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How Adult ESL Students Perceive Prior-Experience-Based Instruction

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Lee Nabb

Introduction

Experience-based education arguably has been widely venerated by adult educators in the United States for several decades (Lindeman, 1926; Dewey, 1938; Knowles, 1970; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Incorporating students' prior experience into the learning experience is commonly practiced in this country, and evidence suggests that adult students favor such instructional strategies (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000; Wlodkowski, 1999, 2004; Vella, 2002). Moreover, globalization as well as ever increasing immigration and international student populations continue to change the composition of adult learners (Institute of International Education, 2011a, 2011b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) reported that about 12% of the total population is foreign-born. This population continues to grow and "is reflected in the ABE and GED classrooms" (Larrotta, 2010, p. 199). These circumstances have made the concept of culturally responsive teaching, which espouses teaching to the strengths of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Banks, 2001), progressively pertinent. Research might suggest that students from differing cultures have different instructional strategy preferences (Hofstede, 2001). The kinds of strategies preferred, and whether differences exist in strategy preference between culture groups is pertinent information in the quest to improve and enhance culturally responsive teaching. Such teaching prompts an investigation to discover whether students from other cultures prefer instructional strategies that incorporate prior experience as well. In order to examine these questions, researchers used a mixed method approach to survey 152 students in five different English as a Second Language (ESL) programs across Wyoming to gather information on preferred instructional strategies and how student prior experience should be related to the teaching and learning process. Although results regarding preferred instructional strategies varied between the three main culture groups identified (Hispanic, Asian and Arabic), overall findings indicate that students from these cultures value the incorporation of prior experience in instruction. Results also indicate that students perceive instruction stressing prior experience to promote language learning, personal growth and social identity.

Background

As previously stated, experience-based education has a history of veneration in the United States. Instruction that emphasizes the prior experiences of students has been widely accepted and promoted (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000; Dewey, 1938; Knowles, 1970; Vella, 2002; Wlodkowski, 1999, 2004; Gay, 2000). Although experience-based instruction has been described differently by various educators with divergent perspectives, these educators all hold the one common belief that learning genuinely takes place when the role of experience is fully recognized, emphasized and utilized (Dewey, 1938; Knowles, 1970; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2005; Lindeman, 1926; Mezirow, 1978; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). So prevalent is the concept that it has been described as "a 'given' in the literature of adult learning"

(Brookfield, 1986, p. 98) that has been closely linked with self identity (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Moreover, motivational conditions for adult learners (such as establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence) have been found to include utilizing learners' prior experience (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). As Wlodowski (1999) explains, "learners and instructors have opportunities to learn about each others' unique backgrounds . . . learners' prior knowledge and learning experiences are explicitly linked to content and questions . . . the instructor helps learners activate prior knowledge and use it as a guide to learning" (pp. 339-343).

Reasons for the advancement of experience-based education are several. One is that experience-based instruction is culturally responsive. In fact, these two concepts are interconnected. The definition of culturally responsive teaching includes ". . . using the cultural knowledge, prior experience, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relative to, and effective for, them" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Instruction emphasizing student prior experiences is also learner-centered. For example, Dewey asserted that education should connect with what is already significant in learners' lives, putting them at the center of the experience (Dewey, 1913, 1938, 1975). Moreover, in Lindeman's learner-centered view, "texts and teachers must give way to the primary importance of the learner . . . the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience" (Lindeman, 1961, p. 6). Such instruction also acts as scaffolding, allowing students to establish connections between past and current knowledge upon which future knowledge might be built (Dewey, 1938; Lindeman, 1926; Merriam & Cafarella, 1999). Finally, instruction emphasizing student prior experience is empowering. Freire used education as a practice of liberation, which comes through conscientization, which in turn comes from becoming aware of, and valuing student experiences (Freire, 1982, 2000). Although the importance of student prior experience in instruction has been deemed important for the abovementioned reasons, and its use has been substantially promoted in the U.S., cross-cultural evaluation seems lacking in the literature. Therefore, researchers undertook the following study.

Methodology

Researchers administered a three-part survey to a total of 152 adult ESL students in programs at the following Wyoming institutions: Casper Community College; Western Wyoming Community College; Laramie County Community College, Cheyenne campus; Laramie County Community College, Albany County campus; and the English Language Center at the University of Wyoming. These locations were chosen because their populations represent a large segment of adult ESL (and thus culturally diverse) students across Wyoming, and because of convenience (accessibility). The survey method to collect data was chosen to facilitate analysis of perceptions of a larger, diverse sample.

Part I of the survey contained 19 items enumerating instructional strategies commonly used in adult ESL programs, 11 of which emphasize the use of student prior experience, and eight of which do not. The 20th item was open-ended asking students to identify other instructional strategies they might have experienced. Students were instructed to place a "+" before the six instructional strategies they have found most useful, and a "-" next to the six instructional strategies they have found least useful. Part II of the survey contained eight, five-point, Likert-type scale questions (from 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree), designed to

ascertain how adult ESL students perceive the role of prior experience in instruction. Part III contained demographic questions to ascertain the participants' home countries (or primary cultures), first languages, genders, ages, and number of years speaking English, as well as a final, open-ended question asking "Are students' prior (past) experiences important to how instructors teach? Why or why not?" Surveys were administered by researchers in ESL classes at each location, with bilingual ESL instructors presenting to help explain any part of the survey that might need clarification.

Research Findings

Out of 152 surveys, 3 were excluded from data analysis -- two because of failure to indicate full understanding of the survey, and one for failure to indicate a home country or primary culture -- leaving 149 completed surveys analyzed for results. Survey results show that the majority of participants represented three main ethnic groups: Hispanic (the largest represented group), Asian (the second largest group), and Arabic.

Part I survey results indicate that the adult ESL students surveyed preferred some instructional strategies that emphasize student prior experience and some that do not, with all major culture groups preferring some strategies in common, as well as participants from one culture group expressing preference for some strategies different from those preferred by participants in the other culture groups. Also, a Pearson correlation test indicates that the selection of strategies that stress prior experience is not correlated with the selection of strategies that do not. In other words, students who chose strategies that stress prior experience did not tend to choose strategies that do not stress prior experience, and students who chose strategies that do not stress prior experience did not tend to choose those that stress prior experience.

Part II survey results indicate the overall favorable attitude toward strategies that focused on classroom performance (class-related strategies) and strategies that promoted improvement and practice of social skills (social-related strategies) that use student prior experience. The result of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient suggests that the scale scores of respondents for the eight questions in this section are reasonably reliable. Means for the eight statements indicate an overall preference for strategies emphasizing prior experience and a slightly stronger preference for strategies with a social-related function. Moreover, a one-way ANOVA analysis detected a significant difference between the groups regarding the perceptions of social-related strategies, but not of classroom-related strategies.

Results include the following:

1. Students from all three ethnic groups preferred the following four instructional strategies: Discussing their cultures and themselves with classmates; learning new grammar from teachers' demonstrations based on student experiences; listening to teachers' lectures on new topics; and watching films to practice listening.
2. Members of the three ethnic groups displayed differences in preference for the following instructional strategies: learning new grammar from the teachers' demonstration based on their prior experience, going on field trips to learn new things, taking multiple-choice quizzes to show that they have learned, and learning vocabulary from lists in a book.
3. Adult ESL students generally indicated a highly agreeable attitude toward instructors' using instructional strategies that stress students' prior experience.
4. Ethnic group members differed significantly in preference for the social-related

function of the instructional strategies that stress students' prior experience.

Implications

Results of this study aid in understanding learning preferences of culturally diverse students, and confirm the overall acceptance of instructional strategies that emphasize student prior experience. Using such findings might be used to guide instructional design and teaching, thus improving and enhancing culturally responsive teaching. To understand culturally diverse student preferences, and thus improve culturally responsive teaching further, these results might be used to guide further research into why certain culture groups perceive a preference for certain instructional strategies over others.

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