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## USING ACTIVITY-BASED METHODS TO DEVELOP PROBLEM-SOLVING COMPETENCE FOR VIETNAM'S LOWER SECONDARY STUDENTS IN THE AREA OF EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES

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### ABSTRACT

The 2018 General Education Curriculum of Vietnam identifies problem-solving competence as one of the core competences that need to be developed in students. Among the educational areas, Experiential Activities serve as an important environment for students to practice and enhance this competence. This article explores the current situation of how lower secondary school teachers in Vietnam use activity-based methods in Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence. The study employs questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews with teachers from several lower secondary schools. The findings indicate that teachers hold a positive perception of the role of activity-based methods; however, their application remains limited in terms of systematic implementation, depth and reflective skills. Based on these findings, the article proposes several measures to improve the effectiveness of using activity-based methods in Experiential Activities to develop problem-solving competence among lower secondary students.

**KEYWORDS:** problem-solving competence, activity-based methods, lower secondary students, experiential activities, competence development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2018 General Education Curriculum identifies the central goal of general education as the formation and development of students' qualities and competencies, helping them acquire lifelong learning abilities and effectively adapt to the rapid changes of modern society. Among the core competences, problem-solving competence plays a particularly important role, as it is closely associated with critical thinking, creativity and the ability to act in real-life situations. This competency is not only essential for learning but also serves as a foundation that enables students to adapt, make decisions and behave appropriately in their personal lives, at school and within the community.

In this context, Experiential Activities are considered an educational environment with distinct advantages in developing students' practical competences. Through diverse activities, Experiential Activities provide opportunities for students to observe, experience, reflect, collaborate and practice life skills, thereby reinforcing their problem-solving competence in a natural and sustainable way. However, the effectiveness of these activities in fostering such competence largely depends on teachers' choices and applications of activity-based organizational methods. This factor determines the extent to which students can demonstrate initiative, creativity and independent thinking during participation.

In reality, at many lower secondary schools, most teachers are aware of the importance of organising Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence. Nevertheless, the implementation of activity-based methods tends to be formalistic, inconsistent and often lacks emphasis on the reflection stage after the experience - an essential phase in Kolb's experiential learning model (2015). In addition, constraints such as limited time, inadequate facilities and insufficient instructional materials also affect the overall effectiveness of these activities.

Given this situation, the present study was conducted to investigate and analyze the current use of activity-based methods by lower secondary school teachers in the area of Experiential Activities, with the aim of promoting students' problem-solving competence. Based on the survey findings, the paper highlights the strengths, limitations and underlying causes affecting the effectiveness of these methods. It also proposes feasible solutions to improve the quality of organising Experiential Activities in schools. The research results provide a scientific basis for adjusting Experiential Activities so that they truly become an environment for students to practise and develop competences in accordance with the orientations of the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

## 2. The Current Situation of Lower Secondary School Teachers' Use of Activity-Based Methods in Experiential Activities

### 2.1. Purpose of the survey

To examine the current use of activity-based methods by lower secondary school teachers in Experiential Activities, we conducted a survey to collect information on the following aspects:

- Teachers' awareness of the importance of using activity-based methods in Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence;
- The current practices and forms of organising Experiential Activities;
- The perceived effectiveness of these methods and organizational forms in developing students' problem-solving competence.

## **2.2. Survey participants and locations**

The study collected opinions from 365 lower secondary school teachers across the three regions of Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam, representing the following provinces and cities: An Giang, Gia Lai, Ha Giang, Hai Phong, Kien Giang, Lai Chau, Lam Dong, Quang Ngai, Quang Ninh, Tay Ninh, Thanh Hoa and Ho Chi Minh City.

## **2.3. Survey methods**

To investigate the current use of activity-based methods by lower secondary school teachers in Experiential Activities, we employed a questionnaire survey combined with in-depth interviews to gather teachers' opinions on relevant issues. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms and the collected data were processed and analyzed using the SPSS statistical software.

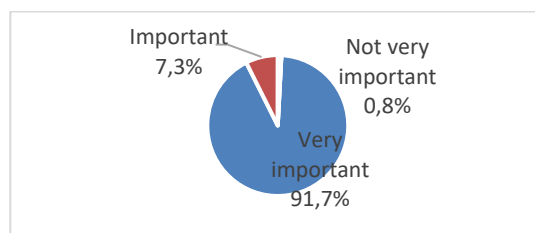
## **2.4. Survey results**

### **2.4.1. Teachers' awareness of the importance of using activity-based methods in Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence**

To explore teachers' awareness of the importance of using activity-based methods in Experiential Activities for developing students' problem-solving competence, we asked the following question:

"How important do you think it is to use activity-based organizational methods in Experiential Activities to develop problem-solving competency for lower secondary school students? Not very important? Important? Very important?"

The results obtained are as follows:



**Figure 1.** The proportion of teachers' awareness regarding the importance of using activity-organization methods in experiential activities to develop problem-solving competence for lower secondary students

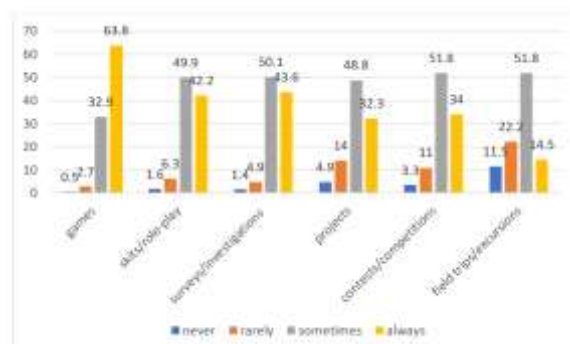
The survey results presented in the chart indicate that the majority of lower secondary school teachers have a positive awareness of the importance of using activity-based methods in Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence. Specifically, as many as 91.7% of teachers rated this factor as very important, 7.3% considered it important, while only 0.8% viewed it as not very important.

This demonstrates that most teachers clearly understand the core role of activity-based methods in stimulating critical thinking, shaping problem-solving skills and fostering students' practical competence. Such awareness aligns with the orientation of the 2018 General Education Curriculum, in which experiential learning is regarded as a distinctive educational environment that enables students to learn through experience, reflection and the application of knowledge to real-life situations. However, despite the generally high level of awareness, about 8.1% of teachers (corresponding to the "important" and "not very important" groups) still do not fully recognise the impact of activity-based methods on students' competence development. This suggests that a small proportion of teachers may perceive these methods superficially or underestimate the role of experiential learning and reflection, leading to less effective application in practice.

In conclusion, teachers' awareness of the importance of activity-based methods is generally positive and highly consistent; nonetheless, it still needs to be strengthened through professional development activities, experience-sharing on organising experiential learning and more concrete guidance on the process of developing students' problem-solving competence in school practice.

#### **2.4.2. Current situation regarding the use of methods and forms of organizing Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence**

In organising Experiential Activities oriented toward competence development, the methods and forms of organisation are key factors in shaping and fostering learners' competences. To examine how frequently teachers employ various methods and organisational forms to develop students' problem-solving competence through Experiential Activities, we surveyed teachers about several characteristic methods and forms used in Experiential Activities. The results are as follows:



**Figure 2.** Frequency of use (%) of methods and forms of organising Experiential Activities to develop problem-solving competence for lower secondary students

The survey results presented in Figure 2 show that lower secondary school teachers employ a fairly diverse range of methods and organizational forms in Experiential Activities. However, the frequency of use varies significantly among these forms. Among them, games are the most frequently applied form (63.8%), followed by short skits/role-play (42.2%) and surveys/investigations (43.6%). More advanced forms that require more extensive preparation - such as projects (32.3%) and contests/competitions (34.0%) - are used at a moderate frequency. Meanwhile, field trips and excursions, which provide highly practical experiences, are organized regularly by only 14.5% of the teachers.

The extent to which methods and forms of organising Experiential Activities are used has a direct impact on students' ability to form and develop problem-solving competence. Methods that are used frequently, such as games and role-play/skits, mainly help students develop basic components of problem-solving competence at the level of identifying and responding immediately to problems. In these activities, students participate in simulated situations, are encouraged to think quickly, collaborate in groups and find appropriate ways to respond. However, due to their brief and reenactment-oriented nature, which often emphasises emotional engagement, these forms provide limited opportunities for students to experience the full process of problem solving - from identifying the problem and analysing its causes to evaluating and selecting the optimal solution.

In contrast, forms of activities that involve higher levels of strategic thinking and practical engagement - such as Projects (32.3% regularly organised), Surveys/Investigations (43.6% regularly organised) or Field Trips/Excursions (14.5% regularly organised) - have strong potential to develop students' problem-solving competence at the analytical, creative and applied levels. These activities require students to formulate their own questions, collect data, test solutions and reflect on outcomes - aligning with the "experience – reflection – conceptualisation – action" cycle (Kolb, 2015). However, the frequency of using these forms remains low (the proportion of teachers who "never" or "rarely" use Project-based activities is 18.9% and for Field trips/Excursions it is 33.7%). This indicates that students

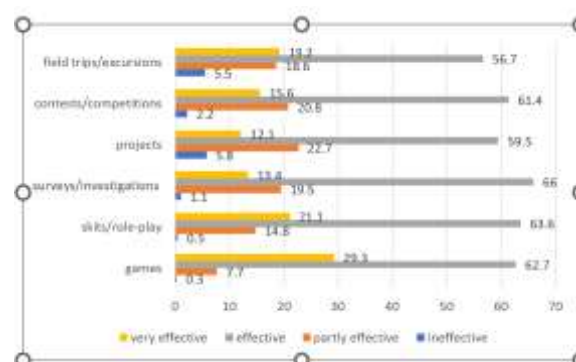
have limited opportunities to practise deep analytical thinking and to develop independent decision-making skills in real-world contexts.

Overall, these findings reflect a tendency to prioritise playful, easy-to-implement classroom methods over community-based, real-world activities. The frequent use of games and role-play indicates that teachers are aware of the value of experiential learning; however, it also reveals limitations in expanding learning spaces beyond the classroom - an essential factor for developing problem-solving competence in authentic contexts. The imbalance between simulated classroom activities and real-world activities suggests that students' problem-solving competence is mainly developed at the levels of reproduction and collaboration, but has not yet reached the levels of creativity and real-life application. In other words, if teachers continue to favor easily implemented methods without investing in more in-depth activities, students' problem-solving competence will develop unevenly across its components (cognitive, behavioral, reflective).

From these results, it can be affirmed that the level of development of lower-secondary students' problem-solving competence is proportional to the diversity and depth of methods used to organise activities. Organizational formats that require students to plan independently, tackle real-world problems and reflect after the activity create more lasting impacts compared to short, performance-oriented experiential tasks.

### 2.4.3. Current situation regarding the effectiveness of methods and formats of organising activities in developing problem-solving competence in lower-secondary students

We asked teachers to self-evaluate the effectiveness of the methods and formats they had used in Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence. The results were as follows:



**Figure 3.** Teachers' self-evaluation of the effectiveness of methods and formats used in Experiential Activities to develop lower-secondary students' problem-solving competence

The results in the table above show that the overall effectiveness level was rated quite high across most organisational formats. The proportion of teachers rating any method as ineffective was very low, ranging from 0.3% to 5.8%. Among these, the game-based method stood out, with a combined

“effective” and “very effective” rate of 92.0%, including 29.3% rated as “very effective” - the highest proportion. Teachers may believe that the engaging nature of games and their ability to stimulate students’ problem-solving thinking through hypothetical situations contribute to their effectiveness. Similarly, Skits/Role-play also achieved a high combined effectiveness rate (84.7%), reaffirming its importance in training communication, collaboration and the testing of problem-solving solutions in a safe environment. For Surveys/Investigations, although the “Very effective” rate was only 13.4%, the “Effective” rate was the highest (66.0%), indicating that this method is useful for developing skills in data collection, information processing and situational analysis - foundational steps in the problem-solving process.

On the contrary, methods demanding more complex organisation received lower effectiveness ratings and more critical evaluations. Specifically, compared with other organisational formats, the Project format has the highest proportion of “Not effective” ratings (5.8%) and the lowest combined proportion of “Effective” and “Very effective” ratings (71.6%). This may stem from challenges related to management, resource allocation and assessment of long-term projects. Similarly, Field trips/Excursions had the second-highest rate of “Ineffective” (5.5%) and a relatively high “Partially effective” rate (18.6%). Although these are real-world experiential activities, without clearly defined problem-solving tasks, they may remain at the level of mere observation and fail to fully unlock their potential for developing students’ problem-solving competence.

In summary, Game-based activities and Skits/Role-play are currently rated as the most effective, while more complex formats such as Projects and Field trips/Excursions require more careful preparation and management to enhance their impact on students’ problem-solving competence.

### **3. Measures to improve the use of activity-based methods to develop problem-solving competence in lower secondary students**

#### **3.1. Designing experiential activities linked to real-world problem situations**

One important measure to enhance the effectiveness of activity-based methods in Experiential Activities is to design activities connected to real-world problem situations. Teachers should select topics close to students’ daily lives - such as environmental issues, health, traffic safety, school relationships or online behavior - and develop learning tasks in the form of “open-ended problems.” Each activity should follow a process consisting of the following steps: warm-up - problem posing - suggesting possible solutions - implementation - reflection and application.

In this process, teachers act as facilitators who guide, support and encourage students to explore and propose solutions rather than provide ready-made knowledge. Organising activities with a real-world orientation helps students identify and analyse the nature of problems while building critical thinking and decision-making skills. Through authentic situations, students practise observation, reasoning, collaboration and evaluating the effectiveness of solutions, thereby developing problem-solving competence naturally and sustainably. Moreover, these activities help increase learning motivation,

foster proactiveness and cultivate a sense of social responsibility among lower secondary students. If applied regularly and systematically, this measure will help teachers shift from simulated activities to more creative and deeply experiential ones, meeting the requirements for competence development set out in the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

### **3.2. Applying the “Experience - Reflection - Action” model (Kolb, 2015) in organising activities**

Another highly meaningful measure to enhance the development of problem-solving competence is applying an activity-based process grounded in Kolb’s (2015) “Experience - Reflection - Action” learning model. This model follows a four-stage learning cycle in which learners participate actively, continuously and with strong reflective engagement.

In the first stage - Concrete Experience -students directly participate in learning activities or real-world problem situations, forming initial experiences. Next, in the Reflective Observation stage, students are encouraged to observe, discuss and reflect on their experiences, identifying reasons for success or limitations in their approach. The third stage - Abstract Conceptualization - helps students connect their experiences with theoretical knowledge, forming concepts and problem-solving strategies in a systematic manner. Finally, in the Active Experimentation stage, students apply the lessons learned to similar or broader situations in real life.

Throughout the activity, teachers serve as facilitators who create an open learning environment, encourage discussion and reflection, then guide students to document their learning through “learning journals” or personal reflection sheets. Reflection after each activity not only helps students self-assess their competence but also develops critical thinking - a core component of problem-solving competence. Experiential learning provides opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes, develop problem-identification skills, choose optimal solutions and adjust their behavior in future situations. In addition, applying this model helps teachers design more open-ended activities that strengthen the link between theory and practice, between school and real life. If implemented systematically, the “Experience- Reflection - Action” cycle will form in students a continuous competence-development loop, enabling them not only to solve immediate problems but also to learn from experience to respond effectively to future challenges.

### **3.3. Flexible use of diverse and integrated forms of activity organisation**

A notable feature of this measure is the flexible and integrated use of diverse forms of activity organisation in Experiential Activities. Combining various formats - such as simulation games, group projects, role-play, panel discussions, field trips -investigations - surveys, and community-service activities - allows students to approach problems from multiple perspectives while mobilising a wide range of cognitive, communication and collaboration skills. In the early grades (6–7), teachers may design simpler activities with clear instructions to help students become familiar with analysing and selecting solutions. In higher grades (8–9), activities should be expanded to include student-designed tasks, student-led group management activities and self-evaluation, thereby developing autonomy and

creativity. The flexible use of these formats not only makes lessons more engaging and dynamic but also increases opportunities for students to encounter authentic situations in which they can practise problem solving actively and creatively. The diversity in activity formats also helps teachers easily select the ones that suit the topic content, the available facilities and the students' age-specific psychological characteristics. When implemented consistently, this measure will help shift Experimental Activities from "learning by doing" to "meaningful experiential learning," laying the foundation for the sustainable development of problem-solving competence in lower secondary students.

### **3.4. Enhancing guidance for students' reflection after activities**

Reflection is not only the concluding stage of an activity but also a key link in the experiential learning cycle, helping students develop deeper awareness of what they have done, learned and need to improve. After each activity, teachers should create opportunities for students to share their feelings, participate in group discussions, write learning journals or complete personal reflection sheets. Through this, students are encouraged to answer guiding questions such as "What contributed to your group's success or failure?", "If you could do this again, what would you change?" or "What did you learn from this process?" The reflection process helps students form habits of analysing, evaluating and adjusting their behavior, thereby developing critical thinking and self-learning - important components of problem-solving competence. Meanwhile, reflection activities also help teachers identify students' progress, adjust their strategies of activity organisation and plan suitable support. If maintained regularly and with clear guidance, reflection will become an effective mechanism for self-learning and self-regulation, contributing to the deep and sustainable development of students' problem-solving competence.

### **3.5. Developing a toolkit to support teachers in organising activities and assessing students' problem-solving competence**

A foundational measure to improve the effectiveness of methods of activity organisation in Experiential Activities is to develop a toolkit that supports teachers in organizing activities and assessing students' problem-solving competence. Developing a unified and systematic assessment toolkit provides teachers with concrete foundations for identifying competence goals, designing appropriate activities and monitoring students' developmental progress.

First, it is necessary to develop a rubric for assessing problem-solving competence, including key components such as problem identification, cause analysis, solution proposal, implementation and reflection. These criteria must be described across specific levels of competence development, enabling teachers to observe and provide timely feedback to students. In addition, a set of activity sheets (or instructional guide) and teacher observation checklists should be designed, clearly outlining the objectives, procedures, tasks and assessment criteria for each experiential activity.

During implementation, these tools should be piloted within subject teams, with teachers' feedback collected and revisions made each semester to ensure feasibility and alignment with school realities. When widely applied, this toolkit will not only help teachers assess students objectively and fairly, but also serve as a two-way feedback mechanism, enabling students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and identify directions for improvement. Furthermore, the toolkit facilitates schools in standardising the assessment of problem-solving competence in accordance with the competence-oriented approach of the 2018 General Education Curriculum, while also enhancing the quality of professional development activities through lesson study. It can be affirmed that developing and effectively using a support toolkit is an important step in innovating the methods of organising experiential activities, making the teaching process more systematic, evidence-based and oriented toward the sustainable development of students' problem-solving competence.

**3.6. Training and developing teachers' pedagogical competence in organising experiential activities**  
One of the essential conditions for the effective use of methods of organising activities in the educational area of Experiential Activities is enhancing teachers' pedagogical competence, particularly their ability to design, facilitate and assess activities aligned with competence-based learning. Professional development should follow a practical, continuous and needs-based approach rather than being limited to short, theory-focused workshops.

First of all, schools and educational management agencies need to organise intensive training sessions on methods of organising experiential activities, reflection skills, group-facilitation techniques, and strategies for integrating the development of problem-solving competence into each theme. Training content should be illustrated with real situations, exemplary lessons and models, enabling teachers to translate training knowledge into classroom practice more effectively.

Along with in-service training, building Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within schools is also an important solution. Through PLCs, teachers have the opportunity to observe lessons, observe colleagues, share experiences and collaboratively analyse lessons to identify the most suitable strategies for organizing activities tailored to their students and the school's specific context. Professional development sessions based on the "lesson study" approach help teachers improve not only their ability to design activities but also their pedagogical reflection skills, enabling them to listen to students attentively and adjust their teaching practices accordingly. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to self-study and engage in professional growth through open educational resources, online courses and professional forums on Experiential Activities, helping cultivate a culture of lifelong learning among staff.

When professional development is implemented regularly, systematically and in connection with classroom practice, teachers' pedagogical competence will be comprehensively strengthened. Teachers will not only be able to flexibly use various methods of organising activities, but also creatively design open-ended learning situations that stimulate students' critical thinking and problem-

solving ability. Thus, developing teachers' pedagogical competence is a core and sustainable solution, providing the foundation for improving the quality of organisation of experiential activities and realising the goal of developing problem-solving competence in lower secondary students under the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

The six measures discussed above demonstrate that developing problem-solving competence for lower-secondary students in Experiential Activities requires a systematic, coherent and continuously developmental approach. These measures do not exist independently; instead, they interact with and complement one another to form a complete cycle - from designing activities linked to real-world situations, organising experience – reflection - action processes, diversifying activity formats, to assessment, feedback and teacher professional development. When implemented consistently, this cycle helps students develop problem-solving competence not only at a cognitive level but also in terms of action and creative application in real life. At the same time, it encourages teachers to innovate teaching methods toward experiential, practical and student-centered approaches. Therefore, implementing these measures in a synchronous manner not only makes Experiential Activities a highly effective environment for competence development but also lays the foundation for sustainable changes in lower secondary teaching practices aligned with the spirit of the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that lower secondary teachers possess a relatively accurate understanding of the importance of using activity-based instructional methods in Experiential Activities to develop students' problem-solving competence. However, a substantial gap remains between teachers' perceptions and their pedagogical practices. Although most teachers acknowledge the necessity of organising activities, their selection and application of methods are not fully aligned with competence development goals. Many activities are still superficial, repetitive and largely simulated, lacking sufficient depth and failing to maximize the reflective component - a core element that enables students to transform experience into knowledge and action competence.

In practice, teachers tend to prioritise activity formats that are easy to implement within the classroom, such as games, role-play or group discussions. Meanwhile, activities requiring community engagement - such as projects, field investigations or social service activities - are used far less frequently. As a result, students' problem-solving competence often remains at the level of recognising and reacting to situations, without progressing to deeper levels of analysis, creativity and real-world application. Furthermore, the lack of consistency in assessment tools and competence criteria makes it difficult for teachers to monitor and provide feedback on students' learning processes, leading to evaluations that rely largely on subjective judgment or on surface-level outcomes of activities.

The causes of these limitations stem from multiple factors: time pressure, inadequate facilities, overly general instructional materials and, notably, the fact that teachers' competences in designing and

facilitating activities have not been systematically developed. Most teachers have not received in-depth training in organising experiential activities geared toward developing problem-solving competence; as a result, they still struggle with designing problem situations, facilitating group work and conducting post-activity reflection.

Based on the above analyses, it can be affirmed that for Experiential Activities to truly become an environment for developing students' problem-solving competence, a comprehensive shift is required in the approach to designing activities, the methods of organisation and the mechanisms for competence assessment. Applying measures such as designing practice-oriented activities, organising learning through experience – reflection - action cycles and developing a unified assessment toolkit will enable teachers to gradually enhance the effectiveness of experiential activities. At the same time, establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) represents a sustainable approach that allows teachers to share experiences, engage in self-directed learning and innovate their pedagogical practices, thereby contributing to improving the quality of Experiential Activities in lower secondary schools today.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The findings confirm that the use of methods of organising activities in the area of Experiential Activities plays a decisive role in shaping and developing lower secondary students' problem-solving competence. Although most teachers are aware of the importance of this issue, the implementation in practice remains largely superficial, lacking the connection between experience, reflection and application. Many activities fail to create authentic problem situations, resulting in students not being fully trained in the steps of the problem-solving process. To address these limitations, a set of coordinated solutions is required, including teacher professional development, the development of supportive tools, innovation in pedagogical methods and diversification of formats of organising activities. When implemented systematically, Experiential Activities will truly become a dynamic and creative learning environment, contributing to the development of problem-solving competence as well as other core competences for lower secondary students in alignment with the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

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