

# The Importance of Experiential and Active Learning Methods in the Teaching of Research Methodology to Algerian EFL Students

أهمية أساليب التعلم التجريبي في تدريس منهجية البحث للطلاب الجزائريين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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## Abstract

Students face a delimma of not being prepared or do not possess the required skills to conduct research (BA, MA and even Doctorate). The aim of the present research paper is to discuss and highlight the importance of experiential learning (active learning) in teaching research methodology. It is a call for teachers to change their teaching methods and adopt student-centered teaching methods including experiential teaching.

**Keywords:** Experiential learning, Active learning, Research methodology, Teaching methods, Student-centered teaching.

## ملخص

يواجه الطلبة مشاكل متعددة تعكس عدم الاستعداد أو عدم امتلاك المهارات المطلوبة لإجراء البحوث (ليسانس وماستر وحتى الدكتوراه). الهدف من هذا المقال هو مناقشة وتبسيط الضوء على أهمية التعلم التجريبي (التعلم النشط) كمنهج لتدريس مقياس منهجية البحث. يركز المقال على الأهمية المركزية لاعتماد أساليب التدريس التجريبي في مقياس منهجية البحث. كما يشكل هذا المقال دعوة للمدرسين إلى تغيير أساليب التدريس التقليدية والتفكير في تطبيق التدريس التجريبي من أجل تحقيق تعليم أفضل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعلم التجريبي؛ التعلم النشط؛ منهجية البحث؛ طرق التدريس؛ التعلمية.

### *Introduction*

In the Algerian English as a foreign language (EFL) context, courses in the subject of research methodology are often taught in more theoretical forms as lectures or as lessons with theoretical activities. The activities might be included to reinforce EFL students' learning of the main aspects covered in the subject. In many cases, EFL students may find themselves confronted with a set of abstract aspects and research methodology principles such as the construction of hypotheses, formulating research questions, summarizing, paraphrasing and quoting other authors' views and so forth. Teachers of the subject of research methodology might feel a lack of interest on the part of many students vis-à-vis research methodology courses because these students perceive the subject as a theoretical and abstract subject. They may feel unease in understanding its major concepts that are highly required later on in their Master research.

The worst case for teachers of research methodology courses might be a situation whereby a teacher gives lectures about abstract concepts with lot of details. In many cases, such kind of teaching practices might result in a class of frustrated students who, at the end of each course, may feel left out and neglected to a great extent. That is why if asked about the subject, some students might reply with weak and non-enthusiastic way; they may describe the course as a boring and a difficult one.

In a good attempt to raise the EFL students' interest in research methodology, teachers may resort to use other methods of teaching that might bring some beneficial and remarkable change in the research methodology classroom. In addition to lectures, teachers may, for instance, give students tasks of further readings, exercises, assignments, research proposals to work on and even small research projects to feel really involved in the subject and to make sense of every point that they have covered. Authentic engagement of students can bring a change in their learning by making it seem balanced between theory and practice. Previous teaching practices of research methodology based on theoretical concepts may not have met what is actually expected from the teacher, the students, and above all the curriculum or the course objectives.

The teaching of the research methodology subject to Algerian EFL students should be based on active and experiential learning. The focus of teaching should be placed on the student and the process of their learning, a fact that has been always emphasized in the student-centered approaches to teaching. Opportunities to learn, question, reflect and experience real life tasks should be promoted and encouraged in the research methodology classroom. Different teaching methods and

techniques are available at the disposal of the EFL teacher to help students learn better and apply what they learn successfully. By involving students in active learning tasks and research projects inside and outside the classroom, this will give them better chances to ask questions, think, reflect, struggle and find solutions by themselves with the guidance of the teacher. This is of great importance to students, especially if they are going to conduct their own future research (Master).

### *1. The Teaching of Research Methodology*

The subject of research methodology is considered as a compulsory subject in undergraduate, and even graduate, curriculum in the LMD (Licence/Master/Doctorat) system. This subject is very important in order to prepare Algerian EFL students to undertake Master research as a condition for their graduation. The importance of this subject is usually mixed with a great fear and frustration on the part of both teachers and students, who perceive it as a challenging and difficult subject.

Actually, it is no surprise to learn that many Master research supervisors find themselves in front of serious situations where many Master students do not at all possess the required basics of conducting Master research. The present research is, hence, set to explore the teaching practices of research methodology teachers and to identify and highlight the problems and challenges that both teachers and students face in conducting Master research. The study also serves as a guidance for teachers and students since it recommends that teachers should use more student-centered teaching practices by using active and experiential learning methods in order to achieve better understanding of the subject and to enhance EFL students' performance in conducting research.

In fact, EFL students usually face serious problems in the learning of certain English subjects because of their theoretical or abstract nature. Research methodology is one of these subjects that some Algerian EFL students seem to struggle with in their learning. This is reflected by the fact that they may get low marks in the research methodology subject or they fail to use knowledge related to the subject in actual practice. In other words, EFL students may find it very difficult to try to link what they learn from theory and apply it in actual research project situations (Carty, 2007, p. 98).

There seems to be no consent among teachers on how research methodology should be taught and which approach and methods to adopt. This central issue in teaching was emphasized by many researchers including Booth and Harrington (2003), who pointed out that, "there is little agreement as the appropriate way to teach research methods or

indeed its role and place in the curriculum” (p. 24). The teaching approach that we support in the present research article is grounded in our experience, first, as students and, second, as teachers. We believe that when students take ownership in what they learn (research methodology), they will develop an interest in the subject. To use Carty’s (2007), “Most importantly, students engage in real research study, or ‘learning by doing’, an approach recommended by most researchers in the field” (p. 100). That is to say, students’ active engagement in learning through experiencing different situations will help them better understand and apply what they learn in more practical terms.

Nowadays, the teaching of the subject of research methodology became an area of central interest and importance in undergraduate and graduate teaching programs. Teachers started to recognize the fact that there is much ignorance on how teaching research methodology appropriately and effectively. Several questions about what to teach and how to teach this important subject have always been raised. The usefulness and the effectiveness of the teaching methods is also usually questioned.

Garner et al. (2009) described the situation whereby students find themselves facing serious troubles in conducting their own research. Students find themselves with very weak knowledge, if no knowledge at all, about research methodology and research methods. Garner et al. (2009) stated that,

As far as methodology was concerned, earlier generations of research students ... were generally flying in the dark. They were either told to follow a specified line of enquiry (or left to pick up methodological skills as and when they could) in the process of doing research. Those who were fortunate had supervisors who initiated them into the research process through a sort of apprenticeship. Otherwise, they had to rely on what they could glean from books on methodology, research reports and ad hoc methodological seminars. The notion that research methods could or should be a subject in the curriculum (let alone a compulsory subject) was largely unknown. (p. 1)

Pressures to improve learning and understanding among students led to stressing the central importance of teaching research methodology with a sound practical training of students in how to do research with regard to research methods or research methodology in general. Since students in the undergraduate and graduate levels in our Algerian universities are required to conduct their own research projects or Master dissertations as

a pre-requisite before graduation, it is always stressed that they should possess sound and deep knowledge about research methodology and apply it correctly and appropriately. What is also very important is the fact that this central subject should be taught and emphasized in earlier years of study at university (Garner et al., 2009).

Calls and concerns to help students learn and apply successfully the theoretical knowledge they get from courses have always been spelt out in all English subjects, but especially with subjects that are abstract in nature and need more practice to deepen and reinforce understanding. Research methodology such a theoretically-oriented subject. Students may experience difficult situations in understanding the subject. What students experience and feel in the research methodology subject or when conducting research is described in the following quote by Ashwin and Hirst (2010), who stated that :

The students readily acknowledged a lack of awareness of research methodology and project [...] skills. The resulting gaps in knowledge and skills meant that they did not know about, or understand, the main concept for data collection and analysis before starting [their][...] project. What was astonishing to all involved was the lack of commitment to an activity which would help bridge some of those gaps, before the work on their compulsory dissertation began. (p. 32)

Because of its great importance, nowadays knowledge of research methodology is a vital tool to enable students to do their research projects effectively and successfully. Given the central importance research methodology teaching has in higher education, it has become a highly required task from teachers to take a critical look at the way they teach research methodology in their EFL classroom. The major focus of the research methodology curriculum in undergraduate and graduate programs should always be to prepare students to conduct future research by equipping them with all the necessary knowledge and skills.

The teaching of research methodology at all levels is complicated. What makes the situation worse is the different perceptions and attitudes that Algerian EFL students have about the importance of doing research. Some students may consider the research methodology courses or subject as unnecessary and imposed on them. Their view is based on the nature of what they receive in the course because, to them, this may reflect a knowledge and theory transmission and not research in its purely practical sense.

We believe, though, that one of the central factors that leads to better understanding and raising students' interest and motivation to learn

research methodology and develop a devotion to it, is the teacher's attitudes and current practices in the teaching of this important subject.

EFL teachers may also express their discontent about the students' in-ability to produce good academic writing when conducting Master research. Students may exhibit weaknesses in paraphrasing and summarizing previous research, citing primary and secondary sources, writing good research proposals, writing good research papers and so forth. In line with this, Khumalo and Ndaba (2005, p. 248) stated that,

We come to realise that the work of students hardly meets the standard of writing research papers. There is no clarity in the statement of the problem, research objectives and hypotheses, research design, sampling design, data collection procedures, data analysis, findings, conclusions and recommendations.

It is usually spelt out that the teaching of research methodology is a difficult task. The reason for that is because teaching methodology usually emphasize lecturing. This theory oriented or teacher-centered teaching tradition provides students with mere knowledge about the subject, instead of involving them in real tasks and doing more practical learning.

## ***2. Teaching Research Methodology Adopting Student-Centered Approaches***

An effective way to improve the teaching and the learning processes is to adopt student-centered approaches to teaching the research methodology subject to EFL students. Special focus should be placed on the introduction of certain interactive and practice-oriented learning activities in the curriculum. This kind of shift in the teaching practices of research methodology comes as a response to the challenges that EFL teachers may experience with students. The intention is to make research methodology curriculum interesting, relevant and more practical in nature (Barraket, n.d.).

Learner-centered teaching is not confined to the use of one single method of teaching. It emphasizes a variety of methods where the role of the teacher shifts from information provider to a source of guidance in the learning process (facilitator). In learner-centered teaching, focus is placed on 'what' students are learning, 'how' they are learning, and 'how' they can use that learning in different situations.

Weimer (2008) pointed out the fact that student centered teaching is based on students' needs. It is oriented towards education as a process

that leads to a product and the learner is the center of the educational process. The role of the teacher is facilitate and guide students in their learning.

In the learner-centered teaching, focus is placed squarely on learning. Attention is mainly given to what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying what has been learnt, and how current learning positions the student for future learning. The student is the main focus of teaching and constitutes an important part of the equation in the learning process.

The present research paper calls for changing the teaching practices in research methodology. It calls for the adoption of learner-centered approaches in teaching the research methodology subject to improve and promote students' learning and performance.

### ***3. Experiential Learning and the Teaching of Research Methodology***

Learning by experience is considered as one of the most fundamental means of learning. In simple words, experiential learning reflects the ability to think and to reflect individually or collectively in a critical and reflective manner. To use Beard and Wilson's (2002, p. 16) Words,

Experiential learning is, in essence, the underpinning process to all forms of learning since it represents the transformation of most new and significant experiences and incorporates them within a broader conceptual framework.

In the same line of thought, Stein (2011) also emphasized the great importance of experiential learning. He (2011, p. 20) stated that,

a uniquely valuable source for learning—especially in the realm of human behaviour on the individual and group level—lies in the experience of everyday life and the conceptualization and reflection on it. It implies that academic or book learning—on its own—cannot be a substitution for learning from experience and may only play a supplementary role by recording or otherwise elaborating on some of the learning phenomena derived from experience.

Silberman (2007) provided a description of what is meant by experiential learning. He (2007, p. 8) stated that experiential learning refers to,

- (a) the involvement of learners in concrete activities that enable them to experience what they are learning about and
- (b) the opportunity to reflect on those activities. Experiential

learning can be based on both real work/life experiences (e.g., working on a current project) and structured experiences that stimulate or approximate real work/life.

Put another way, a good way to teach something is to act it out. Definitions, descriptions and theoretical explanation of some concepts are useful, but they are not always greatly understood by students, especially if they are later on asked to apply what they have covered in the course.

To use Silberman's (2007, p. 8) words again, "acquiring skills require more than monkey see, monkey do". Experiential activities are important in order to succeed in building a level of awareness and to be able to apply what has been learnt in other different, but related, situations and contexts. There are many forms of experiential learning such as : on-the-job assignments, field experience, action learning projects, and so forth.

A variety of techniques is available at the disposal of teachers to teach research methodology in a more practical way including: problem-based learning, group work, doing small research projects and so forth. It is our believe that teaching practices and the research methodology curriculum should be re-oriented toward student-centered teaching. This may lead to better learning, understanding and positive performance on the part of students (Barraket, n. d.).

#### ***4. Active Learning and the Teaching of Research Methodology***

Students can learn better by doing. The active involvement of students in the process of learning is also the key to success. Teaching the knowledge and skills in the research methodology subject using real life situations (research projects) will be very useful in providing EFL students with good learning experience. Learning by doing is a good way to understand, retain knowledge and apply it later on in different contexts.

Unsuccessful teaching of research methodology is claimed to have been basically lecturer-centered or teacher-centered. As it has been pointed out earlier in this research article, focus has always been on delivering information at the expense of placing much focus on the student and the process of real learning. Given these facts, nowadays' teachers' teaching orientations started to be directed towards adopting more student-centered approaches to teaching any English subject, especially that of research methodology. Decisions to adopt the student-centered approaches to teaching is for purposes of increasing interaction among students through group discussions, doing collective/individual research projects and so forth. Khumalo and Ndaba's (2005, p. 248) stated that,



The use of practical real life examples that are relevant to the local situation where students have some expertise and experience is recommended. In research application rather than sheer exposition by lecturers and absorption is what makes effective learning. By giving them an assessed research proposal students have the opportunity to apply concepts, methods and techniques learnt.

The kind of learning that involves students in direct and real life tasks allows them to start asking important questions, think, and reflect in a process of exploration and discovery. In this case, they will develop an ability to appreciate the process of reasoning. Getting students down to work in the research proposal task, for instance, this will allow teachers to provide the students with an excellent opportunity to gauge their grasp of theoretical concepts (Khumalo and Ndaba, 2005).

Wolters et al. (2000, p. 21) pointed out that active learning refers to, a form of learning in which the learner uses opportunities to decide about aspects of the learning process... it refers to the extent to which the learner is challenged to use his or her mental abilities while learning. This active learning on the one hand has to do with decisions about learning and on the other hand making an active use of thinking.

One of the major points that should also be given due concern is the fact that after each course, the teacher should make a follow up by assigning some practical exercises. This will serve as a demonstration of students' understanding of the concepts covered in the course. Adopting student centered teaching and involving students in active learning is necessary, but following students and guiding them in their learning is also essential on the part of teachers.

### ***Conclusion***

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the importance of active and experiential learning by highlighting their importance and necessity. Its purpose was also to raise teachers' awareness about the difficulties that they may encounter in teaching research methodology vis-à-vis certain teaching practices that are theory-oriented.

Experience-based or active-based teaching adopting the student centered approach can help students learn concepts better and apply what they learn in real life situations especially in conducting Master research

projects. The best way to help students improve their research skills is through their active involvement in practical tasks.

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