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Enhancing Language Skills and Fostering Perspective Transformation in Adult ESL Education: A Transformative Learning Approach

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Abstract: *The objectives of this action research are to examine how a transformative learning approach in a university-level ESL setting improved the English language skills of two classes of 32 learners, and how this approach influenced their perspectives on a number of issues. Findings indicate that many learners experience significant gains in their English language abilities, increased self-confidence in English, and perspective shifts regarding the language learning process, other cultures, and a number of social issues.*

Transformative learning (TL) is based on constructivist assumptions, including the conviction that meaning exists within individuals (and not in external forms), and is acquired and validated through dealing with other people and through communication (Mezirow, 1991). Since meaning is therefore so personal in nature, it follows that all adults have their own meaning perspectives (frames of reference or sets of habitual expectation), which “are primarily the result of cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). These are structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences, and “they selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Our meaning perspectives frequently “include distortions, prejudices, stereotypes, social context, and lack of knowledge” (Cranton, 1994, p. 27), and it is through critical reflection on our assumptions that we may transform these frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997), facilitating the development of new or transformed meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). To this end, adult educators must help learners to be self-guided, self-reflective, and rational, and help create communities of discourse in which these values may be upheld and promoted (Mezirow, 1991).

In the years since the emergence of Mezirow’s theory in the early 1990s, its creator has continued to fine tune and modify his theoretical conception of TL. It is noteworthy that despite the lofty position held in educational circles by Mezirow’s theory, a number of alternate conceptions have surfaced in recent years. Taylor (2008) identified seven such perspectives, the first three being the psychoanalytic, psycho-developmental, and social emancipatory views of TL; more recently emerging perspectives include the neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary approaches.

There appears to be a natural connection between TL and the adult ESL (English as a second language) experience (King, 2000). The link, as pointed out by Guiora (1983), lies in the fact that interaction with a new language and culture presents a challenge to the learner in that it offers a different way of describing, conceptualizing, and experiencing the world, meaning that a number of the ingredients for reflection and change are present. Indeed, language learning studies have determined that the language acquisition process may lead to changes in one’s identity (Brown, 1994; King, 2000; Smoke, 1998), and research into acculturation outlines a number of the social changes that adult ESL learners experience (Brown, 1994; King, 2000; Wrigley & Gluth, 1992).

Despite the clear connection between TL and ESL, relatively little research has been done into the use of a TL approach in the ESL. Given this, the purpose of the present study is to determine whether using a TL methodology in a university-level ESL course can lead learners to improve their level of proficiency in English, gain greater confidence in their English language abilities, and experience shifts in their views of the ESL learning process, their perspectives on other cultures, and their positions on a variety of social issues.

Literature Review

A small but growing body of research has examined the use of a TL approach in second/foreign language (SFL) education, including ESL. In his 2007 study, Goulah applied O'Sullivan's culturally-contextualized approach to transformative learning, an approach which reconnects students with their ecologically-interconnected identities (O'Sullivan, 1999), to foreign language learning, focusing on 1 600 American high school students studying Japanese as a second language. Findings indicated that discussions about TL topics in relation to Japanese pop culture media led to greater student awareness of the TL themes of cosmology and eco-spiritual selfhood which may bring about a deep cultural and planetary literacy of peace.

Foster (1997), based on her research with adult learners studying French as a second language, suggests that the risk-taking (and the resulting questioning of self) which second language learning entails creates fertile ground upon which reflection and transformation can occur. She suggests that self-concept is fragile in second language settings, a disparity existing between who learners believe themselves to be and how they appear in the classroom. In a setting in which one's view of self is so challenged, a transformation of perspectives may easily occur.

In her study involving 208 adult learners enrolled in college ESL programs, King (2000) examined the role played by education in participants' perspective transformation experiences, as well as the nature of these changes. She found that 66.8% of her sample experienced TL related to their studies, mainly in the areas of changed views of learning the English language, learning about American culture and developing intercultural awareness, and gaining in self-esteem and self-confidence. King noted that these learners were experiencing life changes during their ESL course, and TL offered a framework of understanding that helped them cope with such challenging situations (King, 2000).

One may draw important conclusions from an overall consideration of research in the field. First, since intercultural awareness occurs in the SFL classroom (King, 2000), multicultural communication, understanding and valuation must be identified as objectives along with language acquisition, making the SFL classroom an excellent setting in which TL may occur (Goulah, 2006). Second, since the SFL setting is an optimal forum for TL, transformative SFL learning should be seen not only as a type of learning, but as a set of content objectives as well (O'Sullivan, 1999; Goulah, 2006, 2008). In order to maximize this potential and engender TL in the SFL classroom, educators must explicitly include in their curriculum a cosmological perspective, ecological selfhood, quality of life, and eco-spirituality/spirit, as well as power in interlocking structures of gender, race, class, and language (Goulah, 2006, 2008).

Methodology

This action research used mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative, to examine an ESL setting in which a TL approach was used, focusing in particular on improvements in learners' English language abilities, changes in their confidence levels in English, and shifts in their perceptions of the language learning process. The second aspect of the study investigated learners' evolving intercultural awareness and changing perspectives on a number of social issues.

Participants

Thirty-two adult learners (including 18 women and 14 men) from two sections of a university-level continuing education low-intermediate ESL course participated in this study. The course in question focuses primarily on students' speaking and listening skills. Many of the participants were working toward a Certificate of Proficiency in English.

Context

Based on King's (2005) ideas about creating a TL classroom, including the use of dialogue, simulations, and other forms of collaborative learning to elicit and challenge learners' prior assumptions, the 13-week course examined in the present study was developed so as to consist of six units. Each unit was based on a particular theme, all of which were designed to promote collaborative learning, discussion, and critical reflection. As each theme was explored, students worked in groups to complete a series of tasks which involved dialoguing as well as an extensive exchange of ideas and points of view. After a given theme was finished, each student wrote a reflective journal entry chronicling the entire process and making note of any perspective shifts or personal growth that may have occurred.

Materials

In order to collect data, several materials were used in this study: 1) *Oral examinations* - in order to chart learners' changing English language abilities, a progress test administered early in the semester and the final examination of the course were used. 2) *Post-course questionnaire* - a post-course questionnaire consisting of eight items was devised in order to document any changes in students' levels of confidence and perceptions regarding the language learning process. The questionnaire also focused on any possible changes in learners' intercultural awareness and acceptance as well as on their perspectives regarding a number of social issues. 3) *Reflective journals* - in order to promote critical thinking and reflection, students were asked to submit reflective journals throughout the semester, each related to a theme dealt with in the course.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed by scoring students' post-course questionnaires and assigning either an "affirmative" (for an answer that showed the student was in agreement) or a "negative" (for an answer that showed the student was not in agreement). Instances in which the student was neutral, or simply did not answer the question, were assigned an "other". Interrater agreement was established through researchers independently coding students' answers in the post-course questionnaire; disagreements among raters were resolved through discussion. Interrater reliability on the items ranged from 97% to 100% (Cohen's $k = .93 - 1$).

Qualitative data was analyzed through an examination of students' free-response entries in the post-course questionnaire. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used in order to reach a greater understanding of participants' learning experiences.

Results

An analysis of oral examinations administered throughout the course indicated that all the participants in this study improved their English language skills over the course of the semester. Significant gains were noted in the areas of fluency, discursive competence, and vocabulary. Less progress was made in the area of grammar.

Regarding the issue of whether a TL approach results in increased confidence in English language skills, the research findings showed that students' answers were more frequently affirmative than negative (affirmative = 28, negative = 3, missing data = 1). The chi-square analysis indicated that there were more affirmative answers than what we would expect due to chance, $\chi^2_{(1, N = 31)} = 18.58, p < .0001$. In order to understand changes in self-confidence, researchers evaluated participants' responses in the post-course questionnaire. Twenty-eight learners reported increased levels of self-confidence in English related to the course, specifying that these increases resulted from *improvements* in various aspects of their English language abilities. The most cited skill area in which students reported improvements which led to increased confidence was the speaking domain. Examples include, "*My English is more fluent and easy,*" "*I am able to have a clear discussion with English people,*" and "*I talk with less difficulty.*" Increased confidence in English did not stem from progress in the area of speaking alone; examples of this are, "*Yes, it changed ...by learning new words and more grammar and conversation,*" "*I understand better than before,*" "*My speaking, listening and writing improved in a good way.*"

As regards the matter of TL bringing about a shift in learners' views of the language learning process, the results indicated that students' answers were more frequently affirmative than negative (affirmative = 27, negative = 5). The chi-square analysis showed that there were more affirmative answers than what we would expect due to chance, $\chi^2_{(1, N = 32)} = 13.78, p < .0002$. An examination of students' responses in the post-course questionnaire revealed that eighteen individuals indicated changed views resulting from the *instructional strategies* used in the course (e.g., reflective journals, small group discussions, etc.). Comments include, "*We used different and interesting strategies to learn and practice during discussions,*" "*This is a good forum to learn rapidly,*" and "*In my country, the method of teaching English is different and more focused on grammar and vocabulary.*" The *course content* was also cited as a catalyst for shifting attitudes in this area. Examples of this are, "*We treat the real life problem,*" "*We could think about different issues that concerning us today,*" and "*We have a idea that the language course is limited to learn in traditional way out of real life. With (the lecturer) I changed my experience about language learning.*"

As concerns the use of a TL approach and intercultural understanding among ESL learners, the research findings demonstrated that students' answers were more frequently affirmative than negative (affirmative = 23, negative = 6, missing data = 2, other = 1). The chi-square analysis suggested that there were more affirmative answers than what we would expect due to chance, $\chi^2_{(1, N = 29)} = 8.82, p = .003$. An evaluation of learners' post-course questionnaires showed that twenty individuals *learned more about other cultures* through their participation in

the course, six specifying that they came to *value multicultural settings* as well. Comments include, “(In an ESL course), you know different people with others customs, ideas, and culture,” “I learned lot of things from other cultures,” “Now, I’m understanding every country how they think and the habits and the cultures of every country,” “It is the best way to approach people of different culture, to take out the prejudgets,” and that “knowing different cultures is one source of knowledge.”

Regarding the matter of whether participants’ views on a variety of social issues can be affected by the use of a TL approach, the results showed that students’ answers were more frequently affirmative than negative (affirmative = 19, negative = 11, missing data = 2). The chi-square analysis indicated that these frequencies were not significantly different than what we would expect due to chance, $\chi^2_{(1, N = 30)} = 1.64, p = .2003$. An examination of post-course questionnaires revealed that 19 learners changed their points of view on a number of social issues due to *exposure to new information* in their ESL course. Examples demonstrating this include, “I learned many things from the others’ opinions,” “I thing the only way to learn about the world and ideas is to hear different points of view of people about issues,” “I am open mind person now,” and “I grow up I think with point of vue of other people.”

Discussion

The findings of this study point to a number of important insights concerning the use of TL in the ESL classroom. First, all of the participants improved their English language skills, suggesting that a TL approach is effective in ESL teaching. Second, a significant number of students became more confident in their English language abilities, indicating that TL can bolster students’ self-efficacy in language learning. Next, it appears that using TL principles when creating course content and devising teaching strategies is most effective in prompting learners to challenge their views of what the ESL learning process involves. Fourth, many of the students enrolled in the course had never studied in a multicultural classroom intentionally designed using TL principles. The experience certainly led learners to question assumptions they may have had regarding other cultures, suggesting that TL fosters a more inclusive worldview. Finally, although the findings were not statistically significant, the majority of learners experienced changes in their perspectives on a variety of social issues, indicating that TL leads learners to challenge many of their long-held views.

Conclusion

Relatively little research has examined TL among adult ESL learners. It is hoped that this study has contributed in some way to scholarship in the area through some of its most salient contentions: TL is an effective means of improving learners’ language skills, building their confidence, changing their views of the language learning process, and promoting reflection on multiculturalism and social justice issues. More research is needed to explore the important role that TL can play as a catalyst for positive change in the lives of adult learners.

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