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Experiential Learning through Artwork Direct Visits in English Classroom for Art Students: An Investigation

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Abstract

Empirical evidence on the integration of experiential learning into English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly within art-based higher education, remains underexplored despite its potential to align language development with students' disciplinary practice. Thus, this study aims to investigate how undergraduate students majoring in Art Conservation enrolled in a state university specializing in the arts in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, engaged with English language learning through experiential learning (EL) activities, particularly direct visits to public artworks. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from in-depth interviews and student reflective essays, with participants recruited to this current study being purposively selected. Through thematic analysis, the findings reveal how the direct visits to the artworks can enhance the students' skills useful for their learning in the English classroom and their future professional endeavors. It indicates that direct engagement with artworks in real-life settings significantly enhances students' learning experiences. These visits supported the development of key academic and professional skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and information retention, by encouraging active observation, personal interpretation, and reflective analysis. The study concludes that experiential learning can provide meaningful opportunities for students to internalize abstract concepts through real-world engagement. Incorporating such activities into language education may foster more profound learning, enhance writing quality, and promote holistic development. These findings underscore the value of integrating experiential methods within higher education settings, particularly art-based majors.

Keywords: EFL; ELT; Experiential Learning; Art

INTRODUCTION

Historically, in the higher education context, experiential learning was coined by Dewey (1986), an educational theorist of the twentieth century who bridges traditional and progressive education. His ideas on experiential learning in higher education gain attention on

a large scale as the students in higher education are required to convert the abstract ideas into more concrete and practical knowledge. Students' prior experiences, based on his theory, should contribute to the learning by relating them to the information and materials presented in the classroom. This framework then inspired Kolb (2015) to formulate learning cycles in experiential learning. Although experiential learning is mentioned by different names, Moore (2010) sums up that they share one mutual aim, which is to invite the students to directly engage in productive works to solve real-world problems. By setting the experience as the learning process, the students are allowed to build their own knowledge through Kolb's learning cycles; therefore, the direct sense and in-context action can be added as the main priority in classroom learning. Thus, experiential learning is viewed as the process of constructing the information through observation and reflection of the experience (Chan, 2012). The notion regarding the process of learning is also agreed upon by Kolb and Kolb (2017) who also pay special attention to improving students' learning in higher education by engaging them in the process rather than outcomes.

To accommodate the demand addressed to the instructor, Kolb (2015) introduced the learning model in experiential learning consisting of four elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Growing emphasis exists on experiential learning, which serves as the bridge between the theory and practice. In higher education, particularly English Language Teaching (ELT), traditional teaching methods are no longer relevant. Gureckis and Markant (2012) state that the students have no control of the stimuli, making the flow of information limited for those involved in passive learning classrooms. In line with this discovery, Wurdinger and Allison (2017) also found that experiential learning plays a vital role in enhancing the students' life skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills. They stated that the process is a complex issue that is more effective than only relying on the students' memory. However, the goal of experiential learning can never be attained without the instructor's role in guiding the purposes of conducting the observation, projects, fieldwork, etc. (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017). Thus, the instructor needs to create an effective scheme to design effective learning that can stimulate the students to transform the experience into knowledge.

Therefore, the benefits of experiential learning in higher education have been exposed across disciplines in recent years; for instance, in urban planning, forestry, and management. It successfully helps the students to practice their engagement skills and communication skills with the clients and indigenous communities (Akinde et al., 2017). In this case, the students are pushed to create the connection with the parties whom they will interact with in their future careers. This is also in line with the goal to increase the students' employability in facing their future career. Experiential learning is also promoted under government policy through *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 3 of 2020 on National Standards for Higher Education. While MBKM encourages students to actively participate in off-campus learning experiences (e.g., internships, community service, independent studies), its core principles can also be meaningfully applied within the classroom. This framework demands the students to engage in diverse, real-world learning experiences outside the classroom. As suggested by Utami and Rismadewi (2024), this program also encourages the more student-centered learning. Hence,

aligned with Kolb's experiential learning theory, both the MBKM policies and the approach position experience as the foundation of knowledge construction, thereby supporting both academic growth and the development of essential skills. In this study, students majoring in the arts are challenged to acquire and enhance their English language skills beyond the classroom setting, by engaging with places or activities that align with their artistic interests.

Previous research has shown that students engaged in experiential learning across various disciplines perceive theoretical concepts as more tangible and practical (Akinde et al., 2017; Chiang et al., 2021), as real-world experiences outside the classroom help to clarify and contextualize abstract ideas (Morris, 2020). The aforementioned findings previously reviewed indicate that experiential learning bridges the gap between the learning taking place in the classroom and that taking place outside. It focuses on putting learning as the process instead of the final outcome. Recently, some studies focused only on professional growth and management skills for students' careers after college learning (Al Issa et al., 2025; Bohon et al., 2017; Rong-Da Liang, 2021). This study fills in the gap to investigate how experiential learning can also be useful for enhancing students' language skills, particularly in English learning. The current research brought the English classroom as the setting to conduct experiential learning for the art conservation students through activities they are keen on. Moreover, this is intertwined with two productive skills in English language learning: writing skill and speaking skill. Both skills are pivotal for their language learning to build engagement and convey ideas orally and in written (Izzatullakhon, 2022). Thus, there is an urgency to implement experiential learning for art-based majors in higher education as it potentially generates promising outcomes in language learning. These outcomes emerge due to the incorporation of arts in ELT and vice versa, which can explore how arts students integrate their creativity and language skills in the ELT classroom. However, the art students' learning strategies, which sometimes highlight the senses e.g., visual experience, perfectly match with the process of understanding and constructing abstract information into knowledge. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how students in art-based majors develop their English language skills through experiential learning, specifically by engaging in direct visits to public art as a form of authentic, real-world language practice.

METHOD
Design

This present research employed a qualitative method through a case study approach in terms of the scope, recommended investigating contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, mentioning case study as a comprehensive research strategy (Yin, 2003). This aligns with the process in which the research gathered the data encompassing classroom observation and in-depth interview, as well as essay writing task completed by the participants.

Participants

The students participating in this study majoring Art Conservation in an English classroom in one of the state universities focusing on arts in Yogyakarta in the academic year 2024/2025 and they were selected purposively. This major focuses on preparing the students to be an art conservator that has the chances to work in several institutions managing the historical places, e.g., museum, gallery, art center, conservation center, etc. Thus, the major

requires the students to be familiar with the real situation in the field relating to the arts place and event.

Instruments

In this research, the data were collected through essay writing and interviews. Writing task in the form of reflective essay was done after the students conducted field observation to the public arts in Yogyakarta as assigned in the previous meeting. To ensure the authenticity of the students' work, the use of technological assistance—including mobile phones, translation tools, and AI-based applications—was strictly prohibited during the writing process. As a result, the submitted essays reflect the students' original language abilities and personal interpretations. Moreover, the students are encouraged to use their experience during the visits. Nevertheless, this study focused on the substantial content of the essay rather than the grammatical rules; therefore, the minor grammatical errors were currently neglected. This aims to gain in-depth analysis of how experiential learning is placed in ELT classroom, especially in the art-based major. The data were also collected through in-depth interview conducted online by Zoom.

Data Analysis

After submitted, the essays were to uncover the participants' perspectives and explore their approaches of thinking after conducting the project in real world context. The essays were read and re-read to note down the initial ideas as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). The ideas were then converted to several codes which answer what happened in the location during the visits and what resulted next in the essay following the visits. To discover more deeply, the interviews conducted by Zoom were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically. This focuses on the students' point of view as art students doing direct visits to the artworks for their English learning, particularly reflective essays. Following the themes, the researcher reviewed the themes and name them to have the full description of the scope and content of each theme. At the end of the analysis, the researcher crosschecked a set of thematic analysis process using 15-point checklist criteria for good thematic analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings in this section investigates the application of experiential learning within the tertiary art-based major. The results are grouped into four key themes explaining how experiential learning is necessitated in this context. Based on the findings, experiential learning in the art-based major at the tertiary level helps students develop in two key areas: on-site experience and transferable skills. The analysis of interviews and post-visit essays yielded these findings. Those were derived from the analysis of interviews and post-visit essays. Based on the results, experiential learning for art-based students leads them to achieve hands-on experience and soft skills. Students' onsite experience enables the students to give personal opinions, interpret visual cues, be aware of symbolism, seek visitors' perceptions, draw conclusions, and analyze the interaction. Simultaneously, the students improve their transferable skills: problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and communication skills. Empirical evidence further describes each of these skills.

Figure 1. Hans-on Experience
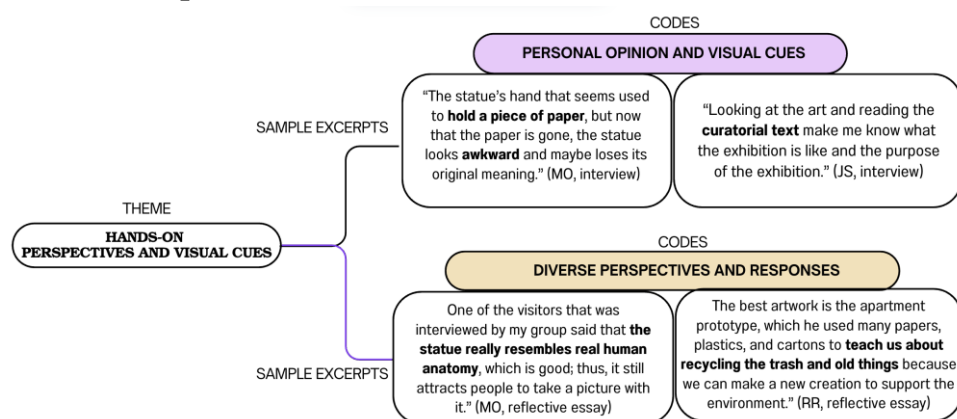
Harnessing hands-on perspectives and responses to elevate analytical depth of writing

Figure 1 illustrates the broader impact of being present in the observation as part of learning. In the first code, it reveals how students can give their opinion instead of gathering information about the artwork only from the internet. AB finds that the visit helps her in the writing process, as she experiences it by herself and can write more specific information. JS added that she needs to see with her eyes and asks for another opinion to make the essay comprehensive. MO and DA agreed on this idea.

> *"Most of what I write is from the interview. I don't have much information, so the interview really helps me in writing."* **MO, interview**

> *"By visiting this, I can write down the historical aspect in my essay. I look at the object so detailed; if I only look at the internet, I cannot see the details. It is very different."* **DA, interview**

This is also reflected in the reflective essay, in which MO specifically described the object on the sidewalk of Malioboro Street, Yogyakarta, and it indicates that MO was on-site. This is also emphasized in the interview: the information from the website cannot be guaranteed to provide the accurate information. Thus, MO interpreted the object, followed by MO's opinion regarding its appearance. To support the perspective, MO also confirmed to the visitors and wrote the information in the essay. The reflective essay serves as reflective practice for the students to develop essential knowledge and skills as discovered by Ho and Lau (2025). This proves that experiential learning can take place everywhere in a set of processes as long as the students use their experience to construct ideas and transform them into their knowledge. In this case, MO learns how to analyze why the object can attract the visitors by stating her own opinion and later confirming it with another person's. JS added how diverse perspectives matter for helping her in the writing process.

> *"Every human's perspectives are different; we all have the same eyes but we see the artwork differently based on our own points of view. So, the public art is not only for decoration, but also for education."* **JS, reflective essay**

Based on the data above, it is evident that the experience helps the students in the writing processes especially in the English classroom. The more experiences they collect, the richer the information they can put in their texts. For instance, the student mentioned above

stated that she mostly wrote the reflective essay based on the interview with the visitors. Visitors provided first-hand information and their perspective that enabled the students to collect the data of diverse opinions for their writing. Online resources can gather some facts, but they cannot fully replace the value of hands-on experience, activities, observations, and emotional touch.

Experiential learning that is realized in the form of direct visits to the public art stimulates the students to engage emotionally. This contributes to the process of learning, as stated by Zull (2006) and Taylor & Statler (2014) that the more the students are engaged emotionally, the more effective the learning process is. In terms of the brain process, Zull (2006) with his four pillars, agrees on using Kolb's four learning cycles by using the concrete experience and putting it as the initial learning process. This facilitates the learners' using more regions of the cortex to stimulate the changes in brain processes while learning. In this case, the students not only described what they observed visually (gathering data) but also connected the data and their memories or background knowledge to form new, meaningful data (reflection).

Personal opinion as a gateway of thoughtful conclusion

The finding about the students' onsite experience, which includes several benefits, is connected to the urgency of expressing opinions or interpretations, as English is not just about studying grammar rules and avoiding sentence errors. By giving their personal opinions, the students are not only describing what is present; they also make some interpretations and give judgments toward the artworks. This assumption is confirmed by RP in the interview, which stated that the direct visit enables her to add the personal opinion based on her experience after gathering the facts on-site. Thus, the student not only mentions the adjective as the emotive language (awkward, good) but also links how those adjectives lead to the conclusion (losing original meaning, attracting people). The finding is consistent with research on experiential learning, which highlights how the students experience feelings, leading to the improvement of awareness, expanding the learning space, and exploring their perspectives on new information (Sanchez et al., 2019).

As mentioned in Figure 1, RR in his reflective essay stated that he found the concept of "reuse and recycle" when observing the materials of the artwork. The students not only find the unique materials but also conclude the artist's intention behind an artwork. A thoughtful conclusion emerges after the process of observing, giving a personal opinion, and concluding. As a result, the student develops an idea to support the environment. Moreover, RR used the causal conjunction 'because' to link his ideas to present the discourse coherence, and it significantly indicates that the writer knows exactly what he wants to convey to the reader (Xu et al., 2022).

In addition, the brain process is linked to the students' preferred learning style on the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) encompassing four styles: activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist (Kolb, 2015). Each examines how the students learn, not indicating the success of their learning. This aligns with the research by Ahmed et al. (2020) that found most of the art-based major students are categorized as Activist, of which the learners prefer the concrete experience through projects. The lecturers are challenged to selectively design the course by

adapting to the dominant learning styles of the students and optimizing projects to improve the learning outcome.

Visual cues and symbolism as tools for information retention in key details

Based on the interviews, the students mentioned that the visual information and cues work better for their essays. For instance, JS relies on the appearance of the artwork along with its curatorial text, and RR relies on his analysis of the color selection of the graffiti. The following displays how RR analyzed the color combination of the graffiti on the topic of corruption cases.

> *"The graffiti is telling about corruption, which always happens in our region, Indonesia. The graffiti that I visited is very cool and deep. It is cool due to its color combination; they used the dark colors like black and red, which mean anger and pain. It is deep in meaning because it is related to the corruption cases that make people angrier."* **RR, reflective essay**

> *"The public art is not much, but how the design the exhibition makes it look nice, big, and interesting. Some artists make the mock-up from what they design which makes the visitors imagine the real one.* **JS, reflective essay**

This visual information, which is then interpreted by the students, unconsciously helps them to construct their writing as it serves as the "aid" in their brain memory. By choosing this as one of the topics in the essay, the students can elaborate on them by adding their own interpretation and connecting the dots to the current country situation (e.g., economic gaps in society, injustice in law, etc.). This highlights the importance of visual cues or representation (symbolism) to enhance students' comprehension, as mentioned by Tseng (2025). The students can draw the conclusion based on the visual information they collected during the visits. They are also able to analyze the information to write a paragraph explaining the role of mock-ups for the visitors. Interpreting visuals can result in the simplification of the abstract concepts. By having the concrete experience and reflecting on the observation, the students begin to develop the ideas and knowledge of how the artists' voices address the social gaps. This is the stage when the abstract concepts are applied through active experimentation (A. Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Ultimately, this results in a set of comprehensive knowledge that is beneficial for the students in writing the essay. However, challenges persist throughout the writing process. Below are the examples explained by the students.

> *I seldom do the writing, so I imagine and think about me being in the location at Jogja National Museum when working on the essay. I also recalled my memory back when visiting the location"* **RR, interview**

In this stage, RR demonstrates how being present in the museum is regarded as a concrete experience, which then becomes a useful step to reflect his memory and be fully engaged in the writing process (reflective essay). Thus, the memory of the past events, including the sensory inputs (atmosphere, textures, shapes, forms, curatorial text, spatial layout, etc.), can activate the brain process to use the vivid details to be transformed into construction of knowledge and ultimately put them all into the writing. Without any writing assistance, students must optimize their background knowledge to effectively convey their ideas on paper. In this case, concrete experience, as the first cycle of Kolb's learning cycle, is successfully implemented without relying on technology-based media to teach visual learners

optimally. Although this research does not put the learning style as the focus of the analysis, the findings indicate that most of the students pay attention to the visual cues and information

> *"Before writing the essay, I visited the exhibition so I know exactly what to write. I am just confused to transfer from my brain to paper. It is the first time for me to write essay without phone, Google Translate, etc."* **JS, interview**

The excerpts indicate that the students rely more on visual information to help them in learning. Although Othman, et al. (2021) found that visual learners, mainly Gen Z, demand technology-based media to attract them more in learning, the current research discovered that visual learners can be facilitated by making them involved and engaged in the practical activities outside the classroom, such as direct visits to public art. Engaging them in an enjoyable platform to supplement the learning tools can enhance the students' language skills, especially the latest generation, without making them feel anxious (Huka et al., 2024). Therefore, they mostly stated in the interview that this project attracts their interest as they can explore the artworks through diverse modes of information, resulting in better learning due to the way the materials and knowledge are presented (Knoll et al., 2017). These findings align with the results of this research, which agree that visual cues and symbolism are tools for information retention for key details.

Leveraging direct visits to build transferable skills: problem solving, critical thinking, and communication

The finding of the present study also highlights how experiential learning can lead to authenticity, as the activities are done by the students themselves by experiencing the real situation in the field. This helps the students in the Art Conservatory major to expose practical challenges and improve their transferable skills. Most interestingly, after observing, interpreting, and confirming, the visit also leads the students to improve some of the transferable skills, e.g., problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and communication skills based on the circumstances they experienced during the visit.
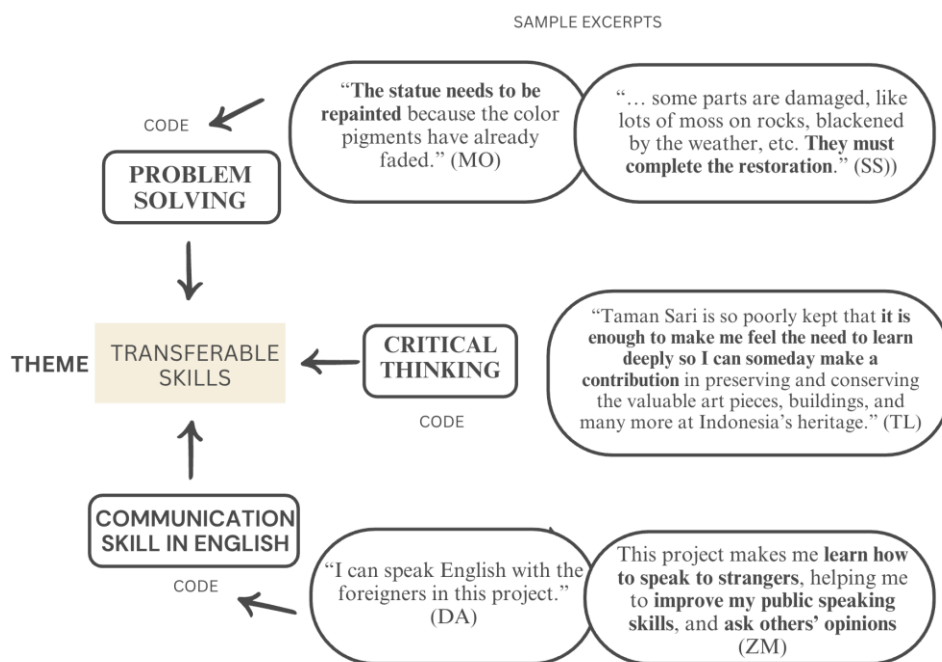
Figure 2. Transferable Skills

Figure 2 displays how the students think critically about the art object. This serves as the evidence that learning through experience will enable the students' minds to think in a larger scope. Thus, it can be interpreted that the students discovered the problems during the visit and thus formulated solutions. The problems they found include the fading color of the statue and damage to the building caused by moss and weathering. In this instance, MO and SS are believed to use the result of their direct observation to enhance their problem-solving skills. The proposed alternatives encompass repainting and completing the restoration. The phrase "problem-solving skill" extends beyond the state of public art; it also pertains to how students execute on-site interviews, wherein they engage in actual interactions with visitors utilizing English.

The critical thinking is also demonstrated by the students. The essay following the visits (reflection) reflects that the students were critically commenting on the artworks while observing them. This assumption is supported by the writing, which highlights some issues displayed by the artworks, e.g., corruption cases through graffiti. Previously, RT wrote in his essay how the number of corruption cases has increased, and RT also emphasized the injustice between the rich and the poor. For instance, the corruptors were sentenced to prison, yet they received special treatment by bribing officers. Meanwhile, the poor do not even get the human rights to protect themselves. The strong emotional engagement is also reflected in the way RT positioned himself many times as the graffiti artist who expressed the anger in the piece of street art. In addition to this idea, AB also came up with an essay highlighting how public art plays a vital role in the community's economic growth. Through the direct visit, AB noted that there is an economic cycle occurring at the site since it enables the tourists and the sellers, particularly street food stalls or souvenir stalls, to meet in one place, and thus the transaction happens. Referring to this, AB calls this the 'win-win solution,' which shares the mutual benefits for related parties.

Conducting the ELT, particularly in art-based higher education, challenged the lecturers to formulate specific lesson plans that are adaptive to the graduate learning outcomes and students' distinct learning styles. Since they tend to be hands-on learners, the traditional method, which is teacher-centered and focuses on the module, is no longer pertinent for hands-on learners. This is supported by the student MD which said that he was happy to practice English conversation with the foreigners while conducting the visits to the museums. Moreover, MZ thanked the lecturers for enabling the students to practice the English interview as one of the activities in ELT. This statement is also in line with RP's essay, which indicates that she interviewed the student coming from other countries. Since the project is conducted in an English classroom, the interviews must be in English.

However, AB shared her experience of finding visitors who were reluctant to participate in the interview due to their fear of speaking in English. AB mentioned in her essay that there are a few visitors, but not even one of them wants to be in the interview because they are scared to speak English. In this context, the visitors were mostly the university students since the public art visited by AB is in the campus area. It indicates the existence of language anxiety among the students (Harmawati, 2024). Based on the research interview, AB stated that the visitors agreed to be interviewed in the first place, but they refused after finding out that the

interview must be in English. Therefore, AB consistently found the interviewee so that the interview in English could be conducted by choosing the exhibition crew as the interviewee.

> *"So again, we choose the crew, she knows a lot, and we find the right hands."* **AB, interview**

Based on the research interview, participant AB reported that although some visitors initially agreed to participate in the interview, they later rejected upon knowing that the interview would be conducted in English. Consequently, AB consistently sought alternative interviewees who were willing and able to communicate in English, ultimately selecting members of the exhibition crew to ensure the interviews could be carried out as required.

ZM agrees that this project can improve English communication skills by stating, "I lack confidence, and this project makes me learn how to speak to strangers, helps me to strengthen my public speaking skills, and asks others' opinions." This excerpt indicates that the students have the possibility of feeling anxiety and fear when speaking English, which then hinders their communication skills (Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022). These are considered negative affective factors that should be avoided, and thus solutions are required. Thus, exposing the real context in the on-site interviews makes the students anticipate the unscripted conversations and stimulates them to pose open-ended questions.

Experiential learning, particularly in ELT, enables the students to practice their English-speaking skills in its actual environment. This goes beyond what Anaza et al. (2023) mentioned in their paper, which used mock interviews to introduce a similar environment to the actual one to increase the students' confidence. In principle, the real interview conducted during the visit will make the students more prepared to use English in the real-world setting. This indicates the language gap regarding the students' communicative competence, where they struggled to practice English in the actual environment. Moreover, Anandari (2015) added the factors causing the students to be anxious in speaking skills as they realized that they should perform good mastery while speaking to demonstrate their knowledge through oral communication. This is in line with the strategy applied by the student in the current research: to choose the exhibition crew as the interviewee who is expected to have better knowledge than the visitor.

Instead of observing pictures of public art in the classroom where the traditional technique is used, the direct visit provides even more sensory experience. It is not only the visual experience but also the experience of other senses. Discussing the topic of public art in the classroom supported by the instructional media could be challenging if the students find it difficult to observe directly. On-site interviews with the visitors conducted by RP suggest that the students constructed the knowledge and information comprehensively by not only visiting but also planning to gather the data. Based on the interview, MO states that the project includes some stages: a) listing the public art; b) deciding on the object inside the campus area; c) preparing the interview with the people; d) formulating the questions; and e) interviewing foreigners from Germany and the Netherlands as visitors as well as students.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how experiential learning applied in the art-based major at the tertiary level results in significant benefits in enhancing their skills, not only for the college but also for their future careers. Grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory, the students can

develop their writing as they optimize what they learned from the on-site experience. As a result, the students can show notable growth in articulating complex ideas and constructing coherent discourse based on their direct visits. As the practical activities of experiential learning, direct visits to the public arts yield some results that harness hands-on perspectives and responses to elevate analytical depth of writing, namely seeking visitors' perceptions and analyzing how visitors respond to the artworks. In terms of the process of thinking, the artwork can be a means for the students to give personal opinions as a gateway to thoughtful conclusions. The outcome demonstrates that the process involves more than just observation; it involves critical analysis, from which one can draw conclusions. Moreover, as art-based major students tend to learn by optimizing their sensing, visual information and symbolism become the modes as tools to information retention for key details.

For the transferable skills beneficial for the students, this project can enhance three skills: problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and communication skills. Problem-solving skills make the students aware of the possible way for every problem they encounter, and thus the alternative is created. This process is intertwined with the critical thinking skills that assist the students in preparing for the real-world setting. The students are posed with various issues, and they are expected to enhance their awareness in the society, which the artists can speak up and make the voice through the artworks. In terms of the communication skill, the students are exposed to meeting the strangers and digging the information from them. The experience enables them to be more active in communication, which is urgently required, especially in their future careers. They are trained to make the interview run smoothly. The findings suggest that incorporating experiential learning into language education not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters deeper intellectual engagement. These results highlight the pedagogical value of integrating real-world experiences into academic settings to support holistic student development. Future research may further investigate how such experiential models can be adapted across diverse disciplines and learning environments.

As the data on the present studies were analyzed qualitatively and conducted in only one specific art major, further studies are expected to broaden the scopes by collecting the data from diverse art majors with the adjusted activities for the students. It hopefully can attain the more comprehensive results to investigate the impact of experiential learning in the context of art-based majors at the tertiary level. In addition, the quantitative research design can also be an alternative to represent the larger domain as well as to assess the English language skills (e.g., writing skill, speaking skill) based on the scores the students achieve after conducting a set of experiential learning activities (off-campus). Therefore, experiential learning is no longer limited to the field of management and can be applied in various fields of study, as the students are required to possess good adaptive, practical skills in this era.

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