



The English Experience

An experiential approach to learning English

FOTOS: NATHAN SPEES

“Tell me and I’ll forget,
Show me and I may remember,
Involve me and I will understand.”
(Chinese Proverb)

Question:
What do you get when you combine outdoor and nature education, group building and leadership activities, and fun and laughter in an „All English, All-the-Time“ setting? Answer: A unique learning environment where students forget that they are learning and using English because they are engaged and enjoying themselves so much.

This is the goal of the OeAV English Experience programs: Freunde Treffen summer camp and SPOT Experience school program. Using a „hands-on learning“ teaching methodology, the educators guide the students through a program where they learn-by-doing and gain valuable skills along the way, and did we forget to mention that FUN is a big part of the experience?

The Traditional Model

Think about your own foreign language classes in school. Maybe it’s rather difficult to remember what you actually/learned in them or what you do remember is not very pleasant. It may have involved sitting in a classroom, listening to your teacher go on-and-on about the importance of grammar rules and learning loads of vocabulary; reading out-of-date and boring texts; translating words or sentences that

did not relate to your life; listening to recordings of hard-to-understand people talking; and on occasion you had the opportunity to speak or apply what you had learned.

Experiential Education Methodology and Language Application

Now, think about educational experiences (not necessarily just language classes) that you remember the most. Weren’t they experiences when you were involved and engaged? Weren’t they out-of-the-ordinary learning situations? Maybe, it was a field trip where you experienced the subject or topic: first-hand and all your senses were evoked. Maybe it was a special project that you worked on with a group of your peers. Maybe, it was something where you were able to use your own creativity and explore areas of interest, or perhaps you applied knowledge that you already had to real life situations. We believe that experiential learning opportunities provide a rich environment that helps students gain English competency while acquiring valuable life lessons. Each course is specifically designed around the learners’ needs and abilities and allows the language to come alive!

While certainly learning basic rules of a language and building vocabulary are valuable components of language acquisition, there are many languages theorists that suggest other means of learning a second

leadership

- Uses real life situations that should relate to the learner’s interests and their abilities

Possible Limitations

While there are many studies that support Task-based learning, there are critics who voice concern that it is not especially suitable for beginning learners. The staff of OeAV English Experience programs has found that the technique is effective with beginning, uninitiated learners as well, if activities are adapted so that the tasks increase in difficulty as the students’ proficiencies improve.

The Trick is...

The trick is to find creative ways to have the students use English while they are completing activities or tasks. Setting up situations where there is a positive reward or vice versa a negative consequence can be used to encourage speaking the language in a fun way. See the “Sinking Islands” example, where the students must pretend to be teams of international scientists and where there is a nasty disease that affects only German speakers and can lead to blindness. Certainly not all students will have equal English speaking skills (just as it is with physical ability or social aptitude) so finding an appropriate level and challenge for the activities and tasks is required.

Sinking Islands!

Example for merging English teaching with experiential education

Materials

- Rope or chalk to make island boundaries
- Sheets of paper (enough for each student to have one)

Setup

With ropes or chalk, create 2 small circles (each one large enough for half of the group to stand in) and one large circle (large enough for the entire group). Small circles should be about 2x as long away from the larger circle as they are

WEB-TIPPS

ASSOCIATION FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION (AEE)
www.aee.org

EBE - BRITISH COUNCIL - TEACHING ENGLISH:
A task-based approach
www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/task-based.shtml

LONGMAN - WHAT IS TASK-BASED LEARNING?
www.longman.com/teaching-tips/task-based-learning.html

■ **Activity**
Using a story, explain that 2 groups of international scientists have been researching the effects of global warming on a series of small islands in the Pacific. To their amazement, the sea level is rising much faster than they expected and soon the 2 small islands where they are working will be flooded. In order to escape from danger (not to mention the water is filled with hungry sharks!), they need to get both teams to safety on the big island. Each member receives a small raft boat that can only be placed in the water once (not moved) and will float away if it is not in constant contact with someone.

Other Rules

Students must communicate (in English) in order to come up with a solution and reach the final goal. If someone speaks a language other than English, then a penalty can be assigned of various degrees. If someone touches the water, then they will have to be taken back to the small islands for first aid treatment! A raft boat is left without contact, then it floats away (is taken). Rules must be applied carefully so as not to discourage the group’s overall success.

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Not Just a Language Course!

Having the students focus on and improve their English is a central focus of the English Experience programs, but it is not the only thing! The „subject matter English must be applicable to the students when they leave the program. Students might learn and explore how to survive in the woods by building an emergency shelter, plan a camping trip, or examine the health of a local creek. Activities that encourage students to work together, require good communication, and experience leadership are all standard in the curriculum and are valuable life skills for students to learn. Moreover, using the natural environment as a classroom awakens students’ senses to the world around them, builds appreciation for its uniqueness, and strives to develop a sense of responsibility in the participants.

The instructors also bring their own special touch to the program whether it be the use of international music, Native American storytelling, or adventure stories and skills which enhance the students’ experience.

“Involve Me and I Will Understand”

If we reflect on the Chinese proverb at the outset of this article, it reveals much about how we learn



SINKING ISLANDS.

and as teachers, how we should teach, if we consider the way that most people learn-by-doing and being personally and physically involved in an activity, then why not employ these techniques in learning a language? By using proven techniques of experiential education in an outdoor laboratory/classroom and focusing on the language as the means of communication, we can create a program where students learn through task-based learning, gain valuable skills along the way, and have a great time, too!

Stay Tunded!

Visit the Blog from the OeAV English Experience Camps I and II. After each of the camps in August 2007, we’ll post journal entries, photos, and stories about the camp – written of course by the students!
<http://oeav-englishcamp.blogspot.com>

DER AUTOR

NATHAN SPEES

SPOT Experience Trainer
Nathan is originally from North Carolina and has lived, studied, and worked in several countries and U.S. States, most recently Alaska. He has experience in working with youth spans 15 years in many different capacities. His working career started by teaching natural history and outdoor education at summer camps in North Carolina. He has worked with both youth and adults and developed numerous trainings and workshops on various environmental, group dynamic, and leadership topics. Currently, Nathan lives with his wife in Innsbruck, teaches English courses, and leads outdoor education programs for adults and youth in and around Innsbruck. His hobbies include backpacking, kayaking, and everything else that is outside!
Wohnort: Garz
Job: Ernährungshelfer;
Berg- und Schiffführer
Hobby: Kochen & Essen, Klettern, Klettern

WELCHER „SOUND OF NATURE“ GEFÄHRT DIR BESONDERS GUT?

One of my favorite sounds in nature is the sound of a flowing stream. I love to find a secluded place next to a stream in the mountains, take off my shoes, walk in the icy cold water, and then sit on a big rock or log and just listen to the sounds of the rushing water and watch all the life that revolves around a stream.

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