All	Group work, Presentations,
10	Developing people		
11	Influence	F	Presentations
12	Adaptability	H	Presentations

13	Digital fluency	B, G, I	Group work, presentations, Open house
14	Global perspective	F, I, G	Presentations
15	Learning agility		
16	Self-management	B	Group work

It is not surprising that all teachers believed that their students could develop communication and collaboration skills because students were required to work in groups for the whole course. In Presentation skill classes, students worked in groups to present the content that they had read previously at home, gave feedback, practiced with such activities like role-play, simulations or talks. In Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution, group work included word games, Open House or final projects. In English for Career Development, students created mini games or mini tests, videos, mock interviews in groups. In English for Business and Entrepreneurship, they worked in teams to create vocabulary games, analyse cases, simulations and come up with a start-up plan.

The teachers could recognize the development of these skills in students quite easily:

"They were more mature in the group work. They knew how to divide tasks among members and avoid conflicts…" (Teacher B)

"…collaboration skills are shown in group work, homework for student groups. They had many deadlines…So I didn't understand how they could manage to prepare for the presentations. I asked them about their preparation, and they said that they created a plan for the whole group…" (Teacher G)

"… I think yes. At least, they could develop their collaboration skills." (Teacher C)

Teacher G was even more excited to share about students' improvement in communication skills:

"Because the course has experiential learning activities, I can see that communication skills can be improved very effectively. In the reflection, students shared that from a timid and shy person, I had changed to be more confident and can communicate very well".

She recognized many aspects of communication skills that students had mastered:

"… students learned to speak tactfully…. Comments were not critical, but supportive. Communication became an art."

"…they said they've learnt to use eye contact."

One skill that some teachers agreed that students could improve is sense making, which is the ability to collect data, analyse and synthesize information and organize them logically. This skill was mastered when students were required to find information for their group work. Teacher I believed that Word Game was a good chance for her students to improve sense making skills:

"For example, when preparing for their word game…students had to read 20 pages, many, right? They must have read carefully and chosen the main point, the important one to put into their game. And when delivering word games by just asking questions, it would have been boring. So they had to think to make the activities more interesting."

Problem solving skill, together with decision making and negotiating skills, are perceived to be developed when students discussed about cases in the English for Business and Entrepreneurship class:

"For example, students were required to give four solutions for a business case, right? … Students could discuss options and argue to choose the best ones…with this activity I could upgrade students' negotiation also." (Teacher B)

Digital fluency is thought to develop when students had to create videos in English for Career Development or slides and posters for Open House activity in Intercultural

Communication and Conflict Resolution courses, or preparations for projects in presentations in the other courses.

One special thing is that teachers in the course of Presentation Skills (Teachers C, D, F and G) are those who can recognize the widest range of employability skills developed by experiential learning activities. Besides the mentioned skills, they also thought that by doing group work to prepare for activities or presentations, students could enhance customer orientation skills (*"choose the topic that audiences want to hear" – Teacher F),* ability to influence others *("when they (students) raised their voice, others would keep silent" – Teacher F),* and global perspectives *("students talk about many cultures in the world" – Teacher G).*

In summary, by organizing different experiential learning activities, especially with the use of group work, teachers were able to help their students to boost almost all skills in the framework. Teachers even posited that her students could develop skills which are not mentioned in this framework (interpersonal skills - Teacher D; time management and negotiating skills – Teacher B). They also shared that they hoped to receive support from the university to organize large-scale activities to benefit students more:

"I also intended to ask students to join a job fair but still did not have a chance. I hope our university will have one soon." (Teacher A)

5. Discussions

The study aims to investigate the application of experiential learning theory into four courses in Vietnam and what employability skills were developed through experiential learning activities. The analysis of the data collected shows that in all four stages of the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), all teachers organized various activities. The activities were the same as what is suggested by Svinicki and Dixon (1987). One special point is that in almost all lessons, all four stages of the experiential learning cycle are practiced. Therefore, each lesson then becomes an experience and the whole course is like a big learning cycle with three steps: experiencing, reflecting and thinking, acting. The reflecting and thinking step are considered as the accumulation of skills and knowledge after each time experiencing. The acting stage happens when students use those skills and knowledge to conduct their final projects.

Previous studies also mentioned various types of experiential learning activities such as simulations, role-plays, case studies, fieldtrips, work-placements, and so on (Gittings et al., 2020) but they only featured one experiential learning activity. Findings in the current study posit that a course can be considered as a large experiential learning cycle that features various experiences and a wide range of learning activities. It is suggested that course designers should create lessons in which teachers can use experiential learning activities flexibly. Moreover, the final project should be the chance for students to apply all the knowledge and skills that they have mastered thanks to experiences during the course. The combination of various activities in the course can also allow teachers to make use of their advantages and minimize disadvantages. However, it is worth noting that teachers should consider the number of activities that they should use and the way they implement them because each activity takes "teachers' time and energy" (Teacher D). Another thing to consider is the class size. One challenge that teachers in this study met is the large class size. Monitoring activities for a class of 40 or 50 students is a serious issue if the teacher wants to ensure that all students will learn from the experience. In such classes, students must take an active role to participate in activities (Morris, 2020).

Regarding employability skills developed through experiential learning activities, data indicated that all teachers could realize students' improvement during the course. Besides, a

wide range of skills were identified. Specifically, collaboration and communication skills were mentioned by all teachers as the ones developed in the course, thanks to group work. This result is similar to many previous studies (Dowling et al., 2015; Huertas-Valdivia, 2021; Jackson, 2015; Lord et al., 2019). Other skills include creative thinking, problem solving, decision making, sense making, building inclusivity, customer orientation, influence, adaptability, digital fluency, global perspective, and self-management. However, not all courses witnessed the development of such skills. Teachers of the Presentation skill course were those who could identify the highest number of skills. Besides, teachers also mentioned skills that do not belong to the framework used such as interpersonal skills, negotiating skills or time management. The study once again affirmed the benefits of using experiential learning to improve students' employability skills (Canhoto & Murphy, 2016; Gittings et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2016). However, one point should be clarified is that students coming to the course were not with a "bare hand" – meaning they possessed zero skill before. Therefore, teachers were also aware that there were some skills they helped students build while others may have been possessed already. To know exactly which skills have been improved, another study with the participation of students should be conducted. Besides, relating to the educator roles, even though students are active in experiential learning activities, teachers, as a facilitator or guide, should still have closer observation to jump in at the right time to support students.

6. Limitations and Suggestions

The findings in this study should not be generalized as it employed the qualitative research design that aims at providing an in-depth understanding of the application of experiential learning in a particular context in Vietnam. However, educators who find common points in their classrooms can consider applying activities mentioned in the article.

Another limitation of this study is the reliance on semi-structured interviews, which capture the participants' perceptions rather than direct classroom practice. While the detailed narratives provided insights into how lecturers conceptualize and implement activities, future research could benefit from incorporating classroom observations and a portfolio analysis of student artifacts to provide a more holistic view of the experiential learning process. Similarly, employability skills developed were what teachers thought of, not the reflections from most students. Other studies should be conducted to investigate students' perceptions about the development of these skills via such courses to have a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness of experiential learning activities.

7. Conclusion

Using Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984) and Svinicki and Dixon's (1987) activities for each stage of the cycle, the study has found that teachers used diverse types of activities to support students' learning and provide them with essential employability skills. The use of activities depends on the type of the course and lesson's objectives. Besides, a wide range of employability skills is also perceived to be developed through these activities. These findings suggest that experiential learning is an effective approach for teachers to equip students with both knowledge and skills that they will need for their future career. The study also recommends that courses should be designed as a large learning cycle that includes many mini cycles practiced in every lesson of the courses. It is expected that the research provides a better understanding of the practice of ELT within the Vietnamese context as there have not been many studies in this field conducted in Vietnam so far.

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