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Transformative Learning: The English as a Second Language Teacher's Experience

■ **The central focus of this article is to emphasize the importance of transformational learning for teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). Mezirow's (1990, 1991) theory, in which adults experience a change in perspective that disrupts their previous knowledge or beliefs, is enhanced with student and teacher stories, as well as pertinent literature on the subjects of culture shock, knowledge, communication, and critical reflection, to provide a foundation for ongoing learning and transformation in ESL teachers.**

No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn from the world anew. (Albert Einstein)

Stories

Growing up in Iran during the dark years of the Iran-Iraq war was not easy. Hearing the sounds of falling bombs, the fear that the next bomb can hit your house, or the house of any of your loved ones, is not something I can forget. Putting the fears of the war aside, the pressure from the Islamic government was at its worst. Women were often stopped at checkpoints and severely punished for not following the dress codes. I remember running away from what was then called the "morality police" when I was a teenager because one of my friends was listening to her walkman and we had been spotted. Needless to say, when I first moved to the U.S., the meaning of democracy shocked me. I felt so

free I could ask any question and not be arrested. I could wear whatever I desired and not have to worry about punishment.

Schooling system in Iran is very different than the U.S. There is no such thing as teacher-student relationship. You obey your teachers, regardless of your own opinion. The student must not disagree. If the teacher says something, then you must do it and the student is never heard. Therefore, the first time that I observed a discussion in one of my English classes in high school, I was shocked by the observation that the teacher was actually accepting suggestions from the students, as suppose to dictating his own opinions to them. The education system in the U.S. encourages students to question what they learn. In my opinion, this is a precious quality, and for this I am so thankful to have had the chance to attend high school and University here.

I have lived in the U.S. for about 10 years. I often miss Iran, and its warm culture. But I have also become accustomed to the American culture. Therefore, when people ask me whether it was difficult for me to make the transition between two cultures, I stop to myself and think. I am not sure if I have ever made the "transition" but rather developed an appreciation for positives and negatives of both cultures. (Iranian immigrant, personal communication, May 2003)

When the war started in Bosnia everything changed the people and the whole country. The War started because Former Yugoslavia didn't want to have Muslims in Bosnia and they wanted to take it to be part of Serbia. Serbia had every kind of weapon, but Bosnia didn't. War started on March 1, 1992 because one Serbian guy was killed in Sarajevo. Bosnia didn't have a lot of weapons only rifles for bear and deer hunting. The war made a lot of innocent people die, and the Serbian guys killed everybody they saw with their sniper rifles. In central Sarajevo, were I lived; there was a lot of sniper shooting, and grenade throwing. Lot of people died close to our house. When my parents wanted to get

food and water they had to go underground so nobody would notice them. My mom had to go every 2 or 3 days to bring the food to me, my brother, and my grandparents. My dad was in the Serbian Camps at that time and there were a lot of people that were captured and killed. My dad was shot 9 times but he is still well today and has good health. Bosnians and Serbians were fighting and many people were killed during that time. The neighbors that lived close to my house were shot by a sniper rifle in the head and only I saw it with my bare eyes. Nobody would go outside because it was too risky to help someone, because you can get killed.

The one thing that was the worst ever was when a single shell fell in the market place in Central Sarajevo and killed 68 people and wounded about 200 people or more. When I watched TV in Bosnia I could see people asking for help and everybody around them was dead. That was the worst thing that happened because there were a lot of people at one time the grenade just fell and killed most of the people. There were lots of killings ordered by the general of Serbia to shoot Bosnian people that were in prison. When the war finished there were still some killings going around but not that many. The UN and NATO helped our country a lot because they got food for ours and other families that were living in our country. Later, after about 2 to 3 years everything got to its place and then the major reconstruction began in Bosnia. They had to fix lots of buildings, but the problem was that they didn't have the money. UN donated lots of money and they helped with building houses and big buildings. There is this particular building (It was a Newspaper company) that was left as it is now because the Bosnians want to show to everybody how war was and how dangerous it was to be at that time and how to be surviving and also seeing a lots of killings.

That was my experience when I was in my homeland and now I would never ever want the war to strike again because people suffered a lot and I don't want to see that anymore. (Bosnian student, personal communication, August 2003)

The preceding stories are contributions from immigrant students and friends whom I asked to express in writing a summary of life experiences in their respective countries. I include these written accounts in their entirety because they represent examples of the types of stories I credit with my transformation, which I describe in the following paragraph. I hope that teachers who read this article and these stories, whether they are new to the field or have taught for a number of years, consider and recognize the power of their students in encouraging ongoing and transformational learning not only in their students but also in themselves.

It is indeed necessary for teachers to recognize the impact of their students on their development. In my experience as a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL), the more I learned from my students, the more I expanded my world and applied this to my teaching. Before I began teaching and volunteering in ESL classrooms, my exposure to countries other than the US was minimal. When I had the chance to actually listen to stories such as the ones listed above, I experienced a form of culture shock because their experiences did not fit with my knowledge and understanding of the world. People who truly struggled in life with matters such as bombings and wars turned me away from traditional ways of thinking and traditional sources of knowledge acquisition. I began to dedicate my time to learning and writing about my immigrant students and friends. Each day I would hear life stories from immigrant and refugee students and friends that prompted me to discover more about their respective countries. Thus, along with my approach to teaching ESL, the whole focus of my life changed because I had firsthand accounts of people from different countries and I felt as though that information should be shared with others to reach a greater level of understanding. In the end, I had transformed.

It is my hope that through this article, teachers will begin to see their transformation process as a result of their students' experiences, perhaps with poverty, perhaps with war,

or perhaps simply with their culture. Many associate learning with a traditional school setting, rows of desks, and emphasize the teachers' ability to impart their knowledge and evoke change in their students. However, learning occurs every day in many different ways. In the classroom, students tell stories about their life experiences that often change the way we as teachers view our situations. We are less like students and teachers but more like participants and facilitators, each taking part in the exciting process of creating new knowledge and in the power of transformation.

Transformational Learning Theory

Although many theories of transformation exist today, Jack Mezirow's version, which emerged in 1978 and looked at the transformational power of learning and its application to adults, contributed revolutionary concepts to the field of education (1991). According to his theory, we may have an idea of the way something works our whole lives and one day we discover that what we had believed our whole lives is erroneous. It often takes a major occurrence—described as a “disorienting dilemma”—to provoke a transformation. Mezirow proposed that a disorienting dilemma could be “a divorce, death of a loved one, change in job status, retirement, or other” (pp. 13-14). A great deal of theory exists that may help to explain the process of change and the importance of disequilibrium in providing the impetus for change (see Merriam, 2001; Mezirow, 1990, 1991). In this instance, the disequilibrium to which I'm referring is what we might experience when our students' views or stories conflict with our (often colloquial) understandings and beliefs about the larger world.

In a previous study (McClinton, 2003), I interviewed several ESL teachers from various educational levels and I have included two of these teachers and their transformational experiences in this article. Although their stories differ, they represent a similar experience of transformation through their immigrant students:

So I started trying to learn a little Spanish and it was magical because as soon as I started to learn something about them, their whole attitude changed and I look back and think, that's pretty obvious, who wouldn't know that? Well I didn't know that, and it became not me telling them what to do but let's get this job done like a family and that was an interesting change for me and I try to carry that same “we're all in this together” to the classroom now. (p. 47)

For this ESL educator, a realization through time allowed him to better communicate with his Hispanic coworkers, which in turn allowed him to approach his own teaching experience with ESL students from a different perspective.

The next ESL teacher gives her experience of change in the following paragraph:

So I don't think I would have had that [looking at her own government from one of her student's perspectives] if I had not spent these past six years working so closely with people who have not had the same life experience as me. I would not have been able to step out of my comfort zone, my comfortable little American way of life, to even entertain the fact that there are people in the world who don't like how we live. It is just so clear to me and I don't think I would have had that perspective had I not been exposed to the world at large the way I am and I feel so lucky for this experience and I'm so grateful for this perspective now and it comes from my students. (pp. 47-48)

As with the previous teacher, this teacher experienced a transformation through her students. However, she describes stepping out of her “comfortable little American way of life” to gain the knowledge that she has today. Arriving at a point of transformation is often uncomfortable and disorienting, and these feelings

have similarities to those felt when one passes through culture shock.

Culture Shock and Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory

There are several parallels between an experience of culture shock and one of transformational learning. Culture shock consists of five connected stages (Guanipa, 1998), which provide a model for a transformational learning experience. Stage one of culture-shock theory is known as the incubation or honeymoon stage, in which everything is new and exciting. We can look at stage one of culture shock as a period of information gathering corresponding to culturally prescribed prior belief systems in Mezirow's theory (1991, p. 32). Stage one for the ESL teacher may be a time for listening to students' stories and interpreting these stories from the viewpoint of his or her own cultural background. This stage involves a great deal of information gathering but no analysis.

Stage two of culture-shock theory maintains that the knowledge of different social realities causes a feeling of disorientation. There is a direct connection between the feeling of disorientation proposed by Mezirow (1990) and the process that occurs in stage two of culture shock. For teachers of ESL, there is no need to leave the country to experience a type of culture shock or disorienting dilemma because the power of listening to people who have experienced religious persecution, have lived through wars, or who offer a completely different cultural perspective often invoke similar reactions. The conflict of student stories or experiences with previous notions held by ESL teachers may cause a confused and disoriented mental state in the teacher as well as the student. According to Schumann (1978), the resulting mental state produced by culture shock may cause the learner to reject not only learning a language but also "himself, his own culture, the organization for which he is working, and the people of the host country" (p. 167).

An important aspect of the learning

process for Mezirow is one's concept of self (1991, p. 35), which begins to change from rejection to acceptance as during stage three of culture shock, when an understanding of the new culture is achieved. The visitor familiarizes himself or herself with the environment and begins an evaluation process of old versus new customs and habits. For Mezirow (1991), not only recognizing that our generalized views of the world are often fallible but also critically examining why this is so is an important part of the learning process and of one's self-concept (p. 35). For ESL teachers, this is a time for evaluation of themselves and their culture as it relates to the culture of their students.

During the fourth stage of culture shock, there is a realization of the negative and positive aspects of the foreign culture. This stage is also a time for critically reflecting on previous knowledge versus new knowledge. The fifth and final stage occurs upon return to one's country of origin and is known as "re-entry" shock (Guanipa, 1998). At this point, ESL teachers may realize, for example, that relating to colleagues or friends outside of the classroom who have not experienced a similar process may prove difficult now that the teacher has an expanded knowledge of the world of their students. In essence, by experiencing a type of culture shock within the classroom, the teacher has transformed his or her prior knowledge of the world of his or her students by critically reflecting upon old versus new belief systems. This entire process develops as a result of student stories. Yet, gathering information through these stories alone is not enough. The following section further defines essential components to the transformational learning process: knowledge, communication, and critical reflection.

Knowledge

Knowledge is of great importance to ESL teachers because they have taken on the great task of fostering its making by their students. According to Novak (1993), there is a distinction between information and knowledge. He

states, "Information can be shuffled around, whereas knowledge has structure, a history of creation, and affective connotations" (p.172). When we simply gather information, as in the first stage of culture shock, we are not altering previous knowledge or beliefs. For Mezirow (1991) the knowledge we gather as a part of our development determines how we view the world (p. 7), and this knowledge is a great deal more difficult than information to discard or reject because it is an intrinsic part of our being. Recognizing that previous knowledge or beliefs have become a part of the inherent structure upon which we form our views of the world is an important aspect of transformational learning. For the ESL teacher, the knowledge achieved as a result of not only listening to student stories but also communicating and reflecting upon their meaning can modernize previous and incompatible expectations and knowledge of the world within and around the classroom.

Communication

The fostering of knowledge depends upon the way we communicate. In her 1997 article addressing intercultural communication in multicultural schools, Van Der Linde claims, "In an education situation where more than one culture is involved, successful communication is a prerequisite for the effective transfer of knowledge" (p. 194). In a multicultural environment such as an ESL classroom, language is often an obstacle for transformation of knowledge because it frequently differs among participants and facilitators. Van Der Linde gives suggestions for improving the communication process, such as avoiding ambiguity, analyzing the communication skills of the students, giving feedback, encouraging students to talk with one another, listening, and avoiding discrimination in the classroom (p. 200). These practices may prove very useful for knowledge acquisition and the reflective process of teachers. According to Mezirow (1991), some of the most significant learning involves an ability to explain and describe intentions, values,

ideals, moral issues, society, politics, and so forth (p. 75). Without effective means of communication, it is difficult to reflect upon previous knowledge and beliefs.

Critical Reflection

Mezirow (1990) examines the reflective process and maintains that we have *meaning schemes*, which are habitual rules for interpreting, such as our expectation that the sun will rise in the east and set in the west; and *meaning perspectives*, which are habits and assumptions, such as our expectation that all people from a certain country will act in a certain way. These meaning schemes and meaning perspectives guide us through our daily lives (p. 2). For the most part, Mezirow argues that these structures, which I have previously referred to as previous knowledge or beliefs, occur as a result of the society in which we live and are reinforced by emotional and cultural experiences that occur in our childhood and adulthood.

It is important to note that when examining meaning schemes and meaning perspectives (p. 2), the ability and willingness to critically reflect is essential to the learning process. Understanding the ways in which our meaning schemes and perspectives stunt our learning processes is a vital step to advancing our own understandings. By critically reflecting on their reactions to their students' stories, ESL teachers can, with greater depth, analyze personal biases and stereotypes that impede their own transformation and ability to reach their full potential as teachers. However, it is not enough to say to someone "critically reflect" without explaining the ways that it can be accomplished. The following are suggestions for ways ESL teachers can accomplish critical reflection.

Dialogue

Engaging in critical dialogue is a way to foster critical reflection and to begin the transformation process. Saavedra (1996) maintains that teacher transformation occurs through the creation of critical and reflective

social contexts that place teachers at the center of their own learning (p. 272). Saavedra suggests that teacher study groups can form an important part of the learning process (p. 272). I add that the dialogue between teacher and students also plays an essential role in the transformation process; in this case ESL teachers may learn a great deal from general conversation with their students.

Listening

Talking must also be accompanied by a willingness to listen. The point of critical reflection is not to win an argument or to intensely prove a point, but rather to be willing to engage in a dialogue that includes participation, listening, discussion of the underlying motives, and reasoning about what is being said. It is often the case that the non-dominant culture (in this case, the students) is the one with the most to say, and therefore willingness to listen is an essential component of critical reflection. This is doubly important if we as ESL teachers expect to facilitate learning in our students and in ourselves.

Journal Writing

Journal writing provides a valuable tool for encouraging dialogue with oneself to foster critical reflection (Lukinsky, 1990). For example, instead of automatically disagreeing with another person, thinking and writing can help to critically reflect upon why we disagree with that person and how our previous knowledge may influence our current belief systems. The process of journaling impressions of students and classroom events and thinking about what is written offers ESL teachers a different approach to understanding, empathizing, and critically reflecting.

Inquiry

In addition to journal writing, ESL teachers may find narrative inquiry helpful to their learning process. Johnson and Golombek (2002) suggest narrative inquiry as a useful tool for critically reflecting upon experiences:

Through such inquiry, teachers recognize the consequences of their beliefs, knowledge, and experiences on what and how they teach. They recognize who their students are, where their students come from, what their students know, and what their students need to know. (p. 5)

Teachers may start with a simple “Where are you from?” and receive many different answers that can in turn lead to further inquiry and student narrative.

A Wave of Immigrants

The importance of ESL teachers to the teaching profession and to the world is also indicated in the dramatic increase of the immigrant and refugee population in the US in the last three decades. Camarota (2002) examined and summarized the U.S. foreign-born population surveys (2001), stating that the number of immigrants living in the US has more than tripled since 1970, from 9.6 million to 28.4 million. As a percentage of the U.S. population, immigrants have more than doubled, from 4.7 percent in 1970 to 10.4 percent in 2000. By historical standards, the number of immigrants living in the US is unprecedented. Even at the peak of the great wave of early 20th-century immigration, the number of immigrants living in the US was less than half what it is today (13.5 million in 1910).

Immigration has become the determinate factor in population growth. The 11.2 million immigrants who indicated they arrived between 1990 and 2000, plus the 6.4 million children born to immigrants in the US during the 1990s, are equal to almost 70 percent of U.S. population growth in the last 10 years (Camarota, 2002).

As diversity abounds, it becomes increasingly important that ESL teachers fully understand how the many different experiences of their students can affect their own lives. As an ESL teacher, I have come to understand the transformative effects my students’ stories have had on my fundamen-

tal understanding of my world and of the teaching process. I have also found that this important aspect of teacher/student interaction has traditionally been overlooked in educational literature. If there is a lack of literature with regard to the teaching practice in general education, then this information is even less available with regard to teachers of ESL. According to Freeman and Johnson (1998), "Even if one argues that many published articles conclude with some sort of pedagogical implications for language teachers, in most cases these ramifications do not focus on the preparation and the continuing professional education of ESOL teachers" (p. 398).

Potential Results

ESL teachers who have learned and experienced transformative learning through the power of student stories not only help to educate at the school level but also have the chance to invoke a similar learning process in others who may have little or no knowledge of the world. Freire (1993) wrote of such education and change: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (p. 47). Though I have not addressed an issue of oppression as does Freire, the idea of initiating social change through critical reflection and transformative learning sets the stage for a greater goal of helping teachers realize the importance of learning from their students and the impact of this learning process upon society as a whole, which is ever-changing. Indeed, teachers are not simply imparters of knowledge but thinkers, reflectors, and ultimately transformational learners. Perhaps in gaining this knowledge of their own transformative process, ESL teachers may, along with becoming better teachers, help to influence others who may have little or no knowledge of other countries. In doing this, we may reach a greater goal of peace and understanding

throughout this country and, ultimately, throughout the world.

Suggestions for Further Study

I realize that ESL teachers come from many different cultural backgrounds and social settings. It would be interesting to know if a larger population of ESL teachers, no matter where they are from or where they teach, have experienced similar types of transformational learning experiences as a result of their students. Perhaps a more extensive qualitative or quantitative approach based on surveys and a larger population would give a more accurate and comprehensive representation of the literature and the research. I would also suggest that research in transformational learning connect more with the psychology of transformation. Last, a look at the differences (if any) between volunteering and teaching and its implications for transformational learning would provide an appealing avenue of research. With the increasing number of immigrants, many schools seek volunteers from the community to help in the classroom. It would be interesting to know how other people, not necessarily teachers, are affected by ESL student stories.

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