



## Fostering Students' English Academic Performance Through Innovative Experiential Learning at Secondary Level

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of innovative experiential learning as an alternative to the lecture method, which often leaves students silent and disengaged. It aims to improve students' English academic performance and examine the role of social-emotional competence in linking experiential learning to academic outcomes. Conducted as Classroom Action Research (CAR) in an eleventh grade, the study followed two cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Results show that experiential learning enhances English performance by fostering active participation, critical thinking, communication, and motivation through real-world applications. Social-emotional competence significantly mediates these improvements, supporting the value of interactive and practical teaching methods.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching approaches are crucial in helping students achieve successful educational outcomes. Since conventional methods of teaching are employed in many educational institutions in Indonesia at the secondary level, a small percentage of teachers use experiential methods of teaching. Academic success is applicable to a student's capacity to fulfill certain educational goals set by their educational institution, whether it be a school, college, or university. A positive academic trajectory encourages students to develop strong work habits, time management skills, and discipline, all of which are essential for long-term success. Francisco and Madrazo (2019) emphasized that students' strong academic success depends on obtaining the proper quantity of information about the numerous subjects focused on and learnt. Recognised that one of the current worldwide movements in sophisticated education is to enhance students' creative thinking (Van de Oudeweetering, & Voogt, 2018; Richardson & Mishra, 2018). Moreover, dedication will enhance students' study habits and academic performance (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2020).

Academic success significantly impacts students' future opportunities, including scholarships, higher education, and job progression. Employers and organizations often use academic records to assess a student's abilities, work ethic, and potential contribution to society. High-quality education is crucial for graduates to participate in the world of excellence and address societal issues. To achieve this, schools must adapt to global education expectations and enhance students' creative thinking and study habits.

A preliminary study on 11th grade students at one of high school in Cirebon revealed that most students struggle with reading comprehension, writing, speaking, listening, and social emotional competence. Students struggled with reading comprehension, writing, speaking, listening, and understanding audio materials. Additionally, students struggled with self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Most students showed empathy towards peers and respected diverse perspectives, but few worked cooperatively in groups and constructively resolved conflicts. Lastly, students made thoughtful academic and social decisions and considered the consequences of their actions.

The current recommended methodology for English language instruction in Indonesia is the communicative approach, which emphasizes the development of proficiency in four key language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Experiential learning is a teaching approach that involves learners actively participating in hands-on experiences and reflecting on those experiences to enhance their knowledge, skills, beliefs, and ability to contribute to the local community. This promotes a student-centered approach to learning, allowing students to generate their own knowledge by drawing on their personal experiences during their studies. It aligns with Geh's (2014) claim that learning becomes meaningful when an individual learns from their own personal experiences

The latest educational framework aims to teach students "highly advanced abilities which allow them to understand that the English language is the most

commonly employed form of communication." Bulger et al. (2002) stated that a teacher's main responsibility is to support learning. Furthermore, Credé and Kuncel (2008) said that strong study habits as a study technique have a significant impact on improving and receiving excellent academic performance in school. Experiential learning facilitates critical thinking, analysis, inquiry, decision-making, and practical application of acquired knowledge in students' everyday experiences. Teaching materials that focus on experiential learning utilize a student-centered approach, operating under the assumption that individuals acquire knowledge most effectively via firsthand experience. Multiple efforts have been made to improve the scholastic achievement of pupils, and educators and parents have consistently aspired for their pupils and offspring to attain the highest possible degree of academic excellence.

The education of a nation is of greatest significance in determining its future, and any level of focus on it is inadequate. Experiential learning is based on the concept that learners gain skills and information directly from their experiences, promoting and supporting learners in actively selecting and participating in their own experiences. It also strengthens learners' ability to retain information by combining auditory and hands-on experiences, boosts motivation, and improves long-term retention of learned material.

This research aims to conduct classroom action research to foster students' English academic performance toward experiential learning method. It focuses on the application of classroom direction, encouraging students to be active in their own discovery and attaching prior knowledge to new knowledge. In conclusion, experiential learning emphasized the learning process done by students, with experience serving as the foundation for four modes of learning: feeling, reflecting, thinking, and doing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Students' Academic Performance*

Academic performance is recognized as a measure of intellectual aptitude. Different perspectives exist on the reasons behind the successful academic performance of certain students and the underperformance of others. Consequently, psychologists have continually endeavoured to discover the primary factors that predict an individual's academic achievement. Successful academic performance on tests is determined by the collaboration of several factors, including the process of learning. Education plays a crucial part in the lives of students (Mangal & Mangal 2009). Behaviour modification refers to the alteration of one's actions (Dutt, 2007), which is evaluated based on academic success. Individuals possess diverse learning styles, which manifest in varying academic aptitudes, deficiencies, abilities, and passions. Many have claimed that academic accomplishment may be primarily attributed to qualities such as individual initiative, effort, and merit (Judge, T. A., & Kammeyer-Mueller, J. D. 2007).

Moreover, studies have discovered that students who achieve superior academic performance, demonstrate greater desire and tenacity by prioritizing intrinsic objectives over extrinsic ones (Gutman, L. M., & Schoon, I., 2013).

Moreover, individuals who possess a strong drive to enhance their past or future performance generally have higher academic results compared to classmates who have weaker motivation (Barry & Rhonda, 2011). Put simply, kids who possess a stronger drive for success tend to attain better levels of academic accomplishment.

According to Kpolovie, J. P., Joe, A. I., & Okoto, T. (2014), academic performance refers to a student's capacity to study, gain information, and effectively use it in educational activities. It may be deduced that academic performance is obtained through the process of learning, so there must be elements that influence academic performance during the learning process. There is a certain domain that has an impact on pupils, specifically known as the micro system factor. Micro-system elements encompass the personal attributes of the student and their immediate interactions with instructors and peers. These aspects include student resilience, individual skills, social and moral growth, and drive to learn. In line with that, Bertolini, K., Stremmel, A., & Thorngren, J. (2012) argue that the micro-system elements are connected to the social-emotional competence of students, namely their capacity to adjust to real-life situations. Furthermore, the academic success of students is influenced by various factors such as the educational level and experience of teachers, their subject matter knowledge, the level of interest students displayed towards education, their attendance, the educational level and income of their parents, the distance between the school and their home, and the availability of materials, textbooks, and the language skills of the students (Getachew, B., 2018).

This study identifies competences which are integrated in English teaching and learning, as explained below:

a. 4Cs 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competence

When constructing the lesson plan for the class, it is essential to incorporate the 4C abilities (Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity) into it (Bishop, et. al., 2017). This study will be focused on the 4Cs: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. They help identify problems, develop solutions, and adapt when strategies fail, preparing students for higher education, careers, and life beyond academics, with a strong focus on future readiness (Erdoğan, 2019).



Figure 1. "4Cs" in English Language Classroom

b. Social-Emotional Competence

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a key focus in primary education, emphasizing skills to navigate social situations. It involves five core abilities: recognizing and managing emotions, showing empathy, making responsible decisions, building positive relationships, and handling challenges (Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). SEL fosters Social Emotional Competence (SEC), enabling learners to regulate behaviour and manage learning effectively (CASEL, 2003). Social emotional competence (SEC) is the ability to adapt to social and emotional situations, fostering well-being and mental health. It includes self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These skills enhance relationships, motivation, confidence, and engagement, creating a supportive environment for effective learning.

*English Academic Performance*

Language serves many functions, and its absence leads to a lack of communication. The four key skills in language learning—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—are essential. Activities focused on these skills in the classroom offer structured support, opportunities for students to create content, real-life language use, validation of proficiency, and most importantly, increased confidence. Listening helps students engage with spoken language, requiring active comprehension (Brown, 2007). Reading is an interactive process where readers reconstruct the author's meaning and understand vocabulary (Zhang & Duke, 2008). Writing strengthens grammar and self-expression, turning knowledge into readable content (Blanchard & Root, 2003). Speaking involves exchanging information through verbal and non-verbal communication, requiring active participation and accuracy (Spratt, Pulverness, & Williams, 2005). By integrating all four skills, teachers can create a comprehensive learning experience that fosters proficiency in language use and communication.

*Experiential Learning Theory*

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) offers a comprehensive model of learning and adult development, emphasizing the role of experience in the learning process. This focus on experience sets ELT apart from cognitive theories, which prioritize cognition, and behavioural theories, which ignore subjective experience. The theory highlights how learning, growth, and development are deeply rooted in personal experience (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning emphasizes practical engagement, with theories learned implicitly through activities like role play, debate, and oral performance. This approach helps address communication barriers, boosting student participation and fostering interest in communication activities, leading to the development of natural English speaking skills. It encourages learners to actively select and engage in experiences, promoting independence and self-direction in their learning (Atherton, 2009).

Armstrong and Fukami (2008) emphasize that experience is central to human learning, with storytelling used to enhance progress. Passarelli and Kolb

(2009) assert that experiential learning focuses on experience, encouraging full engagement in both academic and non-academic settings. Kolb's (1984) model, outlined by McLeod (2010), includes four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, helping learners connect new information to existing knowledge and apply it in practice. Millatina et al. (2020) found that experiential learning improved student engagement in developing speaking skills. Students were motivated to learn English independently and felt less nervous about speaking. However, the main challenge was limited time, which caused some teachers to avoid using experiential learning due to the insufficient time to create diverse activities. Hossain et al. (2023) found that experiential learning, particularly through role-play activities, promotes student autonomy at the elementary level. This approach significantly enhances learners' cognitive abilities, collaboration, authenticity, and confidence.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized Classroom Action Research (CAR) to improve the quality of learning through systematic evaluation and intervention in real classroom situations (Fanani et al., 2022). CAR is a reflective process where teachers examine and solve problems to enhance teaching practices and student outcomes (Mills, 2011; Garpersz & Uktolseja, 2020). It involves planning, action, observation, and reflection, often conducted in cycles, with each cycle refining the teaching process based on prior feedback (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1999).

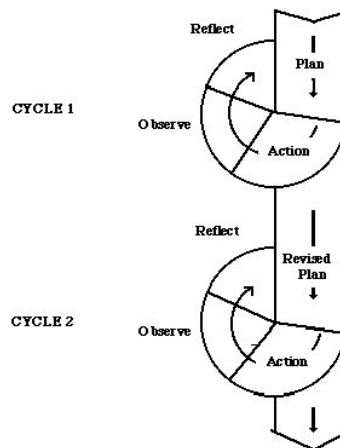


Figure 2. Cyclical CAR model on Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1998)

The study involved researchers, an English teacher, and 33 eleventh-grade students at SMAN 2 Cirebon, focusing on improving English learning with the teacher's support. Data collection used qualitative methods like interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and quantitative methods like pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires to assess English skills, social-emotional competence, and 4Cs (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication). The researcher analyzed quantitative data by comparing pre-test and post-test scores to measure improvements in students' English performance and social-emotional competence. Mean scores and class

percentages were calculated, and individual improvement was assessed using the formula:

$$P = \frac{y_{1(\text{or})2} - y}{y} \times 100\%$$

- P : Percentage of Students Improvement  
y : Pre-test Result  
y<sub>1(or)2</sub> : Post Test 1(or)2

Sugiyono's (2016) scale categorized results into very low, low, medium, strong, and very strong criteria, applied to both test scores and questionnaire responses.

The study ensured data reliability and accuracy using Burns' (1999) five CAR validity criteria. Democratic Validity was achieved through interviews with students and the teacher for feedback. Outcome Validity assessed the effectiveness of the intervention through authentic data. Process Validity involved observing and documenting classroom activities. Catalytic Validity focused on reflecting and collaborating with the teacher on teaching strategies. Dialogic Validity included a peer review process with the teacher's input. To enhance trustworthiness, the study used data source triangulation (cross-verifying information from multiple sources) and methodological triangulation.

## RESEARCH RESULT

### *Pre-Implementation of the Action*

#### **Interview**

Interviews with the teacher and students revealed that the teacher's monotonous methods led to disengagement and difficulties in English skills, especially grammar and writing. The teacher's outdated approach didn't address students' diverse needs. Students recognized that social-emotional skills, like communication and emotional regulation, impacted both academic performance and behaviour. Those with better social-emotional skills were more motivated, creating a positive classroom environment. The study highlighted the importance of fostering social-emotional skills alongside academics to improve student outcomes.

#### **Pretest**

The pretest assessed students' English skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and social-emotional competence. The results showed a mean score of 67.27, indicating struggles with comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and organization. Speaking and listening skills were also weak, with difficulties in fluency and understanding spoken English. Additionally, students had gaps in self-awareness, self-management, and social-emotional skills.

**Table 1. Pretest Social Emotional Competence**

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Criteria</i>
<i>Self-awareness</i>	47%	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Social Awareness</i>	57%	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Self-management</i>	55%	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Relationship Management</i>	55%	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Responsible Decision-Making</i>	54%	<i>Medium</i>

The study found students' social-emotional competence to be at a medium level, with room for improvement. The pretest showed significant gaps in English proficiency, with only 3.03% meeting the target. Contributing factors include lack of engagement, weak foundational skills, ineffective teaching methods, and external challenges. Addressing these issues through targeted interventions and effective teaching is key to improving students' performance and social-emotional skills.

### ***Implementation of the Action***

#### ***Cycle 1***

In Cycle 1, students made significant progress in English academic performance, particularly in understanding mental health concepts and expressing opinions. Writing skills improved, but grammar and speaking fluency still needed work, requiring more practice and correct pronunciation.

Social-emotional competence also showed improvement, especially in social awareness, self-management, and empathy. Most students worked well with peers and respected diverse perspectives, though some struggled with time management, goal setting, and problem-solving. In terms of 21st-century skills, students demonstrated strong critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity, but communication skills lagged due to issues with speaking and vocabulary mastery. Overall, Cycle 1 showed progress in English skills, social-emotional development, and 4Cs, but challenges in speaking, decision-making, and communication remained. Improvements in outdoor experiential learning activities were noted, though better planning and support are needed to address weaknesses like speaking anxiety and time management.

In Cycle 2, the researcher and teacher focused on enhancing students' speaking skills, communication, and time management through experiential learning, including debates and talk-shows. The results showed improvements in English language proficiency, social-emotional skills, time management, and decision-making. Students made progress in comprehension, fluency, grammar, and argument presentation, though some needed more guidance. They also improved in self-management, goal-setting, empathy, and decision-making. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills were strengthened, with students engaging well in group discussions. Despite challenges in academic performance and classroom dynamics, the activities successfully boosted English skills and personal development, highlighting the importance of careful planning and flexibility.

**Post-Implementation of the Action**

The researcher presented the findings from pre-test, post-test I, and post-test II using the table below:

**Table 2. Percentages of Pretest, Post-test 1 and Post-test 2**

<i>Result</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Percentages of target score</i>	<i>Improvement</i>
<i>Pretest</i>	67,27	3,03%	0%
<i>Post-test 1</i>	79,36	45,45%	18%
<i>Post-test 2</i>	82,00	90,91%	44,16%

The assessment report shows significant improvement in students' English performance, with an 18% increase in cycle 1 and 44.16% in cycle 2, highlighting the effectiveness of experiential learning.

The experiential learning method in English classes improved student engagement and participation, fostering a more interactive and supportive environment. Students were motivated by group activities and practice, leading to better grammar and pronunciation. A questionnaire evaluated the approach's impact on language competence, engagement, and confidence in speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

**Table 3. Students' English Language Competence**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
<i>English Language Skills</i>	Reading	77% Strong
	Writing	78% Strong
	Speaking	85% Very Strong
	Listening	86% Very Strong

The study showed strong reading and writing skills (78%), but students struggled with complex texts. Strategies like varied texts and comprehension activities are needed. The researcher also assessed students' social-emotional competence in areas like self-awareness and decision-making.

**Table 4. Students' Social Emotional Competence**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
<i>Social Emotional Competence</i>	Self-awareness	77% Strong
	Social Awareness	79% Strong
	Self-Management	78% Strong
	Relationship Management	80% Strong
	Responsible Decision-Making	86% Very Strong

The study found that experiential learning activities in EFL classrooms significantly improved students' self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. These activities fostered critical thinking and moral development, with real-world contexts enhancing skill growth. Additionally, 33 students completed a questionnaire assessing their skill development, which was analyzed using a 5-point Likert scale.

**Table 5. Students' 4Cs 21st Century Skills**

	<i>Aspect</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
<i>4Cs' Skills</i>	<b>Critical Thinking</b>	74%	Strong
	<b>Creativity</b>	73%	Strong
	<b>Collaboration</b>	83%	Very Strong
	<b>Communication</b>	83%	Very Strong

Experiential learning improved students' critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills, though critical thinking and creativity need further focus. Overall, it enhanced students' 4Cs competencies, preparing them for future challenges.

## DISCUSSION

The study found that students who did not achieve targeted English course scores exhibited low academic performance. However, the introduction of experiential learning methods, such as project-based tasks and real-world exercises, improved engagement and academic performance. This approach also enhanced students' speaking skills, vocabulary mastery, and autonomy. The shift from lecture-based teaching to interactive approaches improved reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and oral communication skills. This highlights the importance of experiential learning in language acquisition. It is in line with previous researchers found that experiential learning is one of the most effective learning strategies that can significantly improve students' speaking skill, students' participation in learning vocabulary mastery, and students' autonomy and leads to improvements in cognitive ability, collaboration, authenticity, and assurance among students (Mantra, et. al (2018), Fitri (2021), Hossain, et. al. (2023).

Experiential learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has significantly enhanced students' social-emotional competence, enhancing their ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions. This is achieved through engaging real-world experiences, such as reflection, group activities, discussions, and projects. Techniques like goal-setting, time management exercises, and mindfulness practices have led to increased productivity, reduced anxiety, and greater resilience. Relationship management has also improved through group projects and team-building activities.

Experiential learning not only enhances academic performance but also equips students with essential life skills.

Experiential learning has significantly enhanced students' 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Through group projects, problem-solving tasks, and presenting ideas, students have developed these skills, which are crucial for academic success. Critical thinking has improved through problem-solving tasks, while creativity has been enhanced through writing, presentations, and artistic projects. Collaboration has also improved, and communication has become more articulate and confident in speaking English. These improvements highlight the effectiveness of experiential learning in preparing students for future challenges.

Experiential learning significantly improves students' English academic performance by enhancing self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. This is achieved through various mechanisms, such as encouraging reflection, fostering empathy, integrating self-management practices, and fostering a positive classroom atmosphere. The social-emotional competence mediates the relationship between experiential learning and English academic performance, thereby enhancing students' motivation, empathy, resilience, and collaboration skills. Overall, experiential learning is a valuable tool for enhancing academic success.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In summary, innovative experiential learning transforms students' English academic performance by fostering engagement, improving essential language skills, developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, enhancing communication skills, and increasing motivation through real-world relevance. These competencies improve how students engage with experiential learning activities and manage their learning processes, leading to increased motivation, better collaboration, effective time and stress management, and more thoughtful participation. As a result, students' academic performance in English improves as they benefit from a supportive learning environment and refined personal skills.

This study explores the use of experiential learning in cycle teaching sessions to enhance students' English academic performance. It provides scientific perspectives on strategies, models, methodologies, and learning approaches. The study also highlights the practical benefits of experiential learning, such as increased student interest, curiosity, and fun. It serves as a reference for educators in selecting learning models for English Language Education and contributes to the school's success. The findings motivate educators to develop more creative and innovative learning methods.

## **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Since the study revealed improvements in students' social-emotional skills, including self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making. The 4Cs: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication also showed positive outcomes, although creativity and critical thinking could still benefit from further attention. These findings suggest that integrating experiential

learning into EFL instruction can enhance both academic and personal development. However, the study highlights the need for more extended interventions and larger sample sizes to confirm the long-term effectiveness of experiential learning strategies.

This research calls for further studies on the link between social-emotional competence and English academic performance. While improvements were observed, more in-depth exploration is needed to understand how social-emotional skills like self-regulation and empathy impact language learning. Future research should focus on long-term effects and explore diverse educational settings to better integrate these skills into English instruction for improved outcomes.

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