

# **BUILDING INTERCULTURAL MATURITY: INFORMAL AND INCIDENTAL LEARNING AMONG VOLUNTEERS IN ADULT ESL CONTEXTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This empirical paper describes the preliminary results of a mixed-methods study about the relationship between informal and incidental learning among volunteers in adult ESL and their intercultural maturity.

Keywords: Adult ESL, informal and incidental learning, intercultural maturity, Global Perspective Inventory

## **INTRODUCTION**

Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) is a field where “full-time positions are rare, resources are scarce, and turnover is high” (Crandall, 1993, p. 497). Part-time instructors and volunteers have played a major role in providing instructions in a variety of settings, including federally funded adult education programs, local education agencies, community colleges, community-based organizations, private institutions and other types of institutions (Eyring, 2014). Volunteers represent over 80% of the staff that work in community-based adult education programs (Tamassia, Lemmon, Ymamoto, & Kirsch, 2007). Volunteers who are willing to teach with minimal or no compensation fill an important gap in adult ESL because they cater to a growing population that cannot afford expensive classes but need English as a life skill (Henrichsen, 2010). Despite the adult ESL learners’ growing instructional needs, adult ESL in nonacademic settings (as different from programs for international students) remains an understudied area (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). Moreover, there has been very little research that focuses exclusively on educators and their practices, although they make a substantial contribution to adult ESL and adult literacy (K. Perry, 2013; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009).

McGroarty (1993) argues to ensure the instruction is culturally and linguistically compatible for adult ESL learners, both learners and teachers need to engage in “ongoing mutual discovery and adaptation” (p. 6). That is, the adult ESL classroom is a learning forum for both volunteers and adult learners. While much research has been conducted on immigrants’ experience in adult ESL, there is relatively little study on how educators may have changed in any way as a result of encountering immigrants (Shan & Butterwick, 2014). Given the limited training adult ESL programs can offer to volunteers and the low knowledge transfer from training to practice (Belzer, 2006a; Schlusberg & Mueller, 1995), informal and incidental learning can be a useful theoretical lens to explore how volunteers learn on the job and make meaning of their experience. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand the informal and incidental learning activities experienced by volunteers in adult ESL settings and the impact on their development of intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Mangloa, 2005).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Informal and incidental learning in adult ESL***

Marsick and Watkins (1990) defined informal and incidental learning by contrasting them with formal learning:

Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Incidental learning is defined by Watkins as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning. Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it. (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 12)

Informal and incidental learning provides a broader theoretical lens to explore learning associated with volunteering, since training is not always available or applicable in these contexts. Findings from the first Canadian survey of informal learning practices showed that those who volunteered through organized community work devoted four hours on average to volunteering related informal learning (Livingstone, 1999). An overarching finding from the literature is that informal and incidental learning is the principal way through which volunteers learn in adult ESL contexts. Like teachers in any setting, adult ESL teachers learn from their own experience in and out of the classroom. Adult ESL teachers' on-the-job learning falls into three main categories: learning through teaching (Belzer, 2006b; Kim, 2005; K. Perry & Hart, 2012; K. Perry, 2013; Stewart, 2015), learning from others with ESL experience or expertise (Abbott & Rossiter, 2014; K. Perry & Hart, 2012; K. Perry, 2013), and self-directed education (K. Perry & Hart, 2012; K. Perry, 2013; Ziegler et al., 2009). They gain new skills and knowledge related to classroom instruction, acquire new values, expand their understanding of the immigrant experiences, and become more aware of their own role in the community and society. Their learning is beneficial not only to themselves but also to the clients they serve, the organizations they work for and even the community they are a part of. However, it is equally important to note that not all volunteers learned the same thing as a result of their experiences. Volunteers have varying motivation and learning capacities, which also interact with interpersonal and organizational factors in the learning environments. Without intervention or critical reflection, it is possible for volunteers to deepen their unexamined assumptions and prejudice, which will affect their work performance and hurt the population they serve (Erickson, 2012).

### ***Intercultural Maturity as the outcome of informal and incidental learning***

The developmental model of intercultural maturity developed by King and Baxter Magolda (2005) is selected to focus on the desired informal and incidental learning outcomes among volunteers in adult ESL contexts. Drawing primarily from Kegan's (1994) adult development model, the model of intercultural maturity presents a holistic perspective on an individual's capacity of "understanding and acting in ways that are interculturally aware and appropriate" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 573). The model is comprised of three dimensions of development as well as their interconnections. The cognitive dimension focuses on one's meaning making system. The intrapersonal dimension focuses on one's development of identity and beliefs and how they govern one's behaviors. The interpersonal dimension

focuses on one's relationship with others and capacity to interact in different social situations. Based on this holistic view, The model of intercultural maturity measures "the developmental complexity that allows a learner to understand and accept the general idea of difference from self without feeling threat to self enables a person to offer positive regard to others across many types of difference, such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 573).

Although the concept of intercultural maturity has never been examined in relation to volunteering in adult ESL settings, cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes have been empirically linked to this volunteering experience. Volunteering in a multicultural and multilingual setting is linked with positive effects on cognitive outcomes such as expanded knowledge about multicultural issues and social justice, a greater appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism, and a higher awareness of prejudice and stereotypes. (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; J. A. Perry, 2013; Primavera, 1999; Shan & Butterwick, 2014). Such new knowledge often interacted with volunteer's pre-existent values and dispositions and provoked reflection and self-examination (Duguid, Mündel, Schugurensky, & Haggerty., 2013). Volunteering in adult ESL settings provides a rich forum for an individual to examine one's identity, privilege, and role in the society (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; J. A. Perry, 2013). Research has also shown that volunteers developed empathy, trust, respect and commitment to social change as a result of involvement in social issues and interactions with diverse individuals (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; J. Perry, 2013; Shan & Butterwick, 2014).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is a part of an explanatory sequential, mixed-methods study (Creswell, 2014) that examines the relationship between informal and incidental learning and intercultural maturity among volunteers in adult ESL contexts. As the study is still currently in progress, this paper only included a preliminary analysis of the quantitative data. In the quantitative portion of the study, a survey was used to assess the participants' participation in informal and incidental learning activities and their level of intercultural maturity. Informal and incidental learning were measured with items adapted by the researcher based on the Learning Practices Audit (Watkins, 2019). Intercultural maturity was measured by the Global Perspective Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Engberg, 2014). Participant's demographic and organization information was also collected. In the qualitative portion of the study, data will be generated through interviews informed by the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954).

### ***Participants***

Approximately 100 adult ESL/literacy programs located in a Southern U.S.A state were contacted. The programs contacted included church-based programs, technical colleges, literacy-based programs, libraries, immigrant and refugee resettlement agencies, and community or minority serving organizations. Fifteen programs participated in this study. A total of 342 adult ESL teachers were asked to respond to the survey. In addition, the survey invitation letter was sent to the members in the state TESOL Association – Adult Education interest section.

### ***Instrument***

The instrument of this study consists of 27 items measuring the teachers' participation in informal and incidental learning, 32 items measuring their level of intercultural maturity and 8

items of demographic information. All items were in 5-Likert scale. The instrument fully adopted 32 items measuring the level of intercultural maturity from the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), and adapted 26 items from the Learning Practices Audit (LPA). The survey was administrated and distributed through Qualtrics, an internet-based survey administration software.

### ***Data preparation***

A total of 114 responses were recorded by Qualtrics. Twelve responses were removed due to partial completion. One completed response was removed because the participant identified his/her teaching context as in South America. One hundred and one completed responses were used for analysis.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

A total of 101 responses were used for this study. The participants were predominately white ( $n=89$ , 88.1%). Over half of them have been teaching for over three years ( $n=60$ , 59.4%). Most of the participants identified themselves as volunteers ( $n=68$ , 67.3%). For organizations hosting adult ESL programs, close to half of the participants taught in a church or other religious organization ( $n = 45$ , 44.6%).

Mean comparisons were conducted to understand the mean LPA and GPI differences among groups. The mean LPA of the sample was 3.36. The mean GPI of the sample was 4.21. Independent t-test was conducted to determine if there was a difference in mean LPA or GPI based on role and race. Paid instructors scored significantly higher on LPA than those who were volunteers ( $t(99) = 3.295$ ,  $p = .001$ ). There was no statistically significant difference of mean GPI between paid instructors and teachers. No statistically significant difference of mean LPA or GPI was found between teachers who identified as white and teachers who identified as other race. To determine if mean LPA and GPI differed based on teacher's years of experience, a one-way ANOVA was conducted, comparing mean LPA and GPI scores for teachers with less than 1-year experience, 1~3-year experience and over 3-year experience in adult ESL. There was a statistically significant difference of mean LPA between teachers with different length of experience ( $F(2,98) = 4.246$ ,  $p = .017$ ). The mean LPA of teachers with less than 1-year experience was statistically significantly higher than teachers with over 3-year experience. No statistically significant difference of mean GPI was found.

An analysis of the LPA data revealed the informal and incidental learning activities that teachers in the adult ESL contexts frequently engaged in. Mean scores of six items on the LPA were higher than 4. The activities teachers frequently engaged in were "learning from teaching my class" ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = .674$ ), "learning from reflecting on what worked and what did not" ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = .853$ ), "learning from mistakes" ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = .800$ ), "learning from my students in the classroom" ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = .910$ ), learning from feedback from my students ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = .984$ ), and learning from trying new things ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = .930$ ). These six informal and incidental learning activities were frequently experienced by both paid instructors and volunteers.

A principal component analysis with a Varimax rotation was used to identify the underlying factors measured by the 27 items in LPA. An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable ( $KMO = .820$ ). When loading less than 0.5 were excluded, the analysis yielded seven factors (Eigenvalues  $> 1$ ), explaining

a total of 70.971% variance. Initial Eigenvalues indicated that the first three factors explained 33.9%, 10.7% and 7.764% of the variance respectively. Factor 1 (9 items) was labelled as "Learning from and with other ESL educators". Factor 2 (6 items) was labelled as "Learning from experience in the classroom". Factor 3 (3 items) was labelled as "Learning online".

Correlational analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between informal and incidental learning and intercultural maturity. Specifically, regressions were conducted to determine if the items grouped into the 7 factors extracted from the factor analysis were significant related to the degree of intercultural maturity as determined by GPI. There was a statistically significant relationship between learning from the experience in the classroom (Factor 2) and the mean GPI ( $F(1, 99) = 9.810, p = .002$ ). The mean Factor 2 score can explain 8.1% of the GPI variance.

To understand if contextual factors moderated the relationship between the participation in informal and incidental learning activities and the degree of intercultural maturity, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. Organization support did not appear to strengthen the relationship ( $b = 1.206, t = 1.625, p > .05$ ).

## **DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The preliminary analysis of the data has revealed some interesting findings and offered some guidance for research in the next phase. First, the study confirmed that informal and incidental learning is a principle way through which adult ESL teachers acquired their knowledge and expertise. The six items identified as the most frequently experienced activities can form an informal and incidental learning circle (Marsick & Watkins, 2014). Such learning happens in the larger context of the teaching work ("I learn from teaching my class") and is often triggered by an unexpected incident (I learn from mistakes). Teachers then engage in a series of learning activities that might eventually produce a new approach to teaching ("I learn from reflecting on what worked and what did not", "I learn from trying new things"). The interaction with students plays an important role in such learning ("I learn from my students in the classroom" and "I learn from feedback from my students"). The analysis also revealed that mean LPA was subject to teachers' role and their years of experience. Paid instructors are more likely to engage in informal and incidental learning activities than volunteer teachers. This is an interesting find because Ziegler et al. (2009) have found that paid instructors and volunteers mastered about the same amount of knowledge on teaching adult literacy. These seemingly contradiction in results might stem from the implicit hierarchy embedded in the concepts of formal, nonformal, and informal learning. Surveys employing the language of formal education (e.g., learning and subject) are likely to discourage participants to report informal and incidental learning (Duguid, Mündel, & Schugurensky, 2013; McGivney, 2006). Another interesting find from the analysis is that less experienced teachers are more likely to engage in informal and incidental learning activities than experienced teachers. In a systematic review of 74 studies on teachers' informal learning in schools, Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans and Donche (2016) found that the literature is in disagreement about whether novice or experience teachers experience more informal learning activities. They concluded that novice and experienced teachers have different learning needs and might be driven to different informal learning activities. Adult ESL teachers' role and year of experience can become the variables that inform the participant selection for the qualitative phase.

Second, the low variance of GPI as explained by LPA seems to be inconsistent with previous research where volunteering in adult ESL was found to have a positive effect on enriching intercultural competence (e.g. Einfeld & Collins, 2008; J. Perry, 2013; Primavera, 1999). However, it might also suggest that GPI measures intercultural maturity more like a trait than a state. Teachers, and especially volunteers might not choose this work in the first place if they have not already processed certain level of intercultural maturity that motivated them to engage in intercultural interaction. Interviews might be able to provide more data on how volunteers make meaning of their intercultural experience in the adult ESL contexts. Nevertheless, GPI was able to provide a profile of adult ESL educators, a population has never been studied using this instrument. GPI is primarily used in studying college student's experience. Until now, over 120,000 students, staff, and faculty in over 200 institutions have completed one version of the GPI (Braskamp et al., 2014). A comparison between each subscales of GPI from the sample to the established national mean can also enrich our understanding of the adult ESL teacher population.

Third, organization support did not appear to strengthen the relationship between teachers' participation in informal and incidental learning and their intercultural maturity. The low moderating effect might be a result of the small sample size. To collect sufficient quantitative data, the recruitment of participants will continue and move towards a national sample. The next step will be recruiting participants through major national TESOL and Adult Education organizations in the United States. Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, schools in the United States have suspended face to face instruction and transitioned to online instruction. Online instruction might be an even bigger challenge for adult ESL teachers because many adult ESL programs operate with limited budget and do not use instructional technology as frequently as schools in K-12 and higher education. The data used in the preliminary analysis were collected prior to the Covid-19 outbreak in the United States. As the data collection continues, we might see some changes in scores on organization support and LPA as adult ESL programs might need to assume a bigger role in supporting the teachers and teachers might take more initiative in exploring instructional technology and experimenting alternative approach to deliver instruction.

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