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Abstract

English communication competencies are increasingly crucial for academic and professional success. However, many non-English major postgraduate students in China struggle with effectively communicating in English as a foreign language (EFL). This study aims to examine whether experiential learning can make a difference to these student' English communication competencies. A mixed-method approach was employed, with data collected from 178 postgraduate students at a Chinese university, through pre- and post-intervention surveys and student feedback reports. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests, while qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically. The results showed significant improvements in the students' communication competencies, with qualitative findings highlighting the role of the instructor, group dynamics, content focus, and learning environment. The study demonstrates great potential of experiential learning for the enhancement of EFL communication competencies.

Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) education has seen considerable development in recent decades, shifting its focus from grammatical proficiency to communicative competencies (Hattani, 2018; Zha et al., 2006). This shift reflects the recognition that language is fundamentally a means of communication and interaction (Gumperz, 1967; Hymes, 1972). Building upon this understanding, Krashen and Terrell (1983) championed the natural approach to language learning, emphasizing the primacy of meaning over grammar and advocating for the development of communicative skills as the goal of language acquisition. Then, Halliday (1985) argued that language should be understood in terms of its functions in communication

rather than as an abstract system of rules. He redefined grammar as a tool for understanding how language operates in real-life contexts, focusing on meaning and use rather than form alone.

However, postgraduate education, with its goal of academic growth, often emphasizes academic writing and research skills, with less focus on oral communication and interactive skills (Osman et al., 2024; Wang & Wang, 2007). This imbalance poses a challenge, as communication competencies are vital in the 21st-century workplaces (Lee et al., 2014; Ramli et al., 2023).

Experiential learning offers a promising solution to this challenge (Raja & Khan, 2018). Studies highlight the benefits of engaging students in context-based learning activities. For instance, Kersten (2023) demonstrated how integrating online negotiation systems into an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course enhanced autonomy, critical thinking, and language proficiency. Similarly, role-playing and other hands-on activities have been recognized for improving language skills and social competencies (Galante & Thomson, 2017; Kamilovna & Urazboyqizi, 2021; Tripathi et al., 2021). Despite these findings, a gap still exists in applying experiential learning to enhance EFL communication competencies among Chinese students. Traditional teaching methods, while effective for building foundational language skills, often fall short in addressing communication needs required for academic success and international career opportunities (Zou et al., 2022). This study seeks to address the gap by implementing an experiential learning approach designed to meet the unique needs of postgraduates.

This article reports findings from a mixed-method investigation that evaluates the impact of an experiential learning-oriented Conversational English course on the EFL communication competencies of postgraduates. In this context, communication competencies are defined as a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to effective communication across various contexts (Arifin, 2021). Building on this broad definition, the researchers adapted a survey based on Rubin's (1982) *Communication Competency Assessment Instrument* and assessed language proficiency and communication skills.

In addition to these dimensions, the researchers incorporated a crucial element—critical thinking skills—into the framework of EFL communication competencies. Critical thinking in communication entails the process of evaluating and making judgments about claims, as well as determining the level of confidence with which one communicates these judgments (Moore & Parker, 2000). Snider (2017) underscores the importance of integrating critical thinking into language education, suggesting that it fosters a deeper understanding of language and culture, which, in turn, enhances communicative effectiveness. Since Rubin's (1982) original instrument did not include this dimension, the researchers used qualitative data to assess whether critical thinking skills were cultivated through the course.

The qualitative data from students' feedback, offered insights into the experiential learning process. As an expansion of the survey, this exploration aimed to identify key factors influencing the development of communication competencies. The two-month intervention incorporated a variety of topics, each accompanied by five key tasks: Check-In (a brief activity where students share their feelings), Homework Review (such as review of pre-class video viewing), Tech-Assisted Topic Discussion (which involved instructor-student Q&A interactions), Pair or Group Work, and Oral Presentations. These tasks were specifically designed to encourage students to overcome shyness and express their thoughts and emotions in English. Further details are provided in the methodology section.

Conceptual Framework

To examine the impact of experiential learning on communication competencies in terms of language proficiency, communication skills, and critical thinking, this study employed an action research design incorporating Check-In, Homework Review, Tech-Assisted Topic Discussion, Pair or Group Work, and Oral Presentations. The conceptual framework of the study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
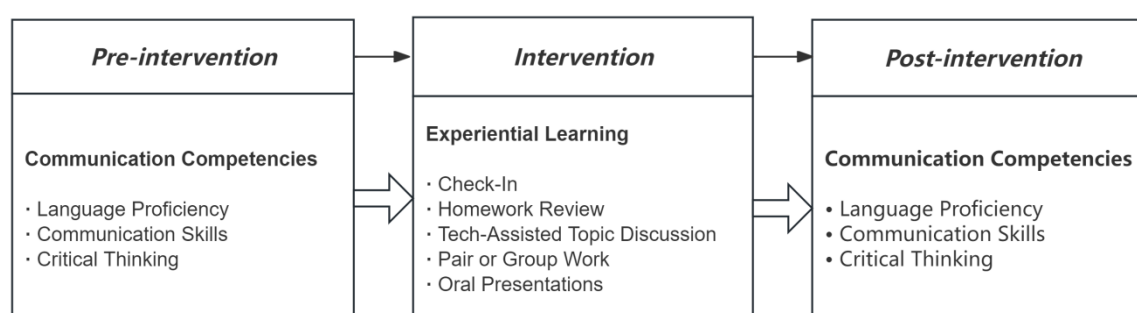
Research questions

RQ1: To what extent does experiential learning impact participants' EFL communication competencies?

RQ2: What factors within the experiential learning process have the greatest influence on participants' EFL communication competencies development?

RQ3: How do the findings contribute to evaluating the effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing the EFL communication competencies of postgraduate students?

Significance of the study

This study confirmed the applicability of experiential learning in enhancing postgraduates' EFL communication competency, a skill set that is increasingly indispensable in today's globalized academic and professional contexts. Given the unique communication

challenges that EFL postgraduate students face, such as participating in academic discussions, presenting research, networking at international conferences, and engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations, this study offers a timely pedagogical intervention that addresses these needs.

Literature Review

Communication Competencies

Competency is often defined as a person's knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes (Arifin, 2021), but this people-oriented term is frequently confused with "competence," which refers to task-oriented knowledge and abilities. This confusion extends to communication-related terms, where "competence" and "competency" are used interchangeably. To clarify these concepts, Arifin (2021, p761) distinguished between them: Competence refers to "the ability to meet performance criteria", while competency is "a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors", and competencies refers to "a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that are transformed into more than one or single competency elements."

The concept of communication competency has evolved over time, beginning with Chomsky's (1965) distinction between "competence," referring to innate linguistic knowledge, and "performance," which involves actual language use. Hymes (1971) expanded this idea by introducing the term "communicative competence," emphasizing the role of social and contextual factors in communication. Ruben and Kealey (1979) then proposed a seven-dimensional framework for assessing interpersonal communication competency, crucial for cross-cultural adaptation. His framework includes respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, role behavior, interaction management, and ambiguity tolerance. Later, Rubin (1982) developed a communication competency scale to assess speaking and listening abilities at the college level, recognizing that students often struggle to express their feelings on various issues or perform basic social tasks. He defined communication competence as the ability to use language effectively within specific situations.

Building on the above definitions and frameworks, this study adopts a more inclusive perspective, recognizing that both linguistic knowledge and performance skills are essential components of effective communication. This view highlights the dynamic, context-dependent nature of communication, emphasizing the need to adapt language use to specific social and cultural settings. Thus, the researchers use the term "communication competencies" to refer to the diverse set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that contribute to effective EFL communication across various contexts for postgraduate students.

Postgraduates' EFL Communication Competencies

Communication competencies in English are essential for postgraduates across all academic disciplines, as they enable students to thrive in both academic and professional environments (Kunioshi et al., 2012; Malthus & Lu, 2012; Tuomaitė & Zajankauskaitė, 2017). Strong English communication competencies open up greater career opportunities for students

(Idrus, 2016). However, Ibna Seraj and Habil (2021) found that environmental, psychological, and linguistic factors can all hinder effective communication among EFL learners. These challenges are especially pertinent in today's globalized world, where the growing importance of English in academia and the workplace places even greater pressure on postgraduates to communicate effectively (Jim, 2018). The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China emphasizes this need in the English Syllabus for Non-English Major Postgraduate Students, which highlights the goal of postgraduate English education: to help students use English as a tool for academic research, professional development, and international communication. This syllabus stresses practical applicability, with clear expectations: students should be able to comprehend listening materials at a pace of 120 words per minute on familiar topics and engage in routine conversations. Additionally, students should be able to deliver a coherent two-minute speech on a chosen subject with proper preparation. Building on this syllabus, the current study's intervention aims to enhance postgraduates' communication competencies through experiential learning, ensuring the practical applicability of English in different settings.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning, as a pedagogical approach, has undergone gradual progress over the past few decades. Keeton and Tate (1978) defined it as a process where learners are directly engaged with the realities they are studying, in contrast to those who merely engage in reading, hearing, talking, or writing about these realities without direct involvement. March (2010) further expanded on this by noting that experiential knowledge arises from ordinary life and work, emphasizing that direct sense experience and in-context action serve as primary sources of learning. However, both of these definitions have been criticized for failing to capture the full depth of the experiential learning process.

Kolb and Kolb (2017) proposed a more comprehensive understanding of experiential learning, highlighting its dynamic and holistic nature. They argued that experiential learning integrates both action and reflection in real-world contexts. This definition is rooted in the educational philosophy of John Dewey's experience education, which emphasizes learning through doing. They also drew from various influential scholars such as William James (radical empiricism), Kurt Lewin (action research), Carl Rogers (self-actualization through experience), Carl Jung (development from specialization to integration), Jean Piaget (constructivism), Lev Vygotsky (proximal zone of development), Paulo Freire (dialogue in naming experience), and Mary Parker Follett (creative experience and learning in relationship). Together, these scholars contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how learning is an ongoing process that emerges from engagement with the world.

The effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing students' understanding of course concepts and their application in real-world settings has been widely acknowledged. According to Slavich and Zimbardo (2012), experiential learning provides students with the opportunity to directly engage with concepts, leading to a more meaningful understanding of

both theoretical knowledge and its practical implications. Since the early 1970s, experiential learning principles have been integrated into curricula across diverse educational contexts, from formal courses to workplace training (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). This trend continues today, with educators experimenting with various experiential learning practices, such as action learning (Keys, 1994), service learning (Brower, 2011), problem-based learning (Bethell & Morgan, 2011), adventure education (Timken & McNamee, 2012), and simulation and gaming (Shields et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012).

While these individual approaches have shown promising results in fostering learning, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the integration of multiple experiential learning strategies. Moreover, most existing studies primarily focus on undergraduate or professional training contexts, with limited research exploring how postgraduate learners can benefit from such approaches.

Therefore, in this study, the researchers adopted the definition of experiential learning proposed by Kolb and Kolb (2017) and integrate multiple experiential learning approaches to support the development of EFL communication competencies in postgraduate education.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-method sequential approach to examine the impact of a Conversational English course on non-English major postgraduate students' EFL communication competencies. The quantitative component involved the administration of pre- and post-intervention surveys, which assessed communication competencies using identical items. The qualitative component was conducted after the survey through students' feedback reports, which served to expand the quantitative findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the course's effects.

Participants

The study employed a convenience sampling approach. The researcher invited 178 postgraduate students from three classes at the Institute of Disaster Prevention located in Hebei Province, China, to participate in the research. Participation was voluntary, and as such, not all students completed both the pre- and post-surveys. After excluding incomplete responses, the final dataset included 150 valid samples for analysis. For the qualitative study, however, all 178 students submitted their feedback reports. As this mixed-method research design was sequential, and the qualitative data were supposed to expand the survey findings, data from all 178 samples were analyzed. The demographic profile of the focus group is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the focus Groups

Category	Subcategory	No. of Quant. Participants	% of Quant. Participants	No. of Qual. Participants	% of Qual. Participants
Class	1	60	4.00%	67	37.60%
	2	41	27.30%	58	32.60%
	3	49	32.70%	53	29.80%
	Total	150	100%	178	100%
Gender	Female	58	38.70%	59	33.10%
	Male	92	61.30%	119	66.90%
	Total	150	100%	178	100%

Instruments

The instruments in this study include one scale—Communication Competency Survey for Postgraduates, and one feedback report. Detailed information is presented below.

The Communication Competency Survey for Postgraduates

The Communication Competency Survey for Postgraduates was adapted from Rubin's (1982) *Communication Competency Assessment Instrument* with minor modifications to align with the specific context of this study. For example, the original item, "Introduce yourself at the beginning of the semester in class," was revised to "I can introduce myself in English at the beginning of the semester in class." The survey comprises 57 items across 19 categories such as listening effectively to spoken English and using words, pronunciation, and grammar appropriate for the situation (See more details in Table 2). Each item targets a specific facet of communication, with respondents asked to indicate their level of agreement using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "very strongly disagree" to "very strongly agree."

Feedback Reports

Feedback reports from participants were the qualitative data source designed to encourage postgraduates to reflect on their Conversational English learning journey. On one hand, they were aimed to confirm the survey findings on the changes of students' communication competencies; on the other hand, they could provide deeper understanding of the course impact beyond the survey findings. Participants were asked to respond to two key questions while writing the reports: (Q1) "What progress have you made in terms of language proficiency, communication skills, and critical thinking?" and (Q2) "What aspects of this course impressed you the most?" Participants' feedback reports were submitted via RainClassroom, a smart teaching platform jointly developed by Tsinghua University and XuetangX.com. Designed to foster interaction through blended learning models, RainClassroom enabled the efficient collection of student reflections.

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

The original instrument, Rubin's (1982) *Communication Competency Assessment Instrument*, is a well-established measure, exhibiting strong inter-rater reliability (mean r = .83) and confirmed construct validity. Given its robust psychometric properties, the adapted version was deemed appropriate for use with the postgraduate participants in this study. Its reliability was further substantiated through pre-test data analysis. As presented in Table 2, the Cronbach's

alpha coefficients for all sub-dimensions of communication competencies exceed .90, indicating excellent internal consistency and reliability of the instrument.

To establish content validity, three university instructors specializing in oracy skills were invited to evaluate the survey items. They assessed the clarity, relevance, and representativeness of each item in relation to the study's objectives. Following their independent reviews and subsequent discussion, they reached a consensus that the instrument was appropriate and comprehensive for the target population.

Procedure

The action research followed a three-phase procedure: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. Detailed descriptions of each phase are provided below.

Table 2

Reliability of the Communication Competency Survey for Postgraduates (n=150)

Sub-Dimensions of Communication Competencies (CCSD)	Cronbach's Alpha
CCSD1: Listen Effectively to Spoken English	0.93
CCSD2: Use Words Pronunciation and Grammar Appropriate for the Situation	0.93
CCSD3: Use Nonverbal Signs Appropriate for the Situation	0.96
CCSD4: Use Voice Effectively	0.93
CCSD5: Identify Main Ideas in English Messages	0.92
CCSD6: Distinguish Facts From Opinions	0.96
CCSD7: Distinguish Between Informative and Persuasive Messages	0.94
CCSD8: Recognize When Another Does Not Understand Your Message	0.95
CCSD9: Express Ideas Clearly and Concisely	0.93
CCSD10: Express and Defend With Evidence Your Point of View	0.92
CCSD11: Organize (order) Messages So That Others Can Understand Them	0.93
CCSD12: Ask Questions to Obtain Information	0.96
CCSD13: Answer Questions Effectively	0.96
CCSD14: Give Concise and Accurate Directions	0.95
CCSD15: Summarize Messages	0.95
CCSD16: Describe Another's Viewpoint	0.97
CCSD17: Describe Differences in Opinion	0.97
CCSD18: Express Feelings to Others	0.94
CCSD19: Perform Social Rituals	0.94

Pre-Intervention

Prior to the intervention, one researcher, who also served as the course instructor, met with the students during the first class session of the academic term. She provided an overview of the study, including its objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations. Students were informed that participation in data collection was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes. Following this introduction, a pre-test survey was administered to those students who voluntarily consented to participate. Participants accessed the survey by scanning a WeChat QR code provided by the instructor and completed the questionnaire using their mobile phones. The pre-test aimed to establish a baseline measurement of participants' communication competencies before the implementation of the experiential learning activities.

Intervention

The intervention spanned the duration of the academic term and was embedded within the regular instructional activities of the course. A variety of interactive and student-centered activities were designed to enhance communication competencies. These activities included a brief Check-In session where students shared their current feelings, a Homework Review that involved reflecting on pre-class video content, Tech-Assisted Topic Discussions featuring instructor-student Q&A interactions, collaborative Pair or Group Work, and student-delivered Oral Presentations. Each activity was carefully scaffolded to promote active participation, reflective learning, and progressive skill development. The instructor also provided feedback throughout the term to support students' communicative performance.

Post-Intervention

Upon completion of the instructional term, the post-test survey was administered to the same cohort of participants who had completed the pre-test. The purpose of the post-test was to assess any changes in students' communication competencies following the experiential learning intervention. In addition to the survey, the researcher invited students to write a feedback report reflecting on their learning experiences during the course. These reflective reports were collected one week later through the online RainClassroom platform and served as supplementary qualitative data. The reports were used to triangulate the quantitative survey results, providing deeper insight into students' perceptions of the intervention's effectiveness and the specific learning gains they attributed to the experiential activities.

Data Analysis

To compare participants' communication competencies before and after the intervention, descriptive analyses and paired samples t-tests were conducted on the survey data. Subsequently, qualitative data (i.e., the feedback reports) were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the method proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). To minimize potential bias, three authors worked together as coders. They identified thematic phrases related to communication competencies and other potential factors influencing participants' effectiveness of learning. These phrases were then grouped into meaningful categories and sub-categories. Finally, the categories were reorganized, and overarching themes were abstracted for further interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The presentation of results began with the quantitative analysis of data from the pre-test and post-test surveys, followed by the qualitative analysis of the feedback reports. Meanwhile, the results were respectively discussed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Quantitative Data Analyses Results

Descriptive analysis of the survey data was conducted to explore trends in the changes, followed by paired samples t-tests to evaluate the significance of these changes. The analyses results are illustrated in Table 3.

As presented in Table 3, the intervention resulted in significant improvements in communication competencies across all sub-dimensions. The descriptive analysis revealed increase in the mean scores for all sub-dimensions from pre- to post-intervention. The paired samples t-tests confirmed these improvements, with all 19 sub-dimensions showing statistically significant mean differences ($p < .001$). The effect sizes (Cohen's d) for the group comparisons ranged from .72 to 1.38, indicating moderate to large effects. The largest effect sizes are on "describe another's viewpoint" (CCSD16, d = 1.38), followed by "summarize messages" (CCSD15, d = 1.32), and "organize (order) messages so that others can understand them" (CCSD11, d = 1.32), while the smaller effect sizes are on "listen effectively to spoken English"(CCSD1, d = .72) and "recognize when another does not understand your message" (CCSD8, d = .74). Overall, the results validate the robustness of the observed effects of experiential learning on the communication competencies of the participants, directly addressing RQ1 (To what extent does experiential learning impact participants' EFL communication competencies?).

Table 3

Pre- and Post-Intervention Comparison of Communication Competencies (n=150)

Communication Competencies Sub-Dimensions (CCSD)	Pre (M ± SD)	Post (M ± SD)	p	Mean Diff	t	df	Cohen's d
CCSD 1	4.33 ±1.37	5.32±1.08	0	0.99	8.83	149	0.72
CCSD 2	3.53±1.21	5.11 ± 1.10	0	1.58	15.17	149	1.24
CCSD 3	4.11 ±1.40	5.26±1.06	0	1.16	9.77	149	0.8
CCSD 4	3.92 ±1.42	5.22±1.05	0	1.3	11.33	149	0.93
CCSD 5	3.86±1.27	5.27±1.04	0	1.41	12.95	149	1.06
CCSD 6	3.68±1.27	5.24±1.07	0	1.56	14.07	149	1.15
CCSD 7	3.60±1.26	5.12±1.03	0	1.52	14.17	149	1.16
CCSD 8	4.04 ±1.35	5.11±1.09	0	1.08	9.1	149	0.74
CCSD 9	3.55±1.29	5.20±1.08	0	1.65	15.56	149	1.27
CCSD 10	3.51 ±1.30	5.12±1.02	0	1.6	14.73	149	1.2
CCSD 11	3.50±1.28	5.19±1.04	0	1.69	16.15	149	1.32
CCSD 12	3.61±1.28	5.18±1.08	0	1.57	14.51	149	1.19
CCSD 13	3.50±1.30	5.20±1.10	0	1.7	15.17	149	1.24
CCSD 14	3.92 ±1.42	5.16±1.03	0	1.24	1.24	149	0.84
CCSD 15	3.38±1.26	5.15±1.07	0	1.76	16.21	149	1.32
CCSD 16	3.33 ±1.27	5.10±1.09	0	1.77	16.91	149	1.38
CCSD 17	3.42 ±1.30	5.18±1.07	0	1.76	16.04	149	1.31
CCSD 18	3.79±1.32	5.25±1.08	0	1.46	12.53	149	1.02
CCSD 19	3.44±1.32	5.18±1.08	0	1.74	14.66	149	1.2

Discussion of Quantitative Data Analyses Results

The quantitative analyses revealed significant improvements across all nineteen sub-dimensions of participants' EFL communication competencies. Effect sizes were consistently moderate to large (Cohen's d = .72 to 1.38), underscoring the substantial impact of the intervention. The most pronounced improvements occurred in the ability to describe another's viewpoint (d = 1.38), summarize messages (d = 1.32), and organize messages so others can understand them (d = 1.32). These competencies require not only linguistic accuracy but also metacognitive awareness and audience-centered perspective-taking, suggesting that the intervention successfully targeted advanced communicative processes.

These findings are consistent with prior research on experiential learning strategies, which have been shown to foster collaborative meaning-making and perspective-taking. For example, lesson-integrated training in transactive communication during cooperative tasks enhanced students' ability to elaborate on partners' ideas and produce richer discourse, thereby improving collaborative communication quality (Jurkowski et al., 2024). Similarly, experiential projects that incorporate iterative feedback and structured reflection have demonstrated significant gains in communicative effectiveness and adaptability, reinforcing the value of audience-centered preparation (Rua & Aytug, 2023). These parallels indicate that the present intervention aligns with established pedagogical mechanisms in the field.

In contrast, smaller yet still meaningful effect sizes were observed in receptive and perceptual domains, such as listening effectively to spoken English (d = .72) and recognizing when another does not understand your message (d = .74). This pattern likely reflects the inherent complexity of developing real-time social perception and receptive listening abilities, which integrate multiple cognitive and contextual processes. Research on EFL listening highlights these challenges, noting the demands of simultaneous phoneme recognition, interpretation of paralinguistic cues, and bottom-up processing to construct meaning in real time (Blinova, 2021). While multimodal instruction incorporating gestures, facial expressions, and prosody has been shown to improve listening comprehension, such gains emerge more gradually than those seen in expressive skills (Kang, 2006; Zhang et al., 2023). Pragmatic and social perception skills pose an additional layer of difficulty. Detecting interlocutors' confusion or misunderstanding depends on subtle cultural and contextual cues, which EFL learners often misinterpret due to pragmatic transfer from their first language (Altakhaineh & Zibin, 2014; Huwari & Al-Shboul, 2015). These skills are further complicated by situational factors such as rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, lexical overload, and lack of background knowledge, which increase cognitive load and impede accurate perception (Fujita, 2021; Sahin, 2015). Consequently, perceptual and pragmatic gains typically require more sustained and targeted training than expressive skills, explaining the comparatively smaller effect sizes observed in these sub-dimensions.

Beyond listening and perception, other competencies also improved in ways consistent with broader experiential learning literature. Gains in vocabulary and grammar usage align with findings by García-Sánchez and Luján-García (2016), who reported that interactive

learning activities enhance intrinsic motivation and communicative competence. Increased clarity and vocal effectiveness echo Kolotouchkina et al. (2020), who identified experiential learning as a key factor in strengthening essential oral communication abilities. Enhanced non-verbal communication skills mirror Maharsi's (2017) results, emphasizing the role of simulations and reflective practice in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. Finally, the improved ability to distinguish between informative and persuasive purposes aligns with Bonesso et al. (2015), who linked experiential learning to the integration of cognitive and social competencies, while pragmatic skills like giving directions and performing social rituals reflect similar outcomes reported by Lubis et al. (2018).

Taken together, these findings provide compelling evidence for the efficacy of experiential learning in developing a broad spectrum of communicative competencies, particularly in expressive and interactional domains. While receptive and social-perceptual skills showed comparatively smaller gains, the intervention nonetheless produced meaningful improvements, suggesting that continued exposure and targeted training in these areas could yield further benefits over time.

Qualitative Data Analysis Results

To further confirm the positive changes in students' communication competencies and uncover additional insights, participants' feedback reports were analyzed. The themes and sub-themes from responses to Q1 ('What progress have you made concerning language proficiency, communication skills, and critical thinking?') are summarized in Table 4, while those from responses to Q2 ('What about this course impressed you most?') are presented in Table 5.

The qualitative coding results from participants' responses to Q1 (See Table 4) highlight improvements across three major areas: Language Proficiency, Communication Skills, and Critical Thinking. Below are more details of the findings:

Language Proficiency: Participants reported notable enhancements in their ability to express themselves orally, expanding their vocabulary and improving grammar. They also gained confidence in speaking English, demonstrated better listening comprehension, and showed appropriate language use in various contexts. Below is an example from a student:

"Throughout this English course, I have seen noticeable progress in expressing myself in English. One of the biggest changes is that I now feel more confident presenting academic topics in English. In the past, I might have felt hesitant or nervous, but now I'm able to express my thoughts with greater confidence. Besides improving my speaking skills, I have also enhanced my listening abilities, which helps me understand others more effectively." ―S98

Communication Skills: Progress in communication skills included higher-quality interactions and increased confidence and courage in communicating in English. Active listening development was emphasized, along with appropriate responses during communication. Participants also highlighted cultural understanding, flexibility in situational communication, perspective-taking, and improved collaboration skills. Strengthened teamwork

awareness and non-verbal communication were additional outcomes, fostering stronger connections and more effective teamwork. For example:

> "In the past English learning, I often studied alone silently and lacked communication with others. Learning English is often just a task for me, so this class made me feel heavy and challenging at the beginning. I was afraid to answer questions in class and worried about expressing mistakes. However, fear cannot change the status quo. In class, we were divided into many groups and had to discuss English problems with unfamiliar classmates. We started by clarifying the problem, then thinking about solutions, and finally focusing on oral expression. This process allowed me to gradually adapt to communicating with others, bravely express my own opinions, and gradually overcome the fear of making mistakes." －S113

Critical Thinking: Participants developed critical thinking through multi-angle considerations, enhanced analytical skills, and improved problem-solving and logical thinking. Independent and dialectical thinking were also strengthened, with improved argumentation skills and adaptability in thinking. These advancements indicate a broader ability to assess and approach problems from diverse perspectives. Below are two examples:

> "This course has facilitated my ability to analyze and evaluate information during discussions and debates, exercising my critical thinking. Furthermore, I have learned how to clearly express my opinions and provide compelling evidence or reasons to support them, further enhancing my logical thinking and argumentation skills. " －S137

> "English learning has taught me to think from different perspectives and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of various viewpoints so that I can make more informed decisions." －S141

The qualitative coding results from participants' responses to Q2 (see Table 5) confirm improvements in students' communication competencies under the theme "Learning Outcomes." Additionally, four other themes—Instructor, Group Dynamics, Content Focus, and Learning Environment—emerged as key factors contributing to the significant pre-post changes, addressing RQ2 (What factors within the experiential learning process have the greatest influence on participants' EFL communication competencies development?). Detailed information is provided below.

Learning Outcomes: Participants reported improvements in communication, presentation, listening, and problem-solving skills. They gained confidence in English contexts, expanded their comfort zones, and increased self-awareness. Motivation for learning English grew, alongside an enhanced understanding and appreciation of different cultures. Below are two examples:

> "The interactive group activities have increased my communication and mutual assistance with classmates, and my spoken English ability has greatly improved in the collaborative atmosphere. It has been a truly immersive experience that has not only improved my language skills but has also broadened my cultural understanding." －S20

> "I would like to thank this course. It not only improved my English level, but

more importantly, it taught me how to be a better listener and communicator. I believe these skills will accompany me throughout my life and help me succeed in my future study and work." －S168

Instructor: The instructor was praised for her amiable demeanor, humor, patience, and encouragement. She demonstrated expertise in English, effectively modeled speaking, and interacted with students in a way that made them think in English. The instructor's positive attitude and rigorous teaching contributed to students' increased interest and confidence in learning English. Below are two examples:

"In class, we can freely express our own opinions. The teacher will tolerate our imperfections and give advice. This behavior invisibly strengthens my self-confidence and allows me to stand up and communicate with the teacher. Falling in love with oral English class is a very simple thing." －S29

"What impressed me most about this course was Miss Han's profound knowledge and humor, which allowed us to really participate in the class, made the learning process pleasant and effective, and cultivated our oral communication skills. Let's focus not only on language skills, but also on cultural understanding and critical thinking." －S32

Group Dynamics: Students valued collaboration during group activities and

Table 4

Themes and Sub-Themes of the Answers to Q1

Themes	Sub-Themes	Excerpts
Language Proficiency	Enhanced Oral Expression	My language proficiency has vastly improved allowing me to express myself more clearly and confidently (S6)
	Expanded Vocabulary	Through continuous practice in class I have expanded my vocabulary (S4)
	Gained Confidence in Speaking English	Through these interactions I learned how to express myself more fluently and confidently (S2)
	Grammar Enhancement	My grammar have also improved significantly making me more confident in communicating with people (S11)
	Improved Listening Comprehension	When I first started I found it challenging to keep up with conversations and express my thoughts clearly However through practice and active participation in class I have significantly improved my listening (S19)
	Appropriate Language Use	I used to struggle with simple sentences but now I can express my thoughts freely and clearly I can handle various topics like daily life hobbies and even some academic discussions (S24)
Communication Skills	Enhanced Quality of Interaction	I can express my thoughts more clearly and engage in conversations with others more comfortably (S39)
	More Confidence & Courage to Communicate in English	Now I can communicate in English more confidently express my thoughts and better understand others' viewpoints (S47)
	Active Listening Development	In terms of communication skills I have learned the importance of listening and understanding body language (S48)
	Improved Listening Comprehension	I'm now able to understand the other person's meaning more quickly thereby reducing misunderstandings and obstacles in communication (S49)
	Appropriate Responding in Communication	In terms of communication skills I am able to respond more precisely and understand different types of inquiries better (S56)
	Cultural Understanding	I understand the communication habits and etiquette under different cultural backgrounds (S51)
	Situational Communication Flexibility	I've developed a better sense of when to speak and when to listen (S55)
	Perspective Taking	I've learned to articulate my ideas more effectively and to listen to others' perspectives (S46)
	Strengthened Collaboration Skills	I learned the importance of effective communication and the power of collaboration (S132)
	Stronger Connection	I realize that good conversations involve engaging with the other person This has helped

Themes	Sub-Themes	Excerpts
		me build stronger connections with people (S48)
	Enhanced Teamwork Awareness	We often complete tasks in group cooperation which has also improved my teamwork and communication skills (S79)
	Non-Verbal Communication	I learned how to listen to others more effectively and how to use nonverbal information to enhance communication (S9)
Critical Thinking	Multi-Angle Considerations	I can analyze problems from multiple angles and provide more comprehensive answers (S56)
	Enhanced Analytical Skills	I've cultivated a deeper analytical ability distinguishing between truth and misconception with greater ease (S54)
	Enhanced Critical Thinking	Through debates and discussions I've learned to analyze information form opinions and articulate my thoughts more clearly (S55)
	Independent Thinking	I can also engage in self-reflection through conversation and no longer blindly accept information (S13)
	Improved Argumentation skills	I have learned how to clearly express my opinions and provide compelling evidence or reasons to support them further enhancing my logical thinking and argumentation skills (S137)
	Improved Problem-Solving Skills	Whenever I try to express complex ideas in English I would organize my language more carefully which has strengthened my logical thinking and problem-solving skills (S138)
	Improved Logical Thinking	English learning has taught me to think from different perspectives and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of various viewpoints so that I can make more informed decisions (S141)
	Dialectical Thinking	In terms of critical thinking I have improved the flexibility and adaptability of thinking (S51)
	Improved Flexibility and Adaptability in Thinking Perspective Taking	Conversational learning makes me more focused on thinking from the other person's point of view which helps me understand others better (S1)

Table 5

Themes and Sub-Themes of the Answers to Q2

Themes	Sub-themes	Explanations
Learning Outcomes	Skill Development	Development of communication presentation listening and problem-solving skills
	Confidence Building	Building confidence and adaptability in English contexts
	Personal Growth	Personal growth comfort zone expansion and self-awareness
	Motivation and Enthusiasm	Increased motivation and enthusiasm for learning English

Themes	Sub-themes	Explanations
	Cultural Awareness	Enhanced cultural understanding and appreciation
Instructor	Teaching Style	Amiable demeanor humor patience and encouragement
	Expertise	Expertise in English modeling in English speaking interaction with students and effective teaching methods
	Attitude	Positive upright views rigorous teaching attitude and passion for teaching
	Impact	Encouragement leading to interest in English and building confidence
Group Dynamics	Collaboration	Collaboration and teamwork in group activities and presentations
	Communication	Active participation and responsiveness within the group
	Support	Supportive environment and peer-to-peer interaction
	Engagement	Engagement with classmates during discussions and debates
	Diversity	Diverse perspectives and creativity brought by group members
	Critical Thinking	Encouragement of critical thinking and perspective-taking
Content Focus	Experiential Learning Activities	Use of experiential learning activities like presentations role-playing and debates
	Diverse Topics	Discussion of diverse topics such as stereotypes food habits and global issues
	Real-Life Applications	Focus on real-life communication scenarios and examples
	Cultural Exploration	Exploration of Chinese culture customs and traditions in English
Learning Environment	Supportive Atmosphere	Supportive and engaging environment with a sense of safety and community
	Interactive Learning	Interactive and immersive learning environment with active participation
	Positive Atmosphere	Positive encouraging and relaxing atmosphere
	Opportunities for Practice	Opportunities for practice expression and real-time conversational practice
	Feedback and Encouragement	Valuable feedback from instructors and classmates

presentations, contributing to the development of communication skills. There was active participation, peer support, and engagement in discussions and debates. Diverse perspectives from group members enriched the learning experience, which results in critical thinking and perspective-taking. Below are two examples:

"One aspect of this course that left a lasting impression on me was the emphasis on collaborative learning. We were divided into different groups to discuss different aspects of the topics. Working closely with my classmates allowed me to learn from their diverse backgrounds and experience, which greatly expanded my worldview. The collaborative projects and group discussions fostered a sense of community and

camaraderie among us." －S19

> "What impressed me most in this course was teamwork. I learned a lot from teamwork. I learned to listen and respect the opinions of others, which made me understand the value of everyone on the team." －S52

Content Focus: Experiential learning activities, such as presentations, role-playing, and debates, helped students apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Diverse topics, such as stereotypes, dreams, and food issues, were impressive. Real-life communication scenarios and the exploration of Chinese culture in English were central to the course. For example:

> "The most memorable aspect of this course for me has been the focus on stereotypes. It has made me aware of many biases that are often ignored in reality, broadening my horizons and proving to be extremely valuable." －S46

> "The most memorable part of this course for me was the lesson on the cuisines of various provinces in China. As a Cantonese, I listened to other groups' introductions to Guangdong food, which not only awakened my nostalgia but also taught me how to introduce Cantonese cuisine in English." －S122

Learning Environment: The classroom atmosphere was supportive and engaging, allowing students to feel safe to participate. Interactive learning kept students engaged, and the positive atmosphere helped reduce anxiety. Students had opportunities for real-time practice and received valuable feedback from both instructors and classmates. Below are three examples:

> "One of the most impressive parts of this course has been the friendly environment. The group activities and discussions created a safe space for us to practice without feeling judged. I appreciated how we could share our experiences and learn from each other. This not only improved our language skills but also built a sense of community among us." －S48

> "What really blew my mind in this course was the atmosphere in the class. It was amazing!" －S128

Discussion of Qualitative Data Analyses Results

The qualitative data provided more evidence of improvements in participants' EFL communication competencies, expanding upon the findings of the quantitative study. These results are examined under the themes of Learning Outcomes and the key contributing factors: Instructor, Group Dynamics, Content Focus, and Learning Environment.

Learning Outcomes

The qualitative data presented improvements in communication competencies under the theme "Learning Outcomes." These included advancements in communication, presentation, listening, and problem-solving skills, alongside cultural appreciation, increased confidence and adaptability to English contexts, and motivation, and enthusiasm for learning English. Besides, participants' reflections on real-world tasks indicated that the experiential learning activities, such as group presentations, role-playing and debates, encouraged them to

open their mouths and express their ideas bravely. This confirms the findings of the quantitative study.

In addition, the postgraduates demonstrated advancements in critical thinking through multi-angle considerations, enhanced analytical and problem-solving skills, and improved logical reasoning. The qualitative results also revealed growth in independent and dialectical thinking, argumentation, and adaptability. This aligns with findings by Yang and Gamble (2013), who highlighted that critical thinking-focused activities, such as debates and peer critiques, enhance both language proficiency and analytical abilities in EFL learners. Similarly, Yaiche (2021) argued that guided discovery methods foster critical thinking, autonomy, and reflective learning in EFL contexts. Besides, this is also consistent with Zhao et al. (2016), who identified that teacher questioning and cooperative learning strategies enhance critical thinking by promoting reflection and engagement.

Key Factors Contributing to Outcomes

Instructor

The instructor's positive demeanor, encouragement, and ability to model effective English use were crucial in fostering student growth. Her focus on providing support and engaging students in critical reflection aligns with findings by Yang and Gamble (2013), who demonstrated that instructors who integrate critical thinking-focused strategies, such as peer critiques and debates, significantly improve learners' cognitive engagement and language proficiency. Moreover, Ferdoush and Jahan (2024) emphasized that teacher-led questioning and scaffolding can overcome institutional barriers and promote deeper critical thinking in EFL classrooms.

Group Dynamics

Collaborative activities, such as group discussions, presentations, and debates, fostered diverse perspectives and critical dialogue among participants. These findings align with Chen and Preston (2021), who demonstrated that team-based learning enhances collaboration and critical thinking. Additionally, Yaiche (2021) found that guided discovery methods in group settings promote autonomy, reflection, and argumentation skills. The rich exchanges within collaborative tasks also reflect the views of Pham (2017), who noted that peer-led group discussions offer students a valuable opportunity to enhance various skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving, while also exposing them to diverse personalities and perspectives.

Content Focus

The integration of culturally relevant topics and experiential learning activities, allowed students to apply their knowledge to real-world contexts and develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, enhancing both their linguistic and intercultural competence. This supports the findings of Hitotuzi (2014), who demonstrated that task-based learning focused on real-life issues fosters analytical thinking and linguistic competence. Similarly, Liaw (2007) emphasized that content-based instruction enables learners to engage with language meaningfully while developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The relevance of

real-world issues in the learning process is further supported by Koukpossi et al. (2024), who highlighted that integrating practical, real-world scenarios enhances EFL learners' critical engagement and comprehension.

Learning Environment

A supportive and interactive classroom atmosphere encouraged active participation and reduced anxiety, fostering a safe space for critical engagement. Interactive methods, including real-time feedback from instructors and peers, align with the findings of Babu (2019), who emphasized that interactive environments enhance students' self-expression and critical thinking. Furthermore, Agustina et al. (2022) demonstrated that using supportive digital tools in interactive classrooms significantly enhances critical thinking and linguistic skills. Moreover, Minakova (2014) highlighted that environments that prioritize active learning and reflection lead to improvements in critical evaluation and logical reasoning in EFL contexts.

To sum up, the qualitative findings further support the effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing EFL communication competencies. The integration of supportive instruction, collaborative group dynamics, relevant content, and a positive learning environment contributed to participants' holistic development. These results provide strong evidence for the inclusion of experiential learning in EFL curricula, offering practical insights for educators seeking to foster deeper engagement and broader skill development in their students. The two datasets together answered RQ3 (How do the findings contribute to evaluating the effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing the EFL communication competencies of postgraduate students?).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Key Findings

This study examined the impact of experiential learning on postgraduate EFL students' communication competencies, focusing on language proficiency, communication skills, and critical thinking. The quantitative findings demonstrated significant improvements across all 19 sub-dimensions of communication competence. Notably, the greatest gains were observed in complex expressive skills, while comparatively smaller yet meaningful improvements were recorded in perceptive skills. These results highlight the effectiveness of experiential learning in fostering advanced communicative abilities among postgraduate learners and suggest the need for targeted strategies to further enhance perceptive components of communication.

The qualitative analysis confirmed the results of the quantitative study and highlighted critical thinking as another key learning outcome, including enhanced analytical reasoning, problem-solving, multi-angle considerations, and adaptability in thought processes. Participants also demonstrated increased cultural awareness and confidence, further illustrating the holistic benefits of experiential learning. Additionally, four key factors—Instructor, Group Dynamics, Content Focus, and Learning Environment—were found to contribute to these outcomes. These results reinforce the value of experiential learning as a transformative approach to developing communication competencies in EFL education.

Implications

Theoretical Implications: The results of this investigation contribute to the field of EFL education by providing empirical evidence in support of the experiential learning theory. By demonstrating the effectiveness of various experiential learning activities, this study affirms the applicability of this approach in improving postgraduates' EFL communication competencies. The findings suggest that EFL educators should consider integrating more experiential components into their teaching, as they are instrumental in fostering a deeper understanding and practical application of the target language.

Practical Implications: The practical implications of this research are multifaceted and offer valuable insights for educators, particularly those involved in training Chinese non-English major postgraduates. The five-task intervention strategies of Check-In, Homework Review, Tech-Assisted Topic Discussion, Pair or Group Work, and Oral Presentations can be adapted and implemented in various classroom settings to promote a dynamic and interactive learning environment. Educators are encouraged to use these strategies as a starting point for developing tailored interventions that cater to the specific needs and profiles of their students. By adopting the proposed intervention design, researchers and practitioners can embark on their own action research projects aimed at refining and expanding the communication competencies of EFL learners.

Methodological Implications: From a methodological standpoint, this study offers an experiential learning model for EFL education, particularly when investigating communication competencies. The dual approach of using both quantitative and qualitative methods provides a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The integration of surveys and feedback reports serves as a practical paradigm for other researchers seeking to explore complex linguistic phenomena. This study's methodological framework may inspire researchers to adopt similar approaches in their own investigations, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of empirical research in the field of applied linguistics.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contributions of this study in evaluating the efficacy of the Conversational English course through an experiential learning approach, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Notably, the survey employed in this research did not incorporate an assessment of critical thinking skills, relying solely on qualitative data to explore this aspect. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced a degree of bias into the findings.

For future studies, it would be beneficial to refine the survey instrument by integrating a critical thinking scale. This would enable a more comprehensive evaluation of EFL communication competencies, including dimensions such as problem-solving, argumentation, and adaptability, alongside traditional measures of linguistic proficiency and communication skills. The use of rubrics could provide a structured and transparent means of assessing these complex skills.

In addition to self-reported measures, future research could enhance the validity of the findings by incorporating objective tests as a complementary method for assessing students' communication competencies. These tests could include standardized assessments, performance-based evaluations, or peer and instructor evaluations to provide a more holistic view of the learners' abilities.

Acknowledgements

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