

Fostering Preservice Teachers' Professional Growth through Experiential Learning: Insights from Grammar Instruction

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Abstract

Teachers play a vital role in fostering learner agency to unlock students' full potential. Therefore, promoting the professional growth and development of student teachers through diverse approaches should be a core component of teacher education. This paper explores how experiential learning outside the formal curriculum facilitated different types of learning among a group of final-year preservice teachers. They participated in an experiential learning project aimed at developing online grammar teaching materials for primary and high school teachers worldwide. Throughout the project, the student teachers followed a four-stage experiential learning cycle and collaborated to develop innovative grammar teaching resources for school educators. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the study underscore the value of non-formal experiential learning in fostering student teachers' professional growth. The outcomes included improved knowledge of grammar pedagogy, a deeper understanding of learners' needs and grammar curriculum design, enhanced collegiality and increased confidence. This project has significant implications for teacher educators seeking to promote experiential learning as a strategy to enhance the professional competence, pedagogical knowledge and skills of prospective teachers for effective classroom instruction.

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Introduction

A central challenge for teacher educators is to create and implement effective practices that support student teachers in becoming independent professionals who can take control and responsibility for their own learning and teaching, thereby maximising

their potential. This paper explores strategies for teacher educators to address this challenge by fostering preservice teachers' professional growth through an experiential learning project. In this project, the participating student teachers collaborated to develop innovative grammar teaching resources for primary and high school teachers. This experience highlights how experiential approaches can help nurture future teachers to become responsible, motivated and reflective professionals who are capable of making informed decisions, acting purposefully and considering the impact of their actions.

This study focuses on grammar instruction as its area of exploration, recognising that grammar has long been a central component of language teaching. Traditionally, grammar teaching is viewed as the presentation and practice of discrete items, with sentence-based drills commonly found in grammar usage books and English classrooms (Lee & Collins, 2009; Richards & Reppen, 2014). However, learning sentence-level grammar does not necessarily provide students with the ability to use a language for communicative purposes, since communication occurs at the discourse level rather than at the sentence level (Celce-Murcia, 2002, 2016). Further, research on teacher cognition in grammar instruction has shown that while most teachers recognise the significance of grammar teaching, many lack sufficient subject knowledge or skills to effectively convey grammatical concepts (Andrews, 2007; Borg & Burns, 2008; Gordon & Harshbarger, 2003; Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010). Petraki and Hill (2011) reported that in a study of 72 ESL and EFL teachers, 47% expressed a lack of confidence in teaching grammar, citing reasons such as: (1) insufficient subject knowledge; (2) a lack of pedagogical knowledge; and (3) individual and contextual factors. These findings align with Andrews' (2007) research on teacher language awareness, which identified essential qualities for language teachers, including language proficiency, subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, understanding of learners, the ability to explain grammar simply, and the capacity to analyse grammatical issues, among other attributes.

There have been ongoing appeals to improve the professionalism of grammar teaching to optimise student learning and communicative competence (Jean & Simard, 2011). Perhaps the best arena for teacher professional learning to take place is in preservice preparation (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010), where a significant task for teacher educators is to enhance teacher candidates' language awareness and pedagogical content knowledge so as to prepare them to meet the language learning demands of school students and to become agents of change in schools (Marchel et al., 2011). Johnston and Goettsch (2000) recommend an integrated approach in English language teacher education programmes, in which explicit connections are made across grammatical knowledge, methodologies and articulations of how students

learn. Hands-on experience through experiential learning is one way to implement such an integrated approach, as well as to promote professional growth among student teachers. The experiential project described in this paper aims to provide an avenue, other than the compulsory school field experience, for prospective teachers to hone their independent learning and materials development skills.

Fostering Professional Growth through Experiential Learning

Learner agency, understood as “the feeling of ownership and sense of control that students have over their learning” (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021, p. 2), is considered central to learner development. With the capacity to act independently, make choices and manage their learning process, agentive learners are more likely to be engaged in learning activities, enjoy the learning process and increase their achievement (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). Central to agency is learner autonomy, empowering learners to lead their own learning (Gao, 2010). Learner agency can grow through collaboration with a shared purpose and through direct interactions within a community of stakeholders, including, among others, teacher educators, peers, school teachers and learners (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). In the learning process, instead of being a giver of knowledge, in this mode teachers play the role of a facilitator by providing opportunities for the learners to practise and enhance their agency by giving them voice and choice in what and how they learn. Having the competence to promote agency in school is an essential attribute of preservice teachers (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Pyhältö et al., 2014; Soini et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2005). One of the primary tasks for teacher education is to enable student teachers to become responsible, accountable and motivated professionals who can fulfil their teaching roles.

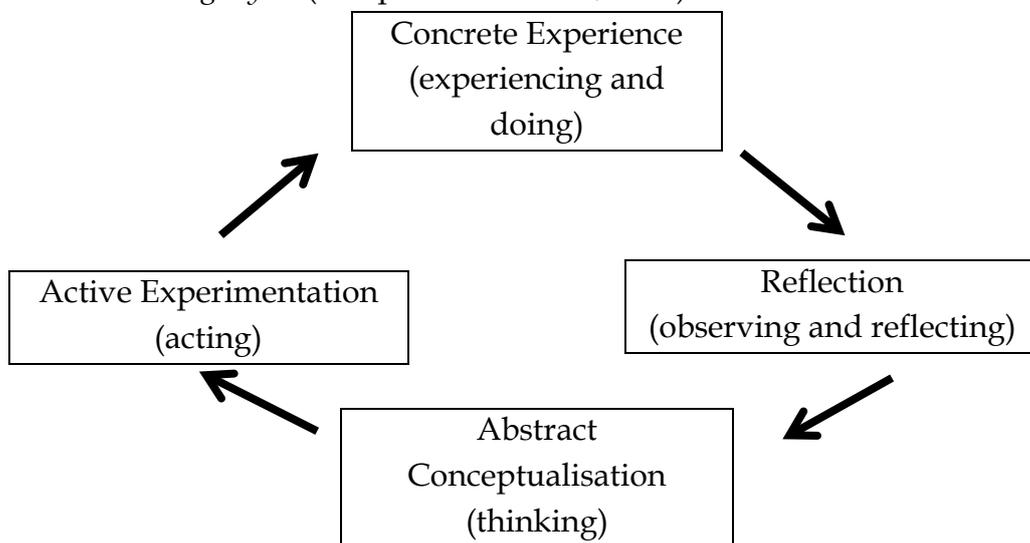
One way to support prospective teachers in developing professionalism is to offer them “affordances” (Mercer, 2011) – opportunities for learning – by engaging them in an experiential learning cycle outside the formal curriculum. Following the insights of distinguished scholars such as John Dewey, Carl Jung, Jean Piaget and Carl Rogers, who regarded “experience” as vital for human learning and development, teacher education programmes have emphasised effective teaching practices for aspiring educators. However, some student teachers have noted that, in certain situations, they are able to gain only minimal teaching experience during their school placements. The causes for this include inadequate time for school experience and practice, class teachers’ interference in their teaching, as well as students’ behaviour and their own previous knowledge and abilities (Taskin, 2006). To supplement compulsory teaching practices, experiential and service learning is considered a valuable additional component of preservice teacher education, allowing teacher candidates to deepen their subject and pedagogical knowledge as well as translate the theoretical and

pedagogical principles learnt at university into effective classroom practices (Bohon et al., 2017; Chambers & Lavery, 2012).

To promote the development of student teachers’ professionalism in grammar instruction, this project utilises Kolb’s (1984) learning model and seeks to investigate the potential benefits of experiential learning for preservice teachers in the realm of grammar teaching. Emphasising that experience is the foundation of learning and development, Kolb posits that learning is a process in which knowledge is constructed through the interplay of grasping and transforming experiences. In Kolb’s four-stage cyclical learning model, Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualisation represent two interrelated modes of grasping experiences, while Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation serve as two interconnected modes of transforming them (see Figure 1). Learners participate in learning activities and get hands-on experience at the stage of “Concrete Experience” (experiencing/doing). They observe others’ behaviours and reflect on their learning activities at the stage of “Reflection” (reflecting). They assimilate and distill their reflections into abstract concepts at the stage of “Abstract Conceptualisation” (thinking), and then apply them in “Active Experimentation” (acting).

Figure 1

Experiential Learning Cycle (Adapted from Kolb, 1984)



According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), learning is a dynamic and holistic process that emphasises the importance of feedback, relearning and the integration of existing beliefs into new concepts. Learning is driven by conflicts and resolutions between opposed modes of grasping and transforming experience (i.e., reflection and action). Additionally, learning involves synergistic interactions between the learner and the learning context, allowing for the assimilation of new experiences and the adaptation

of existing mental frameworks. Ultimately, learning is about creating knowledge rather than merely transmitting preexisting fixed ideas from the teacher to the learner. In other words, according to Kolb's experiential learning model, all learning is relearning, facilitated by a process that draws out, examines and tests learners' existing beliefs and ideas, which are then integrated into new, more refined ideas.

In teacher education, experiential learning that integrates service learning with formal academic studies can enhance student teachers' professional growth and provide them with practical experiences that extend beyond their comfort zones (Colby et al., 2009). Numerous studies have demonstrated that participation in experiential learning positively impacts preservice teachers academically, professionally, and personally (e.g., Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Gao, 2015; Hallman & Burdick, 2011; Kassabgy & El-Din, 2013; Pazilah et al., 2021). As a teacher educator, I seek to investigate the potential benefits of experiential learning for fostering professional growth among student teachers, particularly in the area of grammar instruction, in light of the longstanding challenges associated with grammar learning and teaching (Celce-Murcia, 2016; Ellis, 2006; Lee & Collins, 2009).

The Present Study

This project is an attempt to advance our knowledge of the impact of non-formal experiential learning on preservice teachers' professional growth, especially with regard to English grammar instruction. The research question is: How will preservice teachers benefit from engaging in a non-formal experiential project on the development of grammar teaching resources for school teachers? The study is significant as it will provide insights applicable to different subject areas.

Ethical approval was granted by the Human Ethics Review Committee of the author's university. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including the preservice teachers, the participating school and their students. GPT-4o mini was used for language enhancement in this paper.

Participants

Owing to limited project funding and the intensive supervision involved, the project recruited nine final-year student teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education in English Language programme at an education university in Hong Kong, with the author serving as their supervisor. The student teachers were aged between 21 and 24, with six specialising in the primary strand and three in the secondary strand. For deeper collaboration among the participating student teachers, they were divided into three teams, each containing two members from the primary strand and one from the secondary strand (see Table 1).

Table 1*Student Teachers' Demographic Backgrounds*

Participant (Pseudonym)	BEd Strand	School Education
Kelly	Primary	Hong Kong
Kate	Primary	Hong Kong
Wendy	Secondary	Hong Kong
Christy	Primary	Non-local
Yvonne	Primary	Non-local
Gordon	Secondary	Hong Kong
Helen	Primary	Hong Kong
Grace	Primary	Non-local
Rose	Secondary	Hong Kong

Three participants were non-local student teachers; one of these was from South Korea and two from mainland China. Despite the heterogeneity in their backgrounds, they all had in common the goal of advancing their grammar instruction competence through the project. They started the project with similar knowledge bases; all had completed one grammar course on subject knowledge and two courses on English language teaching methodology. Seven of the participants had completed an advanced course on English grammar, and all of them had completed the 14-week teaching practicum in local schools. Although they had all been encouraged to seek support from their university supervisors and school mentors during their teaching practice, some teacher candidates reported that they were not able to enlist as much support as they would have liked, partly because of the hectic schedules of the school teachers and university supervisors, and partly because of their superior authority. Further, there were no standards for the selection of school teachers to ensure quality mentorship. As a result, the quality of the teaching practicum that the preservice teachers received varied, and was sometimes considered less than satisfactory; this issue has also been noted by other researchers (e.g., Sariçoban, 2010; Taskin, 2006). Hence, one major aim of this experiential project is to strengthen prospective teachers' professional practice and provide them with affordances to enhance professional growth.

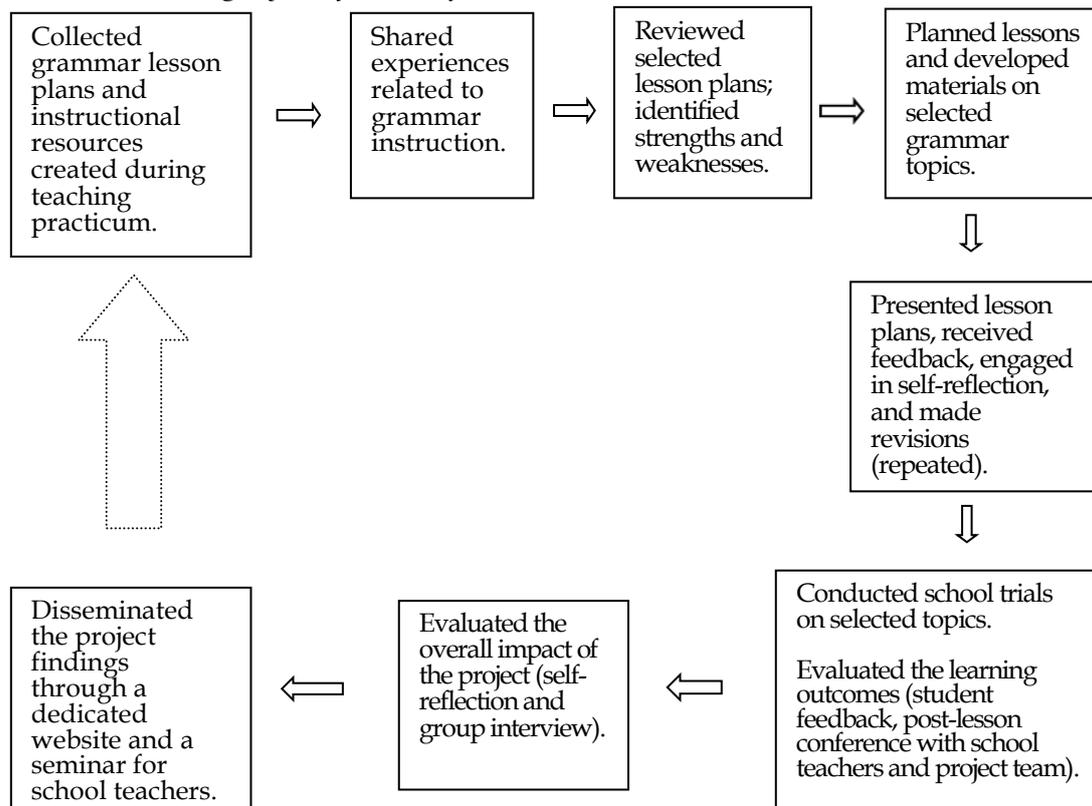
Apart from the project members, a Secondary 2 class of 17 students participated in the project as learners during two school trials, which were conducted by two preservice teachers and observed by other project members as well as the school's English language teacher.

Procedure

The project consisted of 12 meetings held over six months, with different foci at different stages. The key activities included: (1) collecting grammar lesson plans and instructional resources created by student teachers during their teaching practicum; (2) sharing

experiences related to grammar instruction; (3) reviewing selected lesson plans and materials; (4) planning lessons and developing materials on 12 specific grammar topics for various student levels (e.g., senior primary, junior secondary); (5) presenting lesson plans, receiving feedback, engaging in self-reflection, and making revisions; (6) conducting school trials and post-lesson evaluation; (7) evaluating the project; and (8) disseminating the project findings through a dedicated website and a public seminar for school teachers in Hong Kong (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Experiential Learning Cycle of the Project



The project was a modification of Kolb’s (1984) recursive cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. At the stage of Concrete Experience, the student teachers joined the 14-week teaching practicum to gain firsthand experience in classroom teaching. During the stage of Reflection and Observation, the nine participating student teachers held meetings with the author. In the first meeting, they shared their perceptions of grammar instruction, evaluated how grammar was taught and learnt in school, and reflected on the needs of school learners. All student teachers expressed a strong desire to enhance their grammar instruction. They identified several challenges encountered during the teaching practice, including a lack of innovation, limited knowledge of effective grammar pedagogy, and insufficient skills to address learners’ needs. Each of the three teams was then tasked with reviewing

four to five lesson plans on various grammar topics collected from their classmates. They identified strengths and weaknesses in these plans and collaboratively developed improved lesson plans and instructional materials tailored to different student levels based on learners' cognitive development stages. Each team took turns presenting their plans during the meetings. The other project members observed and actively discussed ways to revise the lesson designs. All the plans underwent multiple revisions and presentations before being finalised. According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), through ongoing observations, reflections and revisions, the student teachers are able to reconstruct their experiences, generate new knowledge and develop abstract concepts related to grammar teaching pedagogies during the stage of Abstract Conceptualisation.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional materials, Helen taught Conditional Type 1 and Wendy taught Conditional Type 2 to a Secondary 2 class of 17 students at a local school over two consecutive weeks, as part of the Active Experimentation stage. Prior to the lessons, rehearsals were conducted, and feedback for improvement was gathered from project members. At the conclusion of each school trial, feedback was collected from the learners through a questionnaire survey,¹ as well as from the project members and school teachers during a post-lesson conference. The plans were then further revised based on the comments received. All the finalised lesson plans and teaching resources were subsequently shared on a website for public access. The project outcomes were also shared with local English language teachers at a public seminar.

To address the research question regarding how the participating preservice teachers benefited from engaging in the experiential project, data were collected through various methods. One primary data source was the discussions held by the student teachers during their meetings, where project members engaged in the following activities: (1) discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the collected lesson plans, (2) modifying the plans on the selected grammar topics, (3) presenting their lesson plans and materials design, (4) receiving feedback from the project supervisor and fellow student teachers, and (5) making revisions. These steps were repeated for each grammar topic in a cyclical process until they were finalised. All meetings were videotaped, and a research assistant created detailed written records based on the recordings, which were subsequently cross-checked by all project members. Additionally, all drafts of the lesson plans were retained and examined to track the learning progress of the student teachers.

The student teachers' learning during the project was also gauged through an evaluation survey at the end of the study. They first provided individual written

feedback, and then a follow-up group interview was conducted. The questions aimed to examine the participants' perceptions of the project and their learning experiences. The survey comprised six open-ended questions adapted from the author's another study (Lee, 2019b) to explore participants' reflections on the experiential learning process, which encompasses the stages of "Concrete Experience" (experiencing/doing), "Reflection" (reflecting), "Abstract Conceptualisation" (thinking), and "Active Experimentation" (acting) (Kolb, 1984). The questions were:

1. What have you learnt from the project?
2. What do you think about the project meetings in which student teachers presented their lesson plans and teaching materials? Did the sharing and discussions contribute to your professional learning?
3. What do you think about the need to revise the lesson plans and teaching materials? What have you learnt from this process?
4. What have you learnt from the school trials?
5. How has the project changed you as an English teacher?
6. Have you noticed any changes in yourself since joining the project?

To supplement these open-ended responses, quantitative data were also collected in the survey. The project members were asked to rate three statements on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The statements were:

1. The project has enhanced my understanding of grammar teaching and learning.
2. The project has enabled me to develop better pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach English grammar.
3. My confidence in grammar teaching has been strengthened through the project.

Although the sample size was small, the quantitative data complemented the qualitative findings by quantifying the extent of agreement or disagreement among the student teachers regarding the specific statements related to their learning experiences. This offered insights into their general attitudes towards grammar instruction through experiential learning. Incorporating this combined approach could strengthen the study by enabling the project team to compare the quantitative results (e.g., mean scores) with the themes emerging from the qualitative responses. This mixed methods approach allowed the project team to have a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the study.

With regard to the qualitative data, the interviews were transcribed and converted into electronic files. The qualitative data collected from interviews and reflections were examined manually by a research assistant. Qualitative data reduction strategies were adopted to identify meaningful patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2024;

Nduagbo & Casale, 2023). The data were read through carefully. Open codes were used to develop categorised themes based on the student teachers' frequently used words and responses in their reflections and interviews, in order to identify patterns and better understand their relationships. Relevant data were selected and interpreted based on the research question. In addition, the frequencies of occurrence of some keywords were recorded to identify and quantify important concepts and themes so as to strengthen the overall analysis of the participants' experiential learning. The findings were cross-checked by the author, and any discrepancies observed were resolved together.

Owing to space limitations, the following discussion primarily focuses on the results of the post-project survey. It presents select insights from relevant meetings, lesson designs and pertinent post-lesson evaluations to illustrate how the student teachers demonstrated active engagement and experienced professional growth within the experiential learning cycle.

Results

Regarding the 4-point rating questions in the post-project survey, all nine participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- (1) My participation in the project has enhanced my understanding of grammar teaching and learning (5 strongly agreed, 4 agreed; mean = 3.56).
- (2) My confidence in grammar teaching has been strengthened through the project (5 strongly agreed, 4 agreed; mean = 3.56).
- (3) I think the project has enabled me to develop better pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach English grammar (8 strongly agreed, 1 agreed; mean = 3.89).

The participants' responses to the open-ended questions, which detailed their learning experiences and reflections on the project, supported the quantitative findings. Their responses were categorised into five major themes: (1) knowledge of grammar pedagogy, (2) understanding of learners, (3) insights into grammar curriculum design, (4) building collegiality, and (5) confidence enhancement. Table 2 summarises the percentage of participants who provided responses related to each theme. The findings indicate that knowledge of grammar pedagogy and understanding of learners were the most prominent themes, followed by collegiality, confidence enhancement and insights into grammar curriculum design. These will be discussed in detail below.

Table 2*Summary of Themes and Student Teachers' Responses*

Themes	No. of Participants	Percentage of Responses
Knowledge of grammar pedagogy	9	100.00
Understanding of learners	9	100.00
Insights into grammar curriculum design	4	44.44
Building collegiality	7	77.78
Confidence enhancement	5	55.56

Knowledge of Grammar Pedagogy

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that all the participating student teachers reported improvements in their knowledge and skills related to teaching grammar as a result of the project. The quantitative results reveal average mean scores of 3.56 and 3.89 (out of 4) for the statements “*My participation in the project has enhanced my understanding of grammar teaching and learning*” and “*I think the project has enabled me to develop better pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach English grammar*”, respectively. The techniques highlighted by the preservice teachers in their reflections included contextualisation, dictogloss, riddles, gamification, storytelling, song listening, YouTube video viewing and engaging in group activities. They valued the opportunity to apply these techniques in lesson planning and materials development, as well as to observe their implementation during the two school trials. This was exemplified by Christy’s comment regarding the lesson trial on the type 1 conditional:

I was impressed by how well the teacher taught, and the feedback from students was very positive. I observed that most students said they enjoyed the lesson and liked the way the teacher taught them. I was very inspired because our goal was to engage students and make the lesson enjoyable. I am quite impressed by that.

It appears that the participating student teachers generally became more aware of the importance of designing appropriate contexts for learners to explore the relationships between form, meaning and use, as suggested by various ELT scholars (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 2007; Lee, 2025; Tomlinson 2025; Ur, 2018, 2025). The student teachers remarked in the post-project survey that the arousal and maintenance of learner interest could be achieved through the inclusion of features such as appropriate input, meaningfulness, personalisation, authenticity, tasks with real outcomes, visual materials, multimedia resources and game-like activities. Most notably, instead of relying solely on traditional form-focused instruction, meaning making in context appeared to have become a key concept in the student teachers’ understanding of grammar instruction. In the post-lesson survey, the words “*meaning*” and “*meaningful*” appeared 18 times, and “*context(s)*” 17 times. The following comments illustrate the changes Wendy and Kate have made since participating in the experiential project:

I used to provide drills to my students, just asking them to remember all the rules and forms instead of the meaning. Now I realise that it was a kind of torture for my students to have my lessons like this. Now I start to reflect on how I can make the learning more interesting, and I really need to focus on the meanings and create meaningful contexts in which the grammar items can be used so that students can feel how language makes meaning in real contexts. (Wendy)

I learnt how to design authentic context and meaning-driven lesson plans. Before this project, what I thought about grammar teaching was to ask students to do grammar drills as long as they are familiar with the patterns of the grammar items. But actually this is not true. Students need to know how to learn grammar in a meaningful context and how to practise grammar items in an authentic context. (Kate)

Additionally, this experiential learning project helped the teacher candidates recognise the benefits of connecting grammar instruction to learners' daily experiences and designing communicative tasks that encourage students to use the target structure. This is evidenced in Helen's reflections on her development during the project: *"I tried to make the materials and themes more authentic so that students can feel the need to use the target grammar items in their daily life."*

The prospective teachers' learning was also reflected in the positive feedback received from school learners during the post-lesson evaluation. Nearly 90% of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed the first school tryout on Type 1 conditional, while 94% reported enjoyment for the second tryout on Type 2 conditional. They shared that they particularly appreciated the interactive activities, including video viewing, song listening, song rewriting, and creating imaginary sentences related to Harry Potter. In the post-lesson conferences, the school English language teacher echoed the students' positive feedback, noting that the language activities designed around "superstition" and Harry Potter's magic wand were effective for teaching the two types of conditional sentences. These encouraging comments motivated the teacher candidates to continue their journey in consolidating their understanding of grammar pedagogy and further developing their professional confidence and independence.

In addition, the experiential project allowed the preservice teachers to realise that flexibility is another important quality that teachers need to possess. Being flexible means incorporating feedback from students into teaching, as well as making materials and instructions accessible to students (Luk & Wong, 2010). These include on-the-spot adjustments based on specific classroom situations, commonly referred to as "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 2017; Ramsaroop & Petersen, 2020). The lesson trials helped the student teachers realise that lesson plans serve as guides in the real

classroom, and that unforeseen obstacles may emerge, necessitating on-the-spot adjustments to the plan. The following remarks reflect Helen's and Wendy's deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of grammar teaching and learning through the project. It is encouraging that the student teachers have gained practical insights into how to respond to students' feedback on their grammar instruction through the experiential project.

Teachers have to predict students' responses in order to make the lesson more fun and suitable. Some students' responses were really surprising to me while I was teaching Type 1 conditional sentences. Some of their ideas were really creative. Teachers have to figure out how to respond. To me, teacher-student relationship also accounts for lesson planning, because you cannot simply develop your lesson without considering students' responses. (Helen)

To me, I think lesson plans are only backups. Plans are needed, because we need some directions to conduct lessons. But no plan is perfect. In a real classroom, teaching is very dynamic. There may be a lot of variables, like students' conditions and their previous knowledge. I think teachers have to be flexible when presenting the lessons. (Wendy)

Understanding of Learners

The present project included regular meetings where each group took turns presenting their lesson plans, conducting microteaching, and receiving feedback from their peers. As a result, all the student teachers had the opportunity to observe planned lessons and experience the challenges faced by learners while acting as students. Additionally, they had the opportunity to implement and observe school tryouts, which increased their awareness of how students learn grammar in real classroom settings. Consequently, all the nine student candidates reported that they had a better understanding of learner needs as a result of the project. The following reflections show how Helen learnt to perceive learning from her students' perspectives:

The meetings allowed us to experience the lessons as students, which helped bring more variation and improvement to the plans. Usually when we plan a lesson, we only think ... from a teacher's point of view, but during the meetings, when we sat here and listened to the lesson plans presented, we could really experience the lesson as students and see if the lesson works or not. I also learnt how to make a lesson suitable for students with different learning styles and of different levels, and how to gradually increase the level of difficulty on a grammar topic.

An example demonstrating how the preservice teachers learnt to adopt the students' perspective is reflected in Wendy's comments during a meeting regarding the selection of the song "*If I Were a Boy*" for teaching the second conditional. While she appreciated the use of songs, she expressed concern that the selected song might be too complex for young learners to understand, as it revolves around relationships and a woman's frustration with being mistreated by a partner. Wendy considered children's cognitive development and suggested replacing it with a more suitable song for school learners. Consequently, the group-in-charge selected the song "*If I Had a Million Dollars*" instead.

Building on this, several other examples further illustrate the prospective teachers' enhanced awareness of learner needs through the suggested amendments to lesson plans during the project meetings. For teaching the past tense, Grace proposed using visual aids such as video clips or pictures depicting major events in a celebrity's life to create a slideshow. In the instruction on the present tense, Helen emphasised the importance of developing learners' critical thinking by suggesting that teachers ask students to identify the tense used in a selected song, followed by open-ended questions about why the present tense is used. This approach aimed to help students understand the meaning and use of the present tense through critical engagement.

Insights into Grammar Curriculum Design

In consideration of the horizontal and vertical curricula (Curriculum Development Council, 2017; Lee, 2016), each group was tasked with designing lesson plans and teaching materials on their selected grammar topics tailored for students with varying English proficiency levels and across different key stages. This approach aimed to facilitate school learners' progression from their existing knowledge to the construction of new knowledge at different learning phases (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). For instance, for the instruction of the determiners "*few*" and "*little*", Kelly's team created a fairy tale that incorporates the target language items for senior primary children. The students are then tasked with comparing, contrasting, classifying and generalising the usages of the two determiners, as well as writing a dialogue to express their wishes to a fairy. In contrast, the lesson design for junior senior students builds on their prior learning and requires them to distinguish between "*few*", "*a few*", "*little*" and "*a little*" in the context of a school anniversary. They are subsequently asked to write a proposal to the school principal regarding a class activity for the anniversary, outlining the materials needed and the rationale behind their suggestions. By collaboratively designing grammar lessons for learners at different key stages with team members from various study strands (primary and secondary), the student teachers gained a deeper understanding of curriculum design across different

learning phases and developed skills in scaffolding learners' prior knowledge to enhance their learning.

Additionally, some of the student teachers adopted a language-across-the-curriculum approach, as promoted by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), to contextualise grammar instruction while fostering a deeper understanding of academic subjects in line with students' key learning stages. For example, Grace's and Gordon's teams integrated scientific concepts such as the "water cycle" and the "respiratory system" into their instruction on the "present tense" and "subject-verb agreement" for junior secondary students. In contrast, daily topics such as "weekly activities" and "habitual actions and hobbies" were selected for primary children.

As shown in Table 2, four participants (44.44%) expressed positive feedback on their enhanced understanding of grammar curriculum design in the post-project survey. The findings also revealed that the prospective teachers recognised the importance of designing a grammar curriculum geared to learners' needs and interests. The word "interesting" appeared 18 times, "level(s)" (e.g., *students' levels*, *level of difficulty* etc.) was mentioned 10 times, and "creative(ly)" was noted eight times in the survey. The teacher candidates indicated the necessity to use a wide variety of multimedia resources, such as songs, videos, riddles and games, to engage students. Helen placed a high value on her progress in adapting lessons to accommodate students with varying learning styles and levels, as well as in gradually increasing the difficulty of the material. Grace appreciated the collaboration between the primary and secondary strands within each group, which helped them learn how to create lesson plans tailored for different age groups in diverse ways. Yvonne also commented on her change in teaching beliefs since joining the project:

Before the project, I always thought that I could find materials on websites easily, but after this project, I started to realise that ... teachers have to modify them a lot according to students' levels or culture background. We need to think about what really suits our students' needs. I learnt about how to modify the lesson plans according to students' previous knowledge and students' levels.

In summary, this experiential learning project allowed the student teachers to design a horizontal curriculum that addressed learners' abilities and interests, as well as a vertical curriculum that connected grammatical knowledge and skills from one lesson to the next, and across different year groups, based on the learners' language development sequence.

Building Collegiality

As shown in Table 2, seven participants (77.78%) of the prospective teachers emphasised the importance of peer support in their professional learning throughout the project. Unlike the teaching practicum, which involves formal assessment, authority and a solitary learning process, this experiential project created a non-threatening environment for the student teachers to engage in peer coaching “*without hurting others*” (as Rose put it) under the guidance of the author as the project supervisor during the 12 regular meetings as well as the two school trials. These discussions and observations fostered a sense of the need for self-improvement and encouraged the design of student-oriented lessons. Christy provided the following reflective comments about how peer collaboration and modeling enriched her learning experience:

Through discussions and sharing, I discovered how others design their lessons, how they implement interesting media resources creatively into the grammar lesson. The experience made me reflect on my own lesson design and eventually make progress. I learnt a lot from my peers about their creative ideas... I also benefit from modifying my own lesson plans with the comments from my peers.

The lesson-plan discussions provided a useful platform for the student teachers to exchange ideas and improve their lesson designs. For instance, for the instruction on subject-verb agreement, Gordon initially chose the story “*The Lion and the Mouse*” to help students identify the relationship between the subject and the action verb. Kate provided a helpful comment regarding his choice of genre:

I am not sure if it is suitable to teach the present tense using the story genre for students who already have knowledge of the past tense. They are familiar with using the past tense to write stories, but your story uses the present tense.

In response to Kate’s feedback, Gordon selected a more appropriate genre and made the following response at a subsequent meeting, highlighting the value of peer support:

In the previous plan, a story about a lion was used. But since the comment was that the past tense rather than the present tense should be used in a story, I have changed the input to a text about science.

The opportunity to discuss teaching issues openly with peers in a non-threatening environment was considered valuable for the preservice teachers’ future careers. Kate

compared the peer discussions from the project with those at her placement school during her practicum, expressing a greater appreciation for the former:

The weekly meetings are useful for us to share ideas on the lesson plans and learn from each other. The practice is quite similar to the co-planning meetings with other teachers when we work in the school in the near future. It makes the whole project especially meaningful. Actually, I had the co-planning meeting during the field experience with other English teachers, and their discussions were not as useful and professional as the discussions we had in our project. Sometimes they just focused on some minor points.

Effective teamwork and collaborative practice are recognised as crucial factors that enhance student teachers' capacity to develop professionalism (Soini et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2005). The experiential project in question offered numerous peer learning opportunities that contributed to the development of prospective teachers' confidence and sense of professional competence.

Confidence Enhancement

Professional confidence is viewed as a crucial disposition that enhances student teachers' capacity to perform effectively and independently in their teaching roles (Turnbull, 2005). Participation in this project was found to have increased the participants' self-esteem and self-efficacy. All nine of the participating student teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "*My confidence in grammar teaching has been strengthened through the project*", achieving an average mean score of 3.56 out of 4. The reported increases in confidence from the quantitative survey aligned with the theme of confidence enhancement identified in the open-ended responses, demonstrating consistency between both data types. Five participants (55.56%) explicitly emphasised their increased confidence in their post-survey reflections and interviews (see Table 2), as illustrated by their comments:

The practice in the weekly meetings equips me to plan and present logically and confidently. (Kelly)

I become more confident in applying what I have learnt in grammar teaching. Before the project, I seldom used dictogloss in my teaching, but after this project I learnt more creative ideas. The project motivated me to find more creative teaching ideas. (Christy)

Related to confidence is efficiency. Through frequent practice in lesson planning and ongoing discussions, the student teachers appeared to develop expertise in creating

effective grammar lessons and providing prompt, constructive feedback to one another. Both Kelly and Kate suggested that their professional learning during the project— such as exploring effective lesson planning, experimenting with diverse teaching resources, developing strategies to address learner diversity, and paying attention to essential details—may have contributed to their successful job applications in teaching. Kate compared her professional development in the experiential project to her teaching practicum, noting that, in addition to enriching her professional knowledge and skills, the project had made her more open to accepting and initiating change:

Throughout the revisions, we have learnt to accept others' opinions. I had a co-planning meeting during the field experience with other English teachers ... A lot of teachers in school just took what they already had for granted. They were not willing to change ... because they think it would be too troublesome. In this project, I learnt how to cater for students' needs in different ways, for example, including videos and songs as the comprehensible input. Actually, I tried out some plans during my second [job] interview. They were so surprised and amazed that I could use songs in such a meaningful way, and use videos to cater to students' needs... So I can say that this project has given me a job.

Discussion

Consonant with previous studies (e.g., Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Hallman & Burdick, 2011; Pazilah et al., 2021; Russell-Bowie, 2013), the post-project survey results suggest that experiential learning is beneficial for preservice teachers' professional enrichment in multiple aspects, including improved knowledge of grammar pedagogy, a deeper understanding of learners, insights into grammar curriculum design, collegiality building and confidence enhancement.

Despite the challenges often encountered by school teachers when teaching grammar (Widodo, 2006), all the participating preservice teachers reported that they gained improved knowledge and skills for teaching grammar through the experiential learning cycle. By engaging in the processes of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting within the project, the young prospective teachers appeared to develop a better understanding of various approaches to effective grammar instruction. This was evident in their reflections and interviews, as well as in the improvements observed in their lesson plans across different drafts. This experiential learning experience appeared to discourage them from relying solely on the traditional, form-focused methods of grammar teaching that they had been exposed to as learners in school. The experiential learning process allowed them to critically examine their existing knowledge and construct new knowledge and skills through observation, reflection,

consideration of alternatives and experimentation. There is evidence suggesting that the student teachers progressed from the stage of declarative knowledge development to that of automatised procedural knowledge (DeKeyser, 2003; Lee, 2019b). They appeared to effectively connect the declarative knowledge about factual and theoretical information gained from their university grammar and pedagogy courses to the practical steps involved in developing materials and implementing pedagogical skills required for real classroom teaching (procedural knowledge). It seems that their consistent engagement within the experiential learning cycle helped them become more familiar with and efficient at designing grammar lessons (automatic knowledge) (Salaberry, 2018), which may give them an advantage in developing expertise in grammar instruction compared to many of their peers. The experiential learning project served as a valuable approach to supporting the professional development of the student teachers.

Additionally, the experiential project supported the preservice teachers in gaining a deeper understanding of learner needs and recognising the importance of flexibility when addressing students' learning challenges. Similar to other experiential learning projects (e.g., Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Coffey & Lavery, 2015; Lee, 2019a, 2019b; Pazilah et al., 2021), the present project appears to have helped the participating student teachers develop greater empathy and view learning from their students' perspectives. This empathetic approach could help them establish stronger rapport with future students, which plays a crucial role in promoting students' intrinsic motivation. Further, the student teachers started to sharpen their observation skills and develop reflection-in-action (Ramsaroop & Petersen, 2020; Schön, 2017), enabling them to make informed judgements about how to respond to students' reactions and to adapt their lessons accordingly. As Harmer (2007, p. 24) puts it, "What often marks one teacher out from another is how they react to different events in the classroom as the lesson proceeds". The student teachers' reflections demonstrate their awareness of the importance of flexibility as a key attribute of effective teaching.

Regarding insights into grammar curriculum design, this experiential learning project enabled the prospective teachers to create a horizontal curriculum that focused on students' abilities and interests, alongside a vertical curriculum that connected grammatical knowledge and skills from one lesson to the next and across different year levels, aligned with students' language development stages. This approach offers a way to address ongoing criticisms of many grammar textbooks, which frequently rely on similar content, exercises and teaching methods across different student groups without adequately considering individual learning differences and cognitive development (Lee, 2016).

Collegiality is recognised as an essential component in enhancing teacher professionalism, commitment, enthusiasm and student performance (Shah, 2012; Soini et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2005). Hsu (2005) emphasises the importance of peer relationships and peer encouragement as key sources of social support that contribute to the growth of professionalism. This perspective aligns with the findings from the current project, where many participating student teachers placed high value on collegiality and shared insights on how it contributed to their professional growth. This experiential project offered ample opportunities for peer learning, including collaborative lesson development on selected topics, group presentations with peer feedback during regular meetings, and peer observations followed by post-lesson feedback during school trials. Consistent with previous studies which suggest that community service-learning activities can enhance participants' social and personal skills and foster teamwork (e.g., Lee, 2019b; Bonnette, 2006; Furco & Root, 2010), this experiential project provided additional evidence to support this proposition.

Professional confidence is considered a vital attribute that strengthens prospective teachers' ability to perform effectively and independently in their teaching roles (Turnbull, 2005). Participation in this experiential project was associated with increased self-esteem and self-efficacy among the student teachers, aligning with findings from other experiential learning projects (e.g., Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Coffey & Lavery, 2015; Furco & Root, 2010; Lee, 2019a, 2019b). All nine teacher candidates reported a boost in their confidence in grammar instruction as a result of the project. Some participants also noted improved efficiency in lesson planning. The individual and group presentations during the project meetings, along with the innovative teaching ideas developed through self-exploration and reflection, the guidance from the project supervisor, and peer observation and support throughout the process, probably played a significant role in these positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study investigated prospective English language teachers' professional growth through voluntary participation in an experiential learning project on the development of innovative grammar teaching resources for school teachers. The evidence points to the possibility that the student teachers enhanced their grammar pedagogy through experiential learning beyond the formal curriculum. By following an experiential learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, a culture of reflection and peer learning was fostered. The participants were provided with opportunities to observe project members' lesson planning, and challenge others' and their own way of thinking during the ongoing collaboration. The process encouraged the prospective teachers to view learning from their students' perspectives, which supported them in gradually developing the ability to design horizontal and vertical

curricula for different types of learners. The prospective teachers also experienced the application of their own and others' plans in actual classrooms, and learnt to be adaptable when facing gaps between theory and practice. Equally important, the student teachers witnessed their own professional growth through multiple revisions and improvements to their lesson plans, which in turn bolstered their confidence in grammar teaching. Although they might not have been explicitly aware of the grammar teaching frameworks and theories propounded by various scholars, the student teachers gradually developed this knowledge implicitly and were able to apply it in practice with increasing ease and efficiency through the experiential cycle.

One limitation of the study was the small number of student teachers participating in the project. However, the post-project evaluation suggested that the experiential learning project offered a useful learning platform outside the classroom for all the participating prospective teachers to develop and apply pedagogical knowledge. The project encouraged the student teachers to take an active role in their learning, providing opportunities for them to select their own topics for lesson development, engage in self-reflection and offer constructive feedback on one another's practice in a supportive environment. In other words, the student teachers developed a sense of ownership over their own learning and teaching processes. Their engagement was further supported through their meaningful interactions with various stakeholders in the educational environment, including their peers, school teachers and students during the lesson trials, as well as different educators who participated in the public seminar at the end of the project, where the team members shared their learning experiences.

The implications of these findings highlight the potential benefits of incorporating experiential learning into teacher education programmes. Such an approach can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to experiment with contemporary pedagogy, support their development as proactive learners, and help prepare them to serve as agents of change in school. For future studies, the experiential learning cycle could include a broader range of student teachers from different fields. Additionally, it could be considered for integration into formal teacher education programmes to encourage greater involvement among student teachers, which might help address concerns related to the time commitment required for the meetings.

Notes

- 1 The school learners were invited to complete the following questions in the post-lesson evaluation survey after each school trial.
 - (a) What did you learn in today's lesson?
 - (b) Did you like today's grammar lesson? How did the teaching activities differ

from those in other grammar lessons?

(c) Which activity in the lesson did you enjoy the most? Why?

(d) Did you encounter any difficulties during the lesson? Is there anything that was unclear and that you would like the teacher to explain further?

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Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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