Research article

English language teachers’ engagement in and preference for experiential learning for professional development

Teferi Hatuye Helate, Tekle Ferede Metaferia, Tesfaye Habtemariam Gezahegn

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is an assertion in the professional development of teachers. However, there is a scarcity of studies exploring experiential learning from the integrative perspectives in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context and at the level of a primary school. This study, therefore, aimed to assess primary school EFL teachers’ engagement in experiential learning from these perspectives. A concurrent mixed research design was adopted to explore the cases. 186 teachers were selected for the questionnaire while eight teachers were selected for interviews. Questionnaires, document analysis, and interviews were used to collect data. The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results indicated that most primary school English language teachers were mostly engaged in professional learning and development activities. Besides, they applied cognitive experiential learning strategies and preferred diverger experiential learning styles dominantly. These findings indicate a deviation from the scope, focus, and major aims of experiential learning and constructivist premises. As a result, the study suggested that the teacher development programs for primary school teachers in the EFL context should incorporate activities that lead to the self-directed and autonomous learning of teachers.

1. Introduction

Experiential learning is commonly understood as learning from experiences or learning through experiences that included practicing self-directed learning, planning and setting out goals for self-initiated learning, and self-development based on the specific learning situation (Beard and Wilson, 2006; Graham, 2006). Experiential learning is also autonomous learning that deals with personal freedom for being an independent practitioner and learner (Gao and Zhang, 2020; Sokel, 2019). The concept of experiential learning further involves the high-level personal engagement in professional learning and development activities, strategies, and learning styles that enhance teachers’ professionalism in instructional activities (Oxford, 2011, 2017; Moorhouse, 2020).

When the teachers actively engage in professional learning and development that maximizes their professionalism, they shape their future learning and sustainable growth (Borg, 2006, 2015; Guskey and Yoon, 2009). Therefore, in experiential learning teachers are assumed to be more actively engaged in self-learning and growing than becoming passive receivers and practitioners of theoretical knowledge and skills (Borko, 2004; Boyadzhieva, 2016; Hansen, 2000). On the same issue, Fenwick (2001) notes that experiential learning enables individual teachers’ cognitive development to deal effectively with the demands and constraints of everyday professional life. This dynamic phenomenon of learning includes decision-making, problem-solving, self-regulation, and independence (Pappas, 2014). As well, Borko (2004) and Jarvis (2004) view experiential learning as personal and social learning required for the teachers’ self-regulation, teaching confidently, and acting independently with peers and others in the wider professional community. Therefore, experiential learning is a core component of EFL teachers’ professionalism that is basic for effective teaching of the English Language (Boyadzhieva, 2016; Chee et al., 2011; OECD, 2005, 2009; Sokel, 2019).

Experiential learning includes using experiential learning activities, and strategies and depends largely on the teachers’ self-directed learning (Chee et al., 2011) which encompasses self-reliance activities, such as decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-initiation for assertiveness training, and involving in lessening professional communication barriers personally or in groups (Burns, 2010; Butler, 2012; Kumaravadivelu, 2005). Concerning the major theoretical shift in teachers’ experiential learning, the authors stated understanding the teachers’ experiential learning, the move from passive formal learning towards self-directed learning and deciding on how to engage in effective
and relevant activities, use meaningful strategies, and preferred learning style that meets their learning style preference demands for their learning and growing (Albrahim, 2020; Allen et al., 2020; Brown, 2006, 2014; Cohen, 2003; Cohen and Macaro, 2007; Reeves, 2010).

Primary school English language teachers in Ethiopia are mandatorily engaged in a block of top-down experiential learning and professional development programs that involve induction and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs (Marriam and Bierema, 2014; Lee, 2019). These programs are linked to structured career development and appraisal of teachers (MOE, 2009). The CPD packages require the teachers to involve in on-job generic training and reflective activities prepared for all teachers in the school. The teachers are also required to occasionally involve in English Language improvement pieces of training still prepared for all teachers, not specific to English Language Teachers. Thus, they are rarely engaged in self-directed and autonomous learning. This imposed CPD seems to negatively impact the enterprise of activities, tailored strategies and preferred learning styles of teachers (Turhan and Arikian, 2009). As a result, the teachers’ self-directed and autonomous learning were found to be marginalized by the dominant practice of the imposed professional learning and development activities. These professional learning and development activities are criticized mostly for not aligning with the paradigm of experiential learning (Borg, 2015; Gedamu and Shewangizaw, 2020a; Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum, 2020). Indeed, this is the traditional practice that resembles teacher preparation, professional development or staff enhancement with outdated and insufficient inputs for impacting English language teachers’ lifelong learning (Albrahim, 2020; Bai and Lo, 2018; Sokel, 2019; Wilhoit, 2012).

Recently, experiential learning has received a great deal of attention in research. Anjarwati et al. (2021) studied experiential meaning in article writing while Kalungwizi et al. (2018) examined experiential strategies and learning in environmental education. Forestal and Finch (2020) explored experiential learning in a large introductory lecture course. Feize et al. (2021) made a study on employing experiential learning as a tool to teach mindfulness cognitive behavioral therapy to Latino social work graduate students. Payne and Costas (2020), on the other hand, connected experiential learning to creative dance. However, the studies reviewed here tended to focus on particular fields of study and ignored experiential learning in the professional development of teachers except the one by Girvan et al. (2016). Moreover, none of these studies examined experiential learning of teachers from three perspectives namely experiential learning activities, strategies, and styles in teaching English as a foreign language in particular.

On the same issue, the range of local studies focuses on conceptualizing and testifying to the characteristics, types, structures, and manifestations of perceived knowledge, experience, and learning cycles derived from the psychologist’s propositions pioneered by Dewey and Kolb’s learning cycle (Hirpa, 2019; Temesgen, 2017; Kablan and Kaya, 2014). While studying the impact of teachers’ self-initiation on their professional learning and development and the teachers’ classroom teaching, all of them conducted their investigation in tertiary education (Situmorang et al., 2020). Others still focused on reviewing experiential learning theory based on traditional research worldviews (Kolb and Kolb, 2011; Kolb, 2015). In missing the real-life context, most of these researches were concerned primarily with quality assurance of teaching-learning in a non-subject-specific context (Fekede and Fiorucci, 2012; Smith et al., 2012). On the other hand, there are sketchy attempts to join Kolb’s experiential learning focusing on primary school teachers’ CPD. What is a more vicarious situation is that primary school English language teachers are engaging in illusionary professional learning and development activities (Kaymakamoglu, 2018). They dominantly engage in tailored, insulated, and induced activities with beliefs, attitudes, perceived professional knowledge, experiences, practices, strategies, skills, and procedures oriented by professional development models or experts for all teachers (Amare, 2006; Fekede, 2010; Gedamu and Shewangizaw, 2020a, 2022). To this effect, the current study investigates primary school English language teachers’ engagement in experiential learning.

In general, a desirable professional development of teachers is the result of the positive interlink among the variables such as experiential learning activities, experiential learning strategies, and experiential learning styles. Therefore, this study intended to address (i) the dominant experiential learning activities primary school English language teachers engaged in, (ii) the experiential learning strategies primary school English teachers use the most, and (iii) the types of experiential learning styles primary school English language teachers prefer the most.

2. Research design and methods

2.1. Research design

This study employed a concurrent convergent mixed methods design. It is believed that the use of both the quantitative and the qualitative approaches together capitulates a better understanding of the research problem than either approach alone and improves the validity and credibility of the results (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the quantitative data was collected from the teachers through a questionnaire while qualitative data were collected through document analysis and interviews. Since the mixed methods design opted in this study is a concurrent/convergent one, the results obtained through both approaches were integrated into the discussion section to get a better insight into the issues of the study.

2.2. Research setting and participants

672 English language teachers in the Gamo and Gofa sub-regions of Ethiopia were the population of this study. This population was fairly distributed across 118 clusters in which each one comprises relatively 4–7 schools (first cycle primary schools, 1–4 grades, and second cycle primary schools, 5–8 grades) with a total of around 600 public primary schools. Accordingly, the schools were clustered into 8 blocks based on their proximity to each other. The researchers first identified 5 woredas and 3 towns using a simple random sampling technique (lottery method). Next, the researcher selected 66 sample cluster schools applying the lottery method. Thus, the sample size for this study was determined by computing the simple formula. To this effect, the sample size for this study was determined based on the template of the formula: \( s = X^2/\left(3.841\right) \times \left(0.05\right) \times \left(1 - P\right) \times \left(1 + P\right) \). With respect to using this formula: \( s \) refers to the required sample size followed by \( X^2 \) which refers to the table value stands for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841) refers to the degree of freedom constant across the number of populations. Then, \( N \) refers to the population size. \( P \) refers to the population proportion (assumed to be 0.50 or 50%) used in order to determine the maximum sample size and \( d \) refers to the degree of accuracy (0.05). This formula yielded a sample of 186 participants from a population of 462 primary school English language teachers.

2.3. Data collection instruments

To collect data from teachers on their experiential learning engagement, self-reported questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis were used. Each tool is presented independently in the subsections that follow.

2.3.1. Questionnaire

One of the instruments used was a close-ended questionnaire with 36 items in three parts. Its purpose was to measure the participants’ practice of experiential learning activities, their strategies use, and their preference for experiential learning styles. The self-reported questionnaire was a 5-option Likert scale to enable the participants to indicate the option that most likely reflects their views, opinions, and predispositions. The questionnaires were adapted from OECD (2009) to suit the aims of the
current study. Nevertheless, the questionnaires were checked for validity and reliability.

The first part of the questionnaire included a series of 12 items to measure the extent to which primary school English teachers engage in experiential learning activities with subscales of teachers’ professional learning and development activities (items 1–4), self-directed learning activities (items 5–8), and autonomous learning activities (items 9–12). The five-point Likert Scale ranged from (1) “very low”, (2) “Low”, (3) “Moderate”, (4) “High”, to (5) “Very high”, respectively. The five-point Likert Scale ranged from (1) “very low” (2) “Low” (3) “Moderate” (4) “High” and (5) “Very high”, respectively. The second part also had 12 items that were used to identify the strategies primary school English language teachers use in their experiential learning. This part of the questionnaire is thus, grouped into four categories including cognitive strategy (items 1–3); meta-cognitive strategy (items 4–6), social strategies (using 7–9), and emotional/social strategies (items 10–12). The five-point Likert Scale for this section ranged from (1) “rarely,” (2) “sometimes,” (3) “moderately,” (4) “usually,” and (5) “always.”

Similarly, a series of 12 other items were used to measure primary school English language teachers’ preferred experiential learning style. These were themed into three sub-scales of which (items 1–4) are assumed to measure assimilating style with cognitive skills; items (5–8) were assumed to measure diverging/accommodating styles with social/emotional skills, whereas, items (9–12) were assumed to measure converging styles with autonomous learning skills. Then, 12 statements were used based on 5-point Likert scale options provided as (1) “not interested at all” (2) “not so interested” (3) “interested” (4) “so interested” (5) “extremely interested”.

2.3.2. Interview

The interview was intended to elicit the selected participants’ experiential learning style preferences. The interview items were prepared based on the leading questions of Powell and Bodur (2019) and customized to the teachers’ perception of professional development in a non-online context. The styles expected of the respondents to be described included assimilating styles, diverging styles, and converging styles. However, since the questions are semi-structured kind, the researchers did not expect the respondents to name the styles but use related key terms of their preference on which inferences were made by the researchers.

2.3.3. Document analysis

Documents originating mainly from the CPD framework of the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia, English Language Improvement Program for Teachers, and Portfolio of teachers were considered as data sources for looking into experiential learning practice, strategy use, and preference of style. The primary school teachers are involved in scheduled colleague-led on-job CPD training and are expected to write and do a number of reflective activities and action research as a requirement. Similarly, for their career development to the next ladder, they are expected to keep a portfolio in which they put their classroom teaching reflections, written feedback from their colleagues, tracts, and brochures. They also write about the lessons learned from other professional development training made available by the government including the training in the nationwide English Language Improvement Programs (ELIP English) for all English Language Teachers. It is believed that looking into these activities helps the researchers understand the primary school English language teachers’ perceived practice and strategy use. As a result, the researcher collected the documents from 6 teachers selected purposefully based on the criteria for the inclusion of all or most of the reflective activities in their portfolio including classroom teaching reflections, personally written reflections, and written feedback from colleagues or tutors. To this effect, document analysis was intended to validate primary school English language teachers’ perceived practice and their strategies use of experiential learning. To maintain the quality of the data retrieved from the documents, the researchers used those documents kept in the staff offices only with permission from the school heads and those of the purposefully selected teachers.

2.4. Method of data analysis

The data analysis was made based on the principles of the mixed methods approach that mixes quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Descriptive statistics such as mean scores were run to analyze the quantitative data. For this reason, the summated mean average was enumerated as a comparison of respondents’ scores using the data from the questionnaire. Then, the data from the interviews were transcribed, described, and analyzed under each theme following the analysis of the quantitative data. Document analysis was also made thematically after analyzing the contents of the CPD framework, the ELIP, and Teachers’ portfolios. Finally, the main results of both quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted and discussed together in the discussion section. In other words, the quantitative and qualitative data were presented concurrently in the results section and converged together in the discussion section.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from Arba Minch University Research Ethics Board and informed consent was obtained from the study participants before they had completed the research questionnaire. The participants were also informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary (Ellis and Earley, 2006).

3. Results

3.1. English Language Teachers’ practice of experiential learning activities

The first objective of the study was to determine the extent to which primary school English language teachers engage in experiential learning activities. The analysis was made using the summated mean averages and document analysis.

Table 1 shows the English language teacher’s levels of engagement in experiential learning activities. Consequently, the mean score for the professional learning and development-oriented activities (x = 3.94) appears to have the highest while the autonomous learning activities (x = 3.53) dimension has the lowest mean value. The mean value for self-directed learning activities (x = 3.61) falls in between the mean values of the two dimensions. Besides, the overall mean value of the experiential learning activities scale is found to be x = 3.66. Accordingly, the result indicates that primary school English language teachers were found to be engaging in high-level professional learning activities in a job-embedded context.

On a similar issue, document analysis was made. In this, Ethiopian primary school teachers’ CPD framework, English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) materials, and teachers’ portfolios were consulted.

English language teachers have been engaging in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs. CPD is one of the components that are designed by the government to contribute to all Ethiopian teachers’ professional learning and development after they have attended initial teacher education through pre-service or in-service programs. Accordingly, any primary school teacher should attend the on-job CPD.

| Sub-scale                                      | Mean | Std  |
|-----------------------------------------------|------|------|
| Professional learning and development activities | 3.94 | 0.914 |
| Self-directed learning activities             | 3.61 | 0.969 |
| Autonomous learning activities                | 3.53 | 1.376 |
| Summated mean                                 | 3.66 | 1.086 |
In addition to the pre-programmed CPD, according to the “CPD framework for Ethiopian teachers” (MOE, 2009, p.39), English language teachers need to be engaged with prescribed, predetermined, and singularized inspections. This is described in the framework as:

As a matter of this, all National, regional, and Local educational authorities, such as MoE, REBs, ZEOs, WEOs, and sub-city educational offices always have been assigning a number of supervisors and education experts to their schools and staff. It is the responsibility of these organizations to assign experienced professionals to give help and advice to teachers with professional knowledge and teaching methodology in schools...based on the priorities of content identified by ETP.

The current CPD framework guideline asserts that the most powerful and most accessible human resources for CPD are found in the institutions themselves. This statement indicates that English language teachers’ experiential learning and growth are most probably effective when practiced through collaborative learning in the atmosphere of collegial support and development. Within this understanding, there are many opportunities in the schools for English language teachers to share good practices, to seek self-reflection and evaluation, and reflective feedback important for their professional competencies, self-learning, and growth in a job-embedded setting. The guideline specifically mentioned that MOE (2009).

The CPD approach adopted by the institution should give formal opportunities for collaborative working-mentoring, coaching, experience sharing, team planning, peer observation, team teaching, and etc...which will have a significant and lasting impact on teacher improvement and student achievement. Most institutions also have professional colleagues who have a wealth of knowledge and experience and who are able to engage in formal and informal activities which enable them to share their expertise. Directors, Principals, and Deans should always make a point of identifying and empowering these colleagues as Expert Teachers (p. 39).

This CPD assumed the overall teachers’ understanding of the phenomena of English language teachers’ practice of experiential learning while engaging in both formal and informal learning opportunities incorporating professional learning, self-directed learning, and independent learning activities. However, the actual practice indicates that English language teachers’ self-directed and autonomous learning situations are overwhelmed with achieving institutional goals rather than creating opportunities for life-long experiential learning. MOE (2009, p. 36), “As a result of the implementation of this framework all teachers... in all regions of Ethiopia, will be participating in high quality and appropriate CPD which impacts upon classroom practice to ensure improved student learning and achievement.”

As a part of the TDP by the Ethiopian Government, ELIP (English Language Improvement Program) training has been widely practiced since 2002. It has been a big national initiative supported by the British Council that was designed for training primary school English language teachers, teacher trainers, and trainers of trainers with the assumption of developing English language teachers who can be proficient in teaching English to primary school students and then able to support their students’ literacy development.

The ELIP training has been practiced throughout Ethiopia using the cascading model. Accordingly, a number of first and second-cycle primary school English language teachers have been trained. Based on the MoE (2009) guideline, English language teachers have been trained using the three consecutive materials for 200 h in three phases; these are,

1. Face-to-face material that includes booklet-1 and cassette-1 for sixty (60) hours (5 h per day for 12 days).
2. Distance material that includes booklet-1 with cassette-1 and booklet-2 for eighty (80) hours (50 h Individual practice and 30 h face-to-face).
3. Face-to-face materials that include cassette-3 for sixty (60) hours (5 h per day for 12 days).

One of the key focuses of the ELIP program, is to make the teachers resourceful and to establish English Language Improvement Centers (ELIC) in the schools. However, similar to the government-initiated CPD, ELIP failed to initiate lifelong experiential learning. Teachers do not seem to continue learning by themselves after the one-year CPD or at the end of the 200 h of ELIP.

The concept of CPD, thus, can be traced to the teachers’ experiential learning in a job-embedded setting. However, it does not consider self-directed and autonomous learning and ignores seeing teachers as persons with their own development needs. Moreover, its overall objectives are to improve the teachers’ classroom teaching practice, raise the students’ performance and enhance institutional achievement. Besides, the specific objectives of the CPD are to make each teacher capable in his classroom teaching by using the experiential learning assumptions based on experientially approached curriculum/courses. In addition, it focuses on the teachers’ career-oriented development process, for improving teachers’ professional knowledge, skills, and strategies that are centered on the training in the school context and practice at the classroom level.

Evidently, the results from the questionnaire and the document analysis seem to support each other. In both cases, the focus is on the teachers’ professional learning and development-oriented activities where autonomous learning and self-directed learning activities are marginalized. This may affect the lifelong professional development and independent experiential learning of teachers.

3.2. English Language Teachers’ use of experiential learning strategies

The other objective of this study was to identify the experiential learning strategies English language teachers use.

Based on Table 2, the result with the summated mean accounted for \( \mu = 3.58 \). This result accounts for the respondents’ using all strategies of experiential learning: cognitive, metacognitive, and social/emotional strategies. However, the highest mean average is for cognitive strategies (\( \mu = 4.42 \)). This result indicates that teachers usually use cognitive strategies which are probably coming from the professional development activities they have involved in their school settings.

More strikingly, the table above indicates the decreasing summated means average reported teachers’ strategies use of social, meta-cognitive, and emotional. From this result, it seemed that English language teachers were scarcely engaging in collegial learning, peer observation, self-evaluation, reading different materials; writing reflective activities, and experimenting with new ideas independently.

Document analysis was also made to explore English language teachers’ strategy use. The major documents in the first portfolio included: a personal and educational qualification certificate, for instance, the teachers’ copy of the first degree, clearance from the previous school, a report of absentees, and a copy of action research. In line with the activities to be included in the portfolios, the MOE’s framework stated:

The portfolio should include the individual CV (personal and professional data and qualifications) incorporates evidence of personal development activities undertaken – e.g., upgrading through summer

| Sub-scale                  | Mean | Std  |
|----------------------------|------|------|
| Cognitive Strategy         | 4.42 | 0.661|
| Social strategy            | 3.98 | 0.799|
| Metacognitive strategy     | 3.4  | 0.93 |
| Emotional strategy         | 2.53 | 0.774|
| Summated mean              | 3.58 | 0.791|
programs that are not a part of the mandatory sixty hours (for schools) … attendance certificates for local, regional or national courses/ workshops, and awards received.

This strategy might not help English language teachers’ learning from experiences including professional, self-directed, and independent learning and growth.

The second portfolio revealed that English language teachers are currently maintaining portfolios for the mere collection of every piece of activity. For example, while looking into the given portfolio, the documents within it included copies of routine day-to-day classroom activities. Accordingly, this portfolio included the list of latecomers, lists of students’ names to which the tutorial was given, etc.

The result obtained from the analysis of the third portfolio showed that English language teachers were engaged in maintaining portfolios for their school success. Nevertheless, their practice was monotonous and appeared to be for the benefit of schools and then for the benefit of respective institutions than for self-learning and growing. Thus, most of the reflective activities found in this portfolio were the reports of meditative actions and modifications made for instructional purpose, such as classroom management including one-to-five organization plans, and analysis of semester-based students’ achievement. In respect to this point, the MOE framework strongly suggested the same activities as they should be included in the given portfolio and should be organized based on the following dimensional areas (MOE, 2009):

… provide a record of all development activities and identify improvement against the criteria for ‘Professional Competencies’, provide evidence that contributes to the annual performance review carried out for each teacher, annual appraisal reports, examples of examination results with an analysis, examples of lesson plans with evaluations, and examples of assessment tasks and tests written and/or marking schemes developed by the teacher (p. 43).

The documents and reflective activities to which these teachers engaged were found to be one-size-fits-all approach that every teacher has come to meet in common. Therefore, the advantage English language teachers might be favored with engaging in maintaining portfolios were promoting to the next ladder in the professional career structures.

In respect to the next document analysis, portfolios four and five, the results of the analysis indicated that English language teachers were being engaged in maintaining portfolios on impractical, time-sensitive issues, and product-based activities. Therefore, this leads to the conclusion that the teachers were being engaged in maintaining portfolios dominated and authoritatively dictated by their institutions as the MOE (2009),

Each teacher is required to keep a portfolio of CPD activities. The purpose of this is to: Plan their CPD activities, provide evidence of participation in professional learning, individual CPD Action Plans, evidence of all the CPD activities which have been undertaken by the individual teacher in the last three years, examples of materials prepared by the teacher as part of CPD activities, examples of curriculum development materials developed by the teacher details of any action research undertaken, and professional reading (p. 38).

According to the result obtained from the analysis of the final portfolio, the sixth portfolio, English language teachers were found to be engaging in maintaining reflective activities that are organized based on the informational topics-affirmative actions, such as female students’ tutorials, special need students’ support, lesson plans, students’ attendances, and other mandatory requirements. While comparing these activities with the ones recommended in the MOE’s framework, most of the activities were being developed based on that guideline, “The portfolio could include any of the following: extra-curricular activities… keep a record of activities undertaken.”

The teachers who were found to engage in such activities majorly emphasize the area of professional learning and development strategies.

The absence of self-reflective activities within their portfolios indicates that their time lifetime learning and growing are ignored and the strategies opted in the portfolio and the CPD framework tend to ascribe more to cognitive strategy than the social, metacognitive, or emotional strategy.

3.3. English Language Teachers’ learning style preference

The English Language teachers’ preferences of the learning styles were also assessed through a questionnaire and interviews.

Table 3 shows the English language teachers’ learning style preferences. The mean score for the divergent learning style (x̄ = 4.18) appears the highest while accommodating (x̄ = 3.89) and assimilating (x̄ = 3.86) dimensions were the second and third highest mean values, respectively.

The mean results, therefore, show that the teachers dominantly use diverging and accommodating strategies.

The interview results also indicated that the preferred experiential learning style for primary school English language teachers was individualistic and it was imported through professional learning and development activities.

Participant (P1) expressed his feeling toward the preferred experiential learning style in the following way,

…I am extremely interested if would have to learn through my emotional skills that help me to prefer my own learning styles in order to move beyond the current situation and meet concrete experiences, direct demonstration of the lesson in English classrooms that sounds more realistic even though the preferred experiential learning styles are necessary to augment on my own learning style preference.

Apart from (P1), the second participant (P2) was not employing his own preferred experiential learning in the same manner. This was because he was adapting a little bit from the current practice as he found it the zone of the comfort of his learning style.

This participant, therefore, seems to ascribe to the learning style preferred by the institution and integrate them with his own. This is expressed by the participant as:

… even though I was adhering to the current preferred experiential learning styles I seamlessly integrated them into my preferable learning styles after I had sufficient social knowledge through peer observation, working under mentors, collegial coaching, and supervision in job-embedded context.

As a participant (P2) explained, he employed the diverging learning style with critical investigations of his self-directed and autonomous learning essential for his further self-learning and growth in the future.

Participant (P3) noted that he enjoyed peculiar skills which he got from professional development programs. He expressed that he was strong in using manipulative and learning models as English as a foreign language teacher and he depended on quiet reflections.

This participant (P3) continued to heavily rely on accommodating learning styles. The participant also felt that the professional development activities, such as cooperative group work were found to be giving a good transition in this regard.

The next participant (P4) claimed that the primary emphasis was placed on theoretical learning styles for the teaching profession. This participant stated that:

| Sub-scale          | mean  | SD       |
|-------------------|-------|----------|
| Converging        | 3.44  | 0.941    |
| Assimilating      | 3.86  | 0.944    |
| Accommodating     | 3.89  | 0.963    |
| Diverging style   | 4.18  | 0.848    |
| Summated mean     | 3.84  | 0.924    |

Table 3. English language teachers’ learning style preferences.
As an English teacher, I have been confused in the CPD and the whole system of professional development. I receive some training on English language teaching, but I don’t feel it was sufficient. Additionally, I felt that the preferred experiential learning styles embedded in the form of experiential learning currently implemented in my school were for the teaching of students and did not consider the context of my learning style preference.

The fifth participant (P5) noted that his preference of learning style was found to be institutional with little and no personal responsibility for using them. To this end, the participant (P5) contested as follows:

I was not confident with the type of experiential learning I need to use by now because it was traditional ones. In my school context, most of the experienced teachers, supervisors, and school directors were found to be decisive on how I could prefer my learning style as they guide me to focus on certain styles. Therefore, I was depending on a lot of custom-oriented preferred experiential learning styles preference.

Participant (P6) forwarded his suggestion as follows, “all of the preferred experiential learning styles not tend to push English language teachers to gain new style through meaningful learning style preference which is going along with their specific subject of teaching skills”.

Even if, explicit naming the kind of learning style they prefer was found difficult for the interviewees, they tend to follow what is opted by their institute. This indicates how influential is the institution opted learning style. Thus, the teachers may need to be given various opportunities to utter the preferred experiential learning style that can promote their lifelong learning. Their preference of learning style may include diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating.

4. Discussion

The first objective of the study was to assess the dominant experiential learning activities primary school English language teachers engaged in. The results from the questionnaire indicated that teachers are engaged in professional learning and development-oriented activities to the highest extent than the other types of experiential learning activities. On the contrary, they have reported engaging less in autonomous experiential learning activities. The results of the document analysis also proved teachers are made to engage in professional development activities such as CPD and ELIP. Besides, the results showed teachers did not employ reflective practices that can enable them to learn from their own experiences. Previous studies conducted by different scholars also proved that teachers in different contexts seem to engage in formally designed professional development activities (Ball and Forzani, 2011; Graham, 2006; Jarvis, 2004; Knapper and Copley, 2006; Nugroho and Mutiariningrum, 2020) but they state that professional learning activities are the beginning of learning that perpetuates throughout professional life (Gedamu and Shewangizaw, 2020a,b; 2022; Knapper and Copley, 2000). Engagement in formally designed professional development activities might be good for beginning teachers as they may not develop the skill of engaging in reflective and autonomous experiential learning activities at the early stage of their career. Hence, ‘all-size-fits-all’ professional development activities may not work well. On the contrary, Paulos and Dawit (2019) identified that the practice of experiential learning must accommodate an explicit responsibility of professional learning and development to date that is reinforced by theoretical professional standards and methodological principles that can inform English language teachers’ implicit learning, self-direction, and independence. Given the importance of professional learning and development activities for effective, efficient, and critical professional development, it must critically transform the teachers’ self-regulation (Borko, 2004; Moorhouse, 2020; Utami, 2019). Accordingly, the extent to which Ethiopian teachers engage in experiential learning practice in a primary school situation is dominated by customary professional learning and development activities (Moorhouse, 2020; Oxford, 2011, 2017). With this understanding, Jarvis (2004) suggested that English language teachers are better engaged in contemporary work settings and context-specific activities which are more related to their self-direction, regulation, identity, and autonomy skills (Bai and Lo, 2018; Cohen and Macaro, 2007; Giles et al., 2016; Albrahim, 2020; Doiz et al., 2011; Fenwick, 2001; Jarvis, 2004; Utami, 2019).

The second objective of the study was to examine the experiential learning strategies primary school English teachers use the most. The result revealed that almost all English language teachers mostly engaged in cognitive strategy followed by social, metacognitive, and emotional strategies, respectively. However, the emotional strategy is reported to be least used with a minimum mean value. This shows that metacognitive, social, and emotional strategies were dominated by cognitive strategies in their experiential learning (Grenfell, 2007; Somera, 2018). On the contrary, the metacognitive and emotional strategies are the most crucial strategies for teachers’ experiential learning in job-embedded contexts (Cooper, 2013; Ellis, 2006). While acknowledging the role of cognitive strategy, however, there is less opportunity for primary school English language teachers to use these strategies emanated from their lived experience which can scaffold their self-directed and independent learning (Albrahim, 2020; Abuzagha and Tabieh, 2021; Gao and Zhang, 2020; Koob and Funk, 2002; Utami, 2019), This probably can be the result of theory-loaded professional development pieces of training that are made available by the government of Ethiopia. Teachers seemed to wait for the top-down one-size-fits-all training programs instead of self-initiated and managed experiential learning strategies that encourage independent learning.

The third objective of this study was to explore the types of experiential learning styles primary school English language teachers prefer the most. The results obtained from both quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that the teachers were found to have diverging and accommodating preferences with limited assimilation and converging style preferences (He and Miller, 2011; Vermunt and Endeldijk, 2011). This finding seems to be inconsistent with a study by Kablan and Kaya (2014) in which approximately half of the participants preferred the assimilating learning style. This might be because of contextual differences where the Ethiopian current preferred learning style has been pioneered by standard theoretical professional learning and development. The results obtained, generally, revealed that there was a gap between primary school English language teachers’ learning style preferences and the current preferred experiential learning style by their institution (Dörmey, 2006; Koob and Funk, 2002). This mismatch can negatively affect teachers’ experiential learning. Even though Kolb and Kolb (2011) suggested those learning styles as crucial to teachers’ learning and development, they may have strong effects on limiting the teachers’ self-direction and autonomy for future learning and growth if there is a mismatch.

5. Conclusions

The findings revealed that primary school English language teachers dominantly engaged in professional learning and development activities. In terms of strategies, they tended to frequently use cognitive strategy followed by social strategy. Similarly, the experiential learning style they preferred is diverging followed by an accommodating learning style. These revealed that primary school teachers’ practice of self-directed learning and autonomous learning is minimal. This in turn indicated that the existing experiential learning practice for English Language teachers in the Ethiopian primary schools is defective as it mises the major aims of experiential learning, that is autonomous lifelong learning through self-reflection on practice. As a result, future teacher development programs should incorporate activities that lead to the self-directed and autonomous learning of teachers. Moreover, scholars may need to consider the teachers’ engagements in experiential learning activities, their use of experiential learning strategies, and their preferences of experiential learning styles for its impactful implementation. However,
this study has its own limitations as it depended on self-reported engagement in experiential learning.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Teferi Hatuye Helate: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments. Tesfaye Habtemariam Gezahegn: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper. Tekle Ferede Metaferia: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interest’s statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

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