Articles

Transformational Learning Theory in the University EFL Online Classroom

Andrew Enomoto[*]

Abstract

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, classes around the world changed to an exclusively online format. With this change has come a myriad of challenges such as burnout, Zoom-fatigue, higher dropout rates and decreased student motivation. However, one of the most common complaints from students is the lack of meaningful learning that takes place in the university online classroom. Some educators have taken this opportunity to reevaluate their teaching methods and adapt to the online environment, however many educators continue to struggle with offering meaningful content. This literature review will discuss some of the ways in which Mezirow's transformational learning theory can be applied to result in more positive online learning outcomes in the university EFL online classroom context. The author concludes that critical reflection, rational dialogue and authentic learning tasks are three of the concepts that may help to produce more positive online learning outcomes.

Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world in Spring of 2020, students and teachers were forced to shift from traditional classrooms to online or remote learning environments. While distance education has come a long way from the mid-1990s when it first began, many schools, students, and instructors faced key challenges in adapting to the

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[*] Faculty of International Studies, Bunkyo University

sudden change. According to a November 2020 article from the *Toronto Star*, the switch to the online classroom resulted in many teachers and students feeling more isolated and stressed, many commenting that they feared there had been a deterioration in the quality of instruction and learning (Raza, 2020). Navigator (2020) also polled 2700 students and instructors about their experiences in the changeover to the online classroom. Results showed that 62% of students felt that there was a negative impact on learning. Furthermore, 80% of instructors answered that they experienced a negative impact on their ability to deliver course content effectively. Due to the widespread nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse effects on schools, there has been a significant effect on the education, social life, and mental health of students (Odriozola-Gonzalez et al., 2020).

One of the biggest problems brought about by the switch to a solely remote learning model has been sustaining engagement and motivation. According to Hartnett (2016) successful online learning occurs when students are able to synthesize meaning through multimodal communication and to develop epistemic understanding through active engagement in a digital context. It is critical, therefore, that the students are motivated and engaged throughout the lesson. However, burnout and fatigue due to the pandemic and online courses which continue over a long period of time may cause stress and anxiety, which in turn demotivate students (Brooks et al., 2020). Addressing the

psychological needs of students in the online classroom will undoubtedly become a focal point even after the pandemic has ended.

Transformational learning theory may present a way not only to keep students actively engaged but also to encourage them to become more autonomous learners, a skill which the remote classroom requires. This literature review will examine some of the ways in which transformational learning theory may be applied to the university classroom experience. However, it is important to state that not all learning is transformational and that not all classes should utilize this model. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to discount certain aspects of transformational learning theory in the remote learning classroom.

Transformational Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow first coined the phrase 'transformational learning theory' in 1978 to discuss adult education in which personal biases and faulty perceptions were changed. Since then, it has evolved to encompass a reimagined learning theorem. Transformational learning follows the principle that one's values, beliefs, and assumptions are replaced with new perspectives that are "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). According to Mezirow (2000), the goal of transformational learning is fostering a sense of greater autonomy. It is learning that transforms beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotions through a reflective shift in knowledge, attitudes, or perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). However, Derounian (2017)

argues that there is no one formula for inspirational teaching and that considerations must be made for personal preferences, cultural differences, and even how the individual teacher/learner feels at any given point.

In the university classroom, transformational learning should improve active student engagement in the learning process, build self-confidence, and enhance academic and learning opportunities while improving a sense of community and belonging. This perspective is consistent with that of other scholars such as Paulo Friere (1978) who argue that education can be liberating for the student and, therefore, in its purest form empowers the students to become autonomous thinkers. Transformational learning not only benefits the students but the teachers as well.

Shevlin, et.al (2000) make the point that a teacher's charisma is one the critical parts of inspiriting motivation in students. Whether students feel inspired, heard, and interested in a topic heavily depends on the teacher who is delivering the content. According to McGonigal (2004) the inspirational impact of teaching stems from the use of language and the relationship between the teacher and pupil. Transformational learning theory relies on the idea that the teacher will challenge the students to question their own personal beliefs so that they may gain new perspectives and insights to change their values and preconceptions. One could argue that teachers who are charismatic are not only more naturally inclined to do this, but also engage students in the topic, regardless of whether they undergo transformational learning or not. James (2001) further comments that teachers who show genuine concern for their students' earning and growth were viewed more favorably by students. Staff who are more emotionally aware of their students' understandings, feelings, and emotions are more equipped to help students engage in the 10 steps of transformational learning.

Rosebrough and Leverett (2011) state that the role of the instructor is to help students expand their mastery of key topics while transforming their learning-related attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills; this makes the teacher more of a guide than a vessel from which information is passed. Mezirow's transformational learning theory requires students to transverse a 10-step process:

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Critical assessment of one's assumptions
3. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of the transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
4. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
5. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
6. Provisional trying of new roles
7. Planning of a course of action
8. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by new perspectives

It is important to note that these 10 steps may not necessarily occur in such a straightforward matter and that not all students will be able to reach step 10.

Taylor (2007) condenses these 10 steps into three easier-to-understand processes, which this paper will use: critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action. Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) present an easy-to-understand model of transformational learning with three main pillars. The first contains the theoretical underpinnings which involve promoting individual and collective self-efficacy, challenging habits of mind and points of view, realizing the ideal self and a vision of the future, and transcending self-interest to achieve goals. The second pillar consists of the basic principles: facilitating acquisition and mastery of key course concepts, enhancing strategies and skills for learning and discovery, and promoting positive learning-related attitudes, values, and beliefs. Finally, the third pillar includes the core methods: establishing a shared vision for the course, providing modeling and mastery experiences, challenging, and encouraging students, giving personalized attention and feedback, creating experiential lessons, and promoting preflection and reflection.

Critical Reflection

One of the key components to transformational learning theory is the role of critical reflection in helping the student to change their perspectives on a certain topic (Merriam, 2004). Mezirow (1991) differentiates between three types of reflection on an experience: premise reflection, content reflection, and process reflection. In premise reflection students will reflect on their assumptions or preconceived notions on a certain topic, examining how their beliefs and values were formed. Content reflection has to do with thinking about the actual experience of something, while process reflection is about examining how to handle an experience. Mezirow (1991) argues that premise reflection is the only type of reflection that results in transformational learning because it causes the students to challenge their own beliefs and to examine them from different perspectives, thereby helping to enforce transformation.

Merriam (2004) states that the reflection process is especially important at two points of Mezirow's (2000) 10-step process of transformational learning. When a student encounters a "disorienting dilemma," that student is forced to question their beliefs, values, and opinions on the topic. This often results in self-examination. The next point is when the student engages in a critical assessment of assumptions, which one could argue is likened to premise reflection. Mezirow (1991) takes this a step further and argues that premise reflection is a postformal activity in which problems are not necessarily just solved, but rather, questions are raised regarding a topic's validity. This process is equated with a higher learning subset of principles which further facilitates a transformation in the learner.

Rational Dialogue

Rational dialogue is another key element to the transformational learning theory. This involves discussing and evaluating one's new meanings or perspectives on a topic (Mezirow, 2000). By using dialogue to search for a consensus with cohorts, students can justify their new interpretation or belief. This is accomplished by reflecting on the reasons, evidence, and arguments for the alternative perspective. Reflective dialogue then allows the student to encounter a different set of meaning schemes on a certain topic, then arriving at a judgment they feel is tentatively the best. For rational dialogue to occur there are ideal conditions: having fair access to complete information, being free from self-deception, having the critical thinking skills to examine ideas objectively, and having the opportunity to participate in the dialogue actively (Mezirow, 1995).

One critique of this argument has to do with the fact that critical reflection and rational dialogue—articulating and critiquing one's own underlying assumptions on a topic—may require a very sophisticated set of capacities. Mezirow (2000) admitted that people cannot participate in transformational leadership through means of critical reflection or rational dialogue if they do not have the required preconditions of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence. However, that is not to say that young learners or learners who do not meet these preconditions would not benefit from certain aspects of critical

reflection or rational dialogue. It is always necessary to challenge students mentally to make them more mature. Thus, one could argue that even though they may not reach the goal of transforming their ideas on a certain topic, there is still much value to be found in their attempts. Derounian (2017) argues that inspirational teaching may help with absorption of information and catalyze a constructive response, insight, and personal growth, which one could argue would benefit any student regardless of their maturity.

Authentic Learning

One could argue that the online classroom, especially when it is lecture-based, results in learning that is not authentic (Nicaise, et al., 2000). Curriculum and classroom tasks often only superficially engage students. On the other hand, authentic learning involves tasks that teach problem-solving skills while simultaneously building students' self-confidence in their own learning abilities (Bruner, 1966; Perkins & Blythe, 1994). All these characteristics coincide with the elements of transformational learning. Bennet and Hedberg (2001) also mention that authentic learning tasks require learners to address a problem with their own set of knowledge and skills, which is akin to Mezirow's (2001) 10 steps to transformational learning theory. Authentic learning can also encourage professional identity development in students (Sutherland & Markaukaite, 2010). One can thus see that authentic learning has multiple benefits, such as increased positive learning

outcomes, motivation, and engagement (Unwin & Caraher, 2000). One could also argue that authentic learning aligns with many parts of the conceptual framework of transformational learning theory.

Providing Students with Authentic Learning Tasks

Transformational learning relies on the idea that learners will engage in meaningful tasks that will transform themselves and their preconceptions. One of the earliest recommendations had to do with providing students with authentic learning tasks, debate, and discourse. These promote social interactions among students, which in turn help them to examine phenomena from multiple perspectives while challenging them to analyze their own viewpoints (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Vygotsky, 1986; Wiburg & Carter, 1994). However, many students in online classrooms feel that they are not being challenged, especially in lecture classes. One of the first things a teacher could do to combat this would be to provide engaging tasks such as debate, discussion, and other tasks that help to challenge their preconceived notions. Such authentic learning tasks can lead a student to engage in critical reflection and rational dialogue.

Combatting Disengagement and Recommendations

Disengagement is a hard term to define, but one could say that it is a lack of interest or passion that could sustain any kind of learning. In the online learning classroom, especially in classes where there may not be

a live teacher or a hybrid style of teaching, students may experience a feeling of apathy from instructors. Teachers simply post content on class websites and have students read or watch lectures and then respond in writing. Such an environment provides little opportunity for interaction with the other students or teacher. Thus, another recommendation is to provide opportunities for students to interact with teachers and other students as much as possible in the online classroom. This could take the form of discussion boards, live lessons using webcams and microphones, and blogs. Furthermore, David Kahane (2011) emphasizes highly participatory contemplative courses that help students search for meaning in their loves and explore themes that matter to them. Thus, providing online lessons that incorporate things that they are interested in and passionate about could help to make the online learning classroom experience more meaningful. One could also argue that in an online class where information is posted rather than orally communicated, there is little chance for students to even encounter a disorienting dilemma, which is the first step in transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000).

On the basis of this literature review, I have described eight recommendations for an online classroom that would help to promote transformational learning theory:

1. Give students ample opportunity to express themselves and their identities through discussion or writing activities which engage them with other students or the

teacher.

2. Provide as much real-time learning and discussion time as possible to let students challenge their knowledge sets on a topic to reduce the risk of disengagement.

3. Have the teacher take on a facilitator role instead of that of a knowledge bank, allowing students to come to conclusions by themselves based on both discussion and content provided by the teacher.

4. Have teachers provide content that relates to students' lives, directly or indirectly.

5. Have the teacher be as charismatic and passionate about the topics as they can.

6. Provide students with authentic learning tasks.

7. Provide students with ample opportunities through discussion and writing activities to engage in premise reflection to challenge how their knowledge sets may be flawed.

8. Provide students with ample opportunities to engage in rational dialogue with peers: free discussion or chat boards in which students can express themselves.

Conclusion and Future Research

In the online classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic, many students and teachers complain of disengagement and burnout. I argue that transformational learning may be applied in certain aspects to combat these issues. Transformational learning theory centers around the idea that students will become more autonomous by learning to reorganize and develop their own values, meanings, and purposes through a series of 10 steps (Mezirow, 1997). The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator who helps guide students. Phillips (2000) argues that inspirational teaching should enable students and staff to move towards fulfilling and meaningful lives characterized by generosity, intelligence, community spirit, and a healthy level of self-esteem. However, it is important to remember that transformational learning theory is not applicable to many online university courses. For example, a language course or a lab class may not be suitable. However, in many content- or discussion-based classes that seek to help students develop their critical thinking skills or to deepen their knowledge on a certain topic, many aspects of transformational learning theory are applicable. I have also set out eight suggestions based on my literature review of transformational theory which teachers could implement in their online classes to help facilitate a more positive learning outcome. These mainly center on giving students opportunities to engage in critical reflection and rational dialogue and to provide them with authentic learning tasks. Future research could be done on how aspects of transformational learning theory could be implemented in other kinds of classes.

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