The Effect of the Three Different Dimensions of Transformative Teaching on Iranian EFL Students: A Macro Study on Teaching Professionalism

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the role of three dimensions of Transformative Teaching on Iranian EFL Students as a macro study on teaching professionalism. The participants were 81 female and male Intermediate students enrolled in Jahad Language Institute. The study employed a Quasi-experimental design involving administering PET test as pre-test in order to determine language proficiency and homogeneity of the learners and post-test in which speaking was scored by two rates, the Gardner Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (2004) both in Persian at the beginning of the term and in English at the end of the term, to measure motivation, and a researcher-developed catalogue introducing Transformative Teaching to teachers, and a teacher-made journal of what happened in classrooms. The results of this study revealed, at the P < .05 alpha level, that, the treatment implied in this research had a significant effect on learners’ motivation and speaking ability. Furthermore, the results showed that Transformative teaching happens through being actively engaged in the learning process, co-creating or constructing what it is they are learning as they learn rather than taking in content passively. Thus transformative learning is essentially a way of understanding adult learning as a meaning-making process. The findings also revealed that the most frequently used strategies evoked integrated motivation of the learners.

1. Introduction

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The basic theory of transformative learning is that learning does not stop with adolescence and that adulthood is the time for reassessing assumptions from our formative years that often resulted in distorted views of reality (Mezirow, 1990). This can be defined as slow process in which individuals gradually change their views of the world and of themselves, giving them a new direction to lives. Such perspective transformations also occur, often rather suddenly, in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma like a divorce or a change in job status. Thus, anomalies and dilemmas that cannot be explained by old ways of knowing become catalysts or ‘trigger events’ that precipitate critical reflection and perspective transformations. Mezirow asserts that perspective transformations lead to more inclusive views of the world and of us. Or in other words, perspective transformations erase earlier distortions in our thinking. These could be epistemic, social-cultural or psychic distortions. We develop explanatory perspectives that permit us to deal with a broader range of experience, to be more discriminating, and to be more open to other perspectives.

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We tend to call people creative when they have an extremely well developed ability to reorganize confusing, paradoxical perspectives into a new convergent and innovative synthesis. So what is triggered in complex and dynamic situations is a form of transformative and creative learning that leads to the innovative re-organisation of known facts and arguments. It is my impression that in communicative learning, group members expect the facilitator to suggest innovative and creative syntheses of the facts and arguments that are discussed in the group. But while perhaps effective in the short term, this does not facilitate transformative learning. Learning is ultimately about instilling habits of reflection and critical thinking in the learners themselves.

To put in a nutshell, one can say that Transformative Teaching can help learners to develop depth and breadth of content knowledge. According to Bygate (1987), knowledge about a language is not enough and skill in using it, is also necessary. It means that knowledge has to be used in action. He further stated that a fundamental difference between knowledge and skill is “that while both can be understood and memorized, only a skill can be imitated and practiced”(p. 4). Shumin (2002) reinforces that speaking a language is especially difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interaction.

To talk about the role of the speaking act it relates to the language learning process is difficult due to the fact that speaking ability is often thought of as the end product of acquisition (Fulcher, 2003), or the measure of success in acquisition at any given point, rather than simply one part of a larger multifaceted process. In this regard, Birjandi, Mosallanejad and Bagheridoust (2006) state that speaking does not lead to learning and it just activates what we know and keeps them for a longer time to be more available for the future necessities.

Speaking plays several roles in language learning and in language classes. Chastain (1988) also states that speaking as an essential skill for functioning in another country is of significance for students. Therefore, the most realistic opportunity teachers should demonstrate to students is the practical use of the second language to communicate as a medium of communication during the daily routine of conducting the class.

Having said the above, the present research plans to be responsive to the following quantitative and qualitative questions:

- Does Transformative Teaching have any reliable effect on the achievement of students' speaking?
- Does Transformative Teaching significantly elevate students' motivation in learning?

2. Literature Review

From pedagogical point of view, there has been a stronger desire in the trend of several decades to a more communicative approach to language learning in the classroom (Long, 1990). On the other hand, there is a dynamic relationship between learning and teaching rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge (Askew & Lodge, 2000). The philosophy of foreign language instruction has changed to one, which is more interactive and communicative, and less static and teacher-cantered; and this has thus broadened the domain of language teaching (Tarone & Yule, 1989).

In order to facilitate transformative learning, educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions. What the learners need is practice in recognizing frames of reference and also getting use
of their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective. Finally teacher should assist learners to participate effectively in discourse. Discourse is necessary to accredit what and how one understands, or to arrive at a best judgment regarding a belief.

According to Taylor (1998), core elements and most important components of Transformative Approach are: individual experience, critical reflection and dialogue. Through dialogue, individual experience and critical reflection play out. The dialogue is not much analytical, point-counterpoint dialogue, but dialogue emphasizing relational and trustful communication, often at times “highly personal and self-disclosing” (Carter, 2000, p. 82).

Transformative learning changes or transforms the person into a more effective teacher and student. Transformative learning is an empowering educational process that helps teachers and students to: (1) develop positive, healthy, productive relationships; (2) solve problems and make good choices/decisions; (3) stay attuned to healthy and successful outcomes; (4) manage self in achieving goals; (5) plan and make changes when needed; (6) behave wisely and responsibly (Low and Nelson, 2005).

Transformative learning can be defined as the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. The structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences are based on the frame of references. (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994, 1996).

Habits of mind and a point of view are the two dimensions of a frame of reference (Mazirow, 1997). Habits of mind, which has been mentioned, are abstract ways of thinking and acting that are affected by cultural, social and psychological codes.

Due to the content or process that we try to solve our problem and as a result the need to change our assumption on one situation, our point of view will change accordingly. This is the case when happens whenever we try to understand something that doesn’t match our expectations or anticipations (Mezirow, 1997).

An essential component to fostering transformative learning is the emphasis on a holistic orientation to teaching that engages learners with other ways of knowing. Previous researches has demonstrated that often too much emphasis is given to rational discourse and critical reflection in the fostering of transformative learning and not enough recognition of the role of the affective and other ways of knowing (Taylor, 1998). Learners rarely change through a rational process (analyze-think-change). Instead they “are more likely to change in a see-feel-change sequence” (Brown, 2006, p. 732).

3. Procedure:

As it has been mentioned in previous sections of this paper, in order to make an experimental and control group, 81 students were chosen from intermediate level. The classes were held three times a week for ninety minutes. Two MA holders were teaching the experimental and control groups. The first important thing to be considered is that these participants need to be homogenized and then those whose marks are closer to mean should be chosen for experimental and control group. The chosen scores, which belong to, somehow homogenous students (6 classes) are randomly divided into two groups, one as control group (3 classes) and one as experimental group (3classes). In this study 41 students were as experimental group and 40 students as control group.

The initial phase of the research on the learners focused on the application of the Preliminary English Test (PET) In order to measure and determine the participants' level of general English language proficiency and ensure their homogeneity which covers all the four skills and was taken from students both the control and experimental group participated. Due to the fact that this study wants to investigate any possible changes in student's speaking, their speaking was scored separately as well. The scale by which speaking of students were rated appears in appendix 1. How the candidate’s deal with the tasks in the four separate parts of the PET speaking test is of researcher's concern. This mark reflects the student's performance from the researcher's perspective. A teacher-made catalogue containing information about "Transformative Teaching" was given to the teachers of experimental group in order to make sure that they are all aware of this method. Just after the first session a motivation test which was written in Persian (R. C. Gardner's motivation test, Persian version) was given to the participants in experimental group in order to determine learner's motivation and they were asked to fill the questionnaire carefully. The course continued while teachers were trying to make Transformative Teaching's techniques into practice and also they were asked to prepare
a teacher-made journal that explains how Transformative Teaching is happening in the classes. Transformative Teaching happens through creating an active that can happen during class time, whenever possible, the teacher should use passages, articles or any other reading that can present new insight and ideas from the students view point. He is also to create enjoyable and safe ways and environments in which learners will be able to willingly try on different points of view, and acting out or talking about alternatives. Transformative Teaching can also happen through discourse and dialogue journals provide a format for discourse in which students work in pairs or even triads. They may have one journal that they pass from person to person, responding to each other’s ideas, or they may all write simultaneously, exchanging journal entries and commenting on each other’s writing (this yields, in the end, two or three journals rather than one). Many other strategies will also lead in conscious and critical thinking.

At the last session of the course the English version of the same motivation test was given to the participants to determine the changes in learner's motivation at the end of the term. The course ended up with a post test (PET) in which speaking was scored separately as well in order to be compared with the scores in pre-test to investigate the possible effect.

As mentioned, this research aims at finding the effect of three different dimensions of Transformative Teaching on Iranian EFL students' motivation and speaking. Since we have control group and experimental group in this research and there treatment, the type used would be quasi-experimental Hatch and Farhady (1981). In this case our pre-experimental design, the intact group design was chosen to select the aforementioned groups. As it was mentioned in Hatch and Farhady (1996), both experimental and control groups will receive a post-test, but the experimental group will receive the treatment while the control group does not.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Before starting the treatment, in order to test the homogeneity of the students, a PET was piloted among 30 students being at the same language proficiency level of the main participants of this study and showed an acceptable reliability of 0.84. Subsequently, the test was administered to 81 male and female students who were selected to take part in this study and then they were divided into three experimental and control groups receiving the treatments in one term five weeks.

It is worth mentioning that the speaking scores of the proficiency test were based on the ratings of two raters who enjoyed a significant inter-rater reliability (0.935) for which the correlation was significant at the 0.01 level.

The experimental groups were taught through Transformative Teaching strategies.

Following the treatment, the students in all groups took Pet test as a post-test in which speaking scores rated by two raters, were considered separately. Independent Samples T-Test were used and it indicated that, at the 0.05 level of significance, there was a significant difference among the mean rank of the experimental and control groups on the speaking post-test (p = 0.049<0.05). Also, Paired Sample T-Test were used and it indicated that, at the 0.05 level of significance, there was a significant difference among the mean rank of the experimental groups on the motivation post-test (p = 0.049<0.05). Therefore, the result exposed that using Transformative Teaching strategies instruction could significantly improve EFL learners’ speaking and motivation.

Mezirow developed a theory of adult learning, which was based on cognitive and developmental psychology in 1991. The central points in this theory is making meaning our of one's own experiences through reflection, critical reflection and also critical self-reflection. He named this process as "perspective transformation" that reflects making sense of experiences. Perspectives are sets of believes, thoughts, assumptions and values that we have gaining through life experience and through which we come to have understating of the world which can result in learners motivation. Core elements are the most important components of Transformative Approach to language teaching that are the parts of the most Transformative educational experiences. Originally three such elements were identified: individual experience, critical reflection, and dialogue (Taylor, 1998). Going through the study of Transformative Teaching we understand that other elements that have emerged as equally significant are as a holistic orientation, awareness of context, and an authentic practice.

In conclusion, based on the all above mentioned explanations; participants in both experimental group significantly outperformed control group on their speaking performance and motivation. Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that within a classroom setting the devised treatment i.e. Transformative Teaching strategies, could make the broad-base impact needed to effect major change in student learning and has helped the participants to
perform better and improve their speaking. Here the researcher concluded that if students learn these strategies, they can have better motivation and higher order thinking and likewise they can speak better.

Base on the conclusion, it is recommended that more attention should be paid to integration in syllabus design thereby providing classroom contexts in which the students can improve and construct their own knowledge independently. The materials developed should result in Self-Directed Learning, Critical Thinking by Creating an Activating Event, Openness to Alternatives and enhancing students' motivation.

References

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