

Changing Languages, Cultures, and Self: The Adult ESL Experience of Perspective Transformation

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Abstract: Research was conducted among 208 adult ESL learners enrolled in college-based ESL programs. This study reveals that perspective transformation is frequently experienced in this context, and characterizes its nature. Implications for adult learning theory, education practice, and further research are discussed.

Introduction

Building upon Freire's groundbreaking literacy work (Freire, 1973), adult education has explored the changes which adults go through as they learn the written form of their language. More recently, Mezirow's work in perspective transformation has also been applied as a lens through which to view literacy learning experiences (Mezirow, 1990, 1996) and cultural change (Kennedy, 1994; Taylor, 1994, 1998). However, to date, there has been no research inquiry about perspective transformation among a diverse group of adult ESL (English as a second language) learners. The purpose of this study was to begin to fill that void.

The ESL adult education field has included literature that describes adult education principles, guidelines for practice, and some of the distinctive difficulties that adult ESL learners have in the classroom (California Department of Education, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). While these are very foundational and practical considerations, this research study focuses on the application of adult learning theory to practice. This study was undertaken in order to examine the experience of transformational learning among college-based adult (ESL) learners in order that adult educators may better understand and serve them. Three research questions were answered: (1) What proportion of the sampled population of adult ESL learners experienced a perspective transformation within the context of their education? (2) What common themes were evident in the perspective transformation experience among these adult ESL learners? and (3) What facilitates perspective transformation among adult ESL learners?

Background

Transformational learning is the process whereby adult learners critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, and values in light of acquiring new knowledge and begin a process of personal and social change. These changes result in a more comprehensive, yet differentiating frame of reference by which learners view and interpret their world (Mezirow, 1990, 1996). Similarly, it is recognized that the process of language acquisition can result in changes to an individual's identity and perspective (Brown, 1994; Poole, 1992). The "ideological model" of literacy extends the impact of literacy and ESL beyond the individual to social, political, and economic realities of society (Foster, 1997). In relation to these social changes, literature on acculturation issues

and experiences describe some of the specific social changes that adult ESL learners experience (Brown, 1994; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Bridging transformational learning theory with these perspectives of personal and social change stresses the integration of new learning with life experiences among adult ESL learners.

Research on perspective transformation has revealed changes among adult learners in many settings including cross-cultural settings, higher education, and medical rehabilitation (Taylor, 1998). Although educators know little about perspective transformation among adult

ESL learners, this research builds upon the literacy theoretical basis and perspective transformation research. (Brown, 1994; Foster, 1997; Jacobson, 1996; Taylor, 1994)

Research Method

The research was conducted primarily from a phenomenological perspective, as the researcher sought to understand the perspective transformation experience of the participants from their view. An assessment tool and interview format, "The Learning Activities Survey", that was developed in previous research (King, 1997, 1998a) was adapted for this use. This adaptation was the result of pilot studies with similarly college-based adult ESL learners. The final form of the assessment tool, "The Learning Activities Survey - ESL Format", included changes in vocabulary, the order of presentation of the questions, and specialized questions about perspective transformation and demographics that were pertinent to this study of adult ESL learners. The instrument includes objective and free response questions and has a follow-up interview format with additional questions.

Questionnaires and instructions were distributed in packets for each ESL class and when completed, they were returned to the researcher. During the initial analysis of these data, a "PT-Index" category is assigned to each completed questionnaire; this category is determined by an assessment of responses to five questions. A "PT-Index" category of "3" indicates having had a perspective transformation in regard to educational experience in adult ESL classes and a category "1" is for those who have not. Following this evaluation, a limited number of follow-up interviews were conducted in Spanish and English with those who had experienced a perspective transformation. This process was followed in order to supplement the survey data and verify initial data analysis. The final analysis of the data included individual effects, frequencies, proportions, correlations, and coding of free responses and interviews. While a causal-comparative model was used to identify any contribution learning activities (e.g., critical reflection, collaborative learning) might have to perspective transformation, a phenomenological perspective was used in the follow-up interviews in order to more fully understand the adults' learning experiences.

Description of the Sample

Two hundred and eight adult ESL learners from three different colleges' ESL programs in the New York City metropolitan area participated in this study. Intermediate and advanced ESL students were sought because of the required reading level to complete the instrument. As illustrated in Table 1, 75% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 29. In addition,

75.2% were single, 23.8% married, and 1% divorced or separated. Gender served as another descriptor; 63.9% of these participants were female, and the rest, 36.1% were male. Race identification was in four categories; these were white, non-Hispanic, 20.9%; Hispanic, 40.3%; black, non-Hispanic, 14.9%; Asian or Pacific Islander, 19.9% and 4.0% other. Countries of origin numbered 51, which may be described by geographical distribution as: South America and Latin America, 59%; Eastern Europe, 16.1%; Asia, 14.6%; Africa, 7.3%; Europe, 3%. Prior education levels of the respondents were dominated by "some elementary school" at 61.5% and "some university" at 22.5%. More than two-thirds(67.4%) of the respondents had been in ESL classes for 1 to 3 years, and the average time in the USA was 5.1 years. Generalizability beyond the scope of the stated demographics should be done with caution; this sample was primarily young, recently immigrated, and continuing in their studies as college-based ESL learners. A typical profile of a respondent in this study may be one of a single, Hispanic female in her 20's with "some" elementary schooling, who has emigrated from a Latin American country within the last 5 years.

Table 1

Age Range of Respondents

<u>Age</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<18	8	3.8
18-21	83	39.9
22-29	73	35.1
30-39	24	11.5
40-49	7	3.4
50-59	1	0.5
60-69	0	--
70+	0	--
Missing	12	5.8
N=208		

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research have been extraordinary; while previous research among adult learners in higher education had demonstrated a 32.5% rate (N = 422) of experiencing transformational learning in relation to their educational studies (King, 1997), this most recent research among adult learners enrolled in college-based ESL programs demonstrates a 66.8% (N=208) rate of occurrence. These respondents widely identified with Mezirow's stages of perspective transformation as represented in the instrument and were eager to explain the changes they had experienced. In comparison to previous studies, (King, 1998b), their free responses were more plentiful and substantial, and the scope of the transformation was far-reaching as in the words of one participant, "What changed? My attitude, my personality, my behavior, my language, the way I act."

There were three themes of perspective transformation experiences recounted by the participants: language learning, cultural, and personal change. In each of these both instrumental and communicative learning were evidenced, and while both objective and subjective reframing were evident, the most vividly recounted were the personal examination and change inherent in subjective reframing (Mezirow, 1990, 1996).

One major theme of transformational learning was language learning; as the participants engaged in adult ESL classes, they changed their thoughts about learning the English language. Some of them thought English was easier and/or more enjoyable to learn than they expected, and others saw relationships of similarity or dissimilarity between their native language and English. This highlights the fact that adult ESL learners come to educational experiences with preconceived ideas about the English language and learning it, and that while it could be just objective reframing, instead the learners were engaged in evaluating their own assumptions and beliefs. The adult ESL learners who participated in this study evidently come from programs that are successful in overcoming these barriers and further research may reveal the reasons for their success in order to inform other ESL programs.

A second major theme of these responses, cultural changes, was also twofold in nature: learning the United States culture (acculturation) and developing intercultural awareness. The adult ESL learners were surprised that the American culture they were learning to cope with was different from what they had expected. For example, "My ESL classes help me to feel more comfortable in the US and the society. It also has changed my ideas about Americans;" and "I understand better the American culture, so that I see now the country, the USA, with another point of view. They have helped me to know my position in the society that I am living in. Because I'm learning the English language I've seen the country in a different way."

The learners repeatedly echoed another major development within their social and cultural understanding, they became more aware of and appreciative of people from other cultures. In the scope of perspective transformation, intercultural awareness is a significant breakthrough; these ESL classes were effective in helping to guide learners through this experience and they readily described the changes: "Sometimes our views was (sic) wrong on some ideas. After we discuss that we realize that our views is (sic) wrong. If we listen to someone else we also learn how to understand them better;" "In the ESL class we often talk about religion, people beliefs which made me change my opinion about others with different beliefs." And "I have become a more objective person since taking ESL - I believe that every religion, every culture, has a different way of thinking and are good like mine." The perspective transformations that comprise the cultural theme vary in several ways. In one respect, ideas about the American culture could be wedded to the individual or merely be a superficial opinion, and yet intercultural awareness and tolerance is deeply rooted within an individual (Brown, 1994). In addition, the intercultural awareness usually had more to do with interpersonal interactions and risky self-assessment, that the reshaping of ideas about American culture did not necessarily entail. However, all the accounts that were of a cultural theme were tied to preconceived ideas and beliefs about cultures, the learners had to face a disparity in their belief system, evaluate the difference, and make a decision to accept a new perspective. These are very vivid, classic examples of the kind of perspective transformations adult ESL learners experience.

The third theme of perspective transformation was in the scope of personal change. The adult ESL learners reported how they gained greater self-esteem and empowerment as they learned to cope with learning the new language and culture. This greater self-confidence affected what they did, how they related to others, and how they thought about themselves. "By learning the language I was capable to read papers and what is most important to understand them. So I could judge on what I see and read, instead of what I hear from others;" "Now I can understand the news on TV. I can go to different places and talk with other people. I feel different than before;" "I never thought I could study in an American University, now English has opened other doors for my future in this country. I say, if I want it, I can do it." One of the predominate goals of adult education is to empower adults, and this research demonstrates a clear manifestation of empowerment in adult ESL learning that promotes transformative learning.

Among the 139 adult ESL learners who had experienced a perspective transformation, the facilitators that they most frequently cited were discussion of concerns, 56.1%; class activities, 40.3%; essays, 38.8%; assigned readings, 36.0%; writing about concerns, 33.8%; group projects, 28.8%; personal journal, 28.1%; role plays, 16.5%; and worksheets, 15.8%. (It should be noted that since multiple learning activities could be selected, the percentages do not necessarily total 100%.) The participants cited which facilitators were available to them and which ones actually contributed to their perspective transformation experience. While these data do not mean that the ESL classroom alone may cause perspective transformation, they demonstrate adult ESL learners' perceptions that it has a contributing role in the experience.

Viewed in light of the themes of perspective transformation these adult learners described in their free-responses and interviews, one can see a complementary relationship with the learning activities. The adult ESL learners have documented that these specific learning activities contributed to the perspective transformation. It was through these learning activities that the ESL students were learning the new language, and also being changed in the dimensions of language, culture, and self. Nonetheless, a strict, isolated causal relationship between individual learning activities and perspective transformation is not proven. Many conditions and experiences contribute to a perspective transformation experience. However, learning activities have been focused on in this study, because relevant to the educational process, educators only have control over the classroom and what happens therein.

Finally, crosstabulations were evaluated between demographic information and experiences of perspective transformation ("PT-Index 1" and "PT-Index 3"). The Chi-square (X^2) values were determined in order to examine significant relationships between these variables. One modification of the original data was needed because statistically each cell of data needs to have a minimum of five members; the age, marital status, and education categories were redivided and coded in order to meet this condition. As can be seen in Table 2, none of the demographics were significant at the $p < .05$ level, thus, indicating that no relationship other than what could be caused by chance is apparent in the data.

Table 2

Chi-Square (X^2) Test of Demographic Measurements versus PT-Index 1 and 3

	<u>Chi-Square (X^2)</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>Significance (2-sided)</u>
Age	3.279	2	.194
Marital Status	1.814	1	.178
Race	7.259	4	.123
Gender	.459	1	.498
Education	1.845	3	.605

Implications

This research confirms that the adult ESL classroom is a place where much change occurs, and that perspective transformation theory provides a basis from which to view these changes. The changes identified were foundational not only to language acquisition, but also to the learner's understanding of culture and self. Critical to educational practice, these perspective transformation experiences underscore the fact that adult ESL learners have many needs and concerns. From the learners' accounts, the programs that they were enrolled in encouraged reflection, discussion, and critical thinking, and learning activities that were tied to these functions contributed to perspective transformation. However, it does not seem to be a sterile utilization of teaching techniques that contributed to these profound changes; instead, it was their use in this context of critically reflective thinking and discussion in a safe, supportive environment. The free-responses and interviews distinctly portray support of the person in the educational process.

Our classrooms can be changed by this research if we are ready to examine our educational practice. This research returns us to basic adult learning principles, such as recognizing the experience that adults bring to the classroom, creating a climate of respect, and active participation. Each of these ingredients are important in facilitating transformational learning and were portrayed in the accounts of the research participants. Adult educators can read these accounts and ask if this sort of change is happening among their students and how they can facilitate and support such significant learning.

The adult ESL classroom is rich territory within which to proceed with further adult learning and perspective transformation research. The changes among these learners occur more often and with deeper roots than in higher education in general (King, 1997, 1998b). Direction for such work may be in further characterizing the perspective transformation experience. We might ask: Because this experience is so pronounced within this setting, what may be evident that we could be missed in less dramatic change? The contributing role of learning activities may also be further examined. Why do the learners more often cite certain learning activities? What makes them successful in fostering perspective transformation? Revealing how adult ESL learning experiences contribute to perspective transformation may lead to structuring adult ESL classes and programs in new ways in order to support the learners.

Conclusion

Until now, there has been little research about perspective transformation among adult ESL learners. This study begins to offer some understanding of the breadth and depth of perspective

transformation that these learners experience. Realizing that not only are adult learners learning a new language, but also changing their perspectives of language, the host culture, intercultural awareness, self-confidence and gaining empowerment, broadcasts the message that adult ESL learning is much more than what it appears at face value. Along the path of language acquisition, acculturation, and personal transformation ESL classes offer the opportunity for new beginnings and new dreams. In the words of one participant, "I changed my way of looking to the future. Before I didn't have a specific goal, and now I have it. I learned a new language and I could see that I could do more than I expected.

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