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Applying the Intercultural Competency Learning Model to the Experiences of Adult Educators Living and Working Abroad

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined the intercultural experiences of three adult educators who taught English in Istanbul, Turkey. Using transformative learning theory as a starting point, and phenomenological research methods to gather, analyze, and synthesize the data, I found three composite themes: motivation to live and teach abroad; identity issues and transformation; and negotiating the intercultural experience. Taylor’s (1994) learning model of becoming interculturally competent helped make sense of the learning processes of the intercultural experiences the participants shared and reflected on in this study.

Keywords: intercultural, intercultural learning, intercultural competence, intercultural transformation

Purpose of the Study

My goal for this study was to examine and seek a deeper understanding of the experiences of those living and working abroad and the meanings they attached and/or derived from living and working in a different culture. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine, in an intercultural context, the experiences of educators who are living and working abroad. As an adult educator who lived and worked abroad, I understood there were opportunities regarding intercultural experiences to be examined more thoroughly.

In conversations and observations of teachers living and working abroad with me, in the same host country, I was reminded of what Lyon (2001) discussed when she emphasized the need for more research of professionals working abroad. She cited Osland (1995) and her belief that usually expatriates only share information regarding their sojourn among one another. As Lyon (2001) asserted, “apart from these interactions, there are few resources, formal or informal, to help expatriates make sense of the radical changes that working abroad can make in their lives” (p. 119).

That being said, my goal here was to examine several individuals’ personal transformations, occasioned by their living and working abroad. I stopped to think how a sojourner might negotiate his/her sets of beliefs, feelings, and assumptions in these new and different surroundings? This questioning could add to our understanding of learning in relation to individual transformation. Taylor (1998) pointed out that meaning structures we know as beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions are rooted in the individual’s cultural and contextual experiences and impact how one acts and interprets those incidents.

Theoretical Framework

The overarching interest for me was: Might living and working abroad provide a transformative learning experience for a person, regarding his/her outlook or understanding? The framing of my original research question was based on Mezirow’s (1978; 1990; 1991; 1997; 2000a; 2000b; 2003) transformative learning theory which, briefly holds that “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow,
1996, p.162); the learning experience(s), pertinent to the learner, construct “new meaning through personal reflection” (Tennant, 1991, p. 197). For Mezirow, transformative learning theory (1978; 1990; 1991; 1997; 2000a; 2000b; 2003) is “the process of learning through critical self-reflection which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive discriminating and integrative understanding of one’s experience” (p. xvi).

In line with the aforementioned process of self-examination and development, Mezirow contended that in thoroughly analyzing our cultural beliefs, assumptions, values, attitudes, and behaviors, we might experience a formidable perspective shift. With that said, transformative learning theory was, for me, a point of departure. The reflection on intercultural experiences was a key factor to be considered in this phenomenological research study.

**Relevant Literature**

**Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence is “an adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture” (Taylor, 1994, p. 154). Taylor (1994), concerned with the number of Americans needing to live and work outside of the United States, but not successfully completing their sojourn, decided to conduct a qualitative study to explore the issue. Taylor’s study had a “two-fold purpose: (a) to delineate the learning process of intercultural competency, and (b) to explore the theory of perspective transformation as a possible explanation for the learning and changes participants’ experience” (p. 154). The twelve participants were deemed “interculturally competent” as part of the selection criteria and spoke the host language as his/her primary form of communication in the host country.

What Taylor measured from a learning perspective was the intercultural competence that is derived from an intercultural experience. Taylor (1994) used a three-step phenomenological approach to analyzing the data. The study generated a model of six steps, used to help understand the process of becoming interculturally competent. Additionally, it highlighted parts of Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation, and partially explained the learning process of intercultural competency.

Taylor derived two conclusions from his study. The first conclusion confirmed that a similar pattern of learning emerged in becoming interculturally competent, despite the study’s participants’ diverse backgrounds and host culture. Secondly, Taylor asserted that transformative learning theory only partially explained “the learning process of becoming interculturally competent” (p.168).

Deardorff’s (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence developed from definitions gathered from scholars in the field of intercultural competence. Her model stressed that learners enter the model at different levels depending on their current level of intercultural competence, with attitude serving as the most fundamental characteristic. Learners then develop knowledge and comprehension that Deardorff described as two interacting components. According to her model, the more components gained the more possibility for interculturally competent outcomes. The model also stressed intercultural competence attainment where the learners first desire internal outcomes such as adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and understanding.

Cheng (2012) addressed issues of cultural competence in relation to English education in the fields of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), stating that due to globalisation, little qualitative research had been conducted on EFL teachers’ beliefs and their effects on classroom
procedures. Unfortunately, many teachers ignore the importance of intercultural knowledge in language education (Cheng, 2012). Kurogi (1998) provided a partial explanation for EFL teachers’ lack of intercultural competence and understanding, acknowledging that most EFL teacher education programs consider intercultural competence unimportant.

**Research Design**

The approach to this study was Husserlian in nature; therefore, it was important to understand the experiences that brought to light ideation, “the transformation of individual or empirical experience into essential insights” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). The phenomenon of living and working abroad served as a suitable starting point for such an investigation. Such a situation is founded upon an intercultural experience that seeks valid determinations that are open for researchers to substantiate (Husserl, 1931). My goal was to examine and seek a deeper understanding of the experiences of those living and working abroad and the meanings they attached and/or derived from living and working in a different culture. A phenomenological approach was well suited for such a study as it is “committed to descriptions of experience,” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). It is from direct perceptions and observations that the most significant understandings are presented “until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58).

Phenomenology invites us to “call into question our whole culture, our manner of seeing the world and being in the world in the way we have learned it growing up” (Wolff, 1984, p. 192). In doing so, the threads of our perceived notions are slackened and they allow us to transcend “like sparks from a fire” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiii). Therefore, phenomenology is considered to be a first-person exercise; “Each of us must explore our own experience, not the experience of others” (Crotty, 1998, p. 84).

**Rationale for Choice of Methodology**

A phenomenological approach was utilized so as to be “committed to descriptions of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). It is from direct perceptions and observations that the most significant understandings are presented “until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). The phenomenological research method to this study of people’s subjective and daily experiences is centered on the theory of phenomenology. Phenomenology is an understanding of meaningful, concrete relations, implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation (Moustakas, 1994).

The primary target of phenomenological knowledge consists of a yield to experience so as to gain an all-inclusive account of the phenomenon being investigated in order to provide a solid basis for a philosophical exploration that represents the principles of the experience(s) (Moustakas, 1994). The maxim of phenomenology is said to be “to the things themselves,” (p. 26) because it is through this philosophical approach that what is present provides the incentive for experience and for producing new knowledge. In other words, phenomena are “the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (p. 26).

**Modes of Data Collection**

There were general principles to be used in phenomenological-based research so to ensure that “subjective character of the experience is not prejudiced,” (Crotty, 1998, p. 83). Phenomenology “puts in place a number of procedures to prevent, or at least minimise, the imposition of the researcher’s own knowledge” (Crotty, 1998, p. 83). According to the
phenomenological model (Moustakas, 1994), when collecting data through the use of interviews, in order to obtain descriptions of the experience, the researcher should consider the following:

- Informal interviewing;
- Open-ended questions; and
- Topical-guided interviews (p. 181).

The use of open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews gave me a place to start and allowed me to break up my interviews into themed sessions. The first session(s) were themed “initial perceptions and the new milieu.” The next interview session was themed “framing the intercultural experience,” and the last interview session was themed “the personal transformation through the intercultural experience.”

The sessions were set up in order to interview the participants in a sequential manner that allowed us to travel by way of the participant’s reflections from the beginning of his/her time spent in the new setting. We began by getting a sense of his/her initial feelings, outlook, and understanding of the new environment. We then moved on to the core part of his/her time spent in Istanbul, Turkey in order to understand what types of challenges, daily experiences, newfound perspectives he/she was experiencing. Then we moved on to the time that he/she left and returned to his/her hometown (if they had returned at all). What did he/she make of the time spent there? What new understandings or transformations came from the intercultural experience? What now?

Research Participants

The participants were carefully selected to represent significant research parameters in order to center the attention on the participant, his/her experiences, and the evidence that would address the purpose of the study (Soy, 1997). The criteria were as follows:

- Each participant declared the United States as their place of citizenship before his/her time abroad;
- Each participant was an adult over the age of 25 during their time abroad;
- Each participant lived and worked abroad for at least two years; and
- Each participant worked as an educator during his/her time abroad.

Research Questions

In interviews, I asked each participant about: What participants say prompted them to live and work abroad; What, if anything, they did to prepare for his/her time abroad; What the participants’ initial perceptions were of the new setting; How participants’ self-knowledge affected their outlook and understanding of the new milieu; How the participants framed their intercultural experience(s); What challenges, if any, the participant faced in the new setting; How the participants resolved any challenges they faced; What deeper understanding or appreciation, if any, resulted from the intercultural experience; and whether the participants felt any type of transformation as a result of their intercultural experience(s)?

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an interactive and reflexive process that begins as data are being collected rather than after data collection has ceased (Schutt, 2008). The researcher mixes and matches specific analysis methods as required by the research problem to be investigated and the setting in which it is to be studied (p. 355). With that said, a modification (Moustakas, 1994) of van Kaam’s (1959, 1966) phenomenological method was used for the analysis of the data,
Findings and Conclusions

The results of the data analysis were categorized into three emergent themes: Motivation to Live and Work Abroad; Negotiating Intercultural Experiences; and Identity Issues and Transformation. What my analysis of the data revealed were occasions where some of the participants’ initial transformation began out of the need to relieve stress and anxiety. My analysis of the data brought to light the research participants’ motivation to live and work abroad, how they negotiated the intercultural experience, and issues of theirs having to do with identity and transformation.

The analysis revealed both positive and negative emotions they said that they experienced. Through my application of Taylor’s (1994) learning model, I illustrated the behavioral learning strategies that the research participants described as helping them in their intercultural encounters. My analysis revealed a shift of consciousness, one that involved a shift in their understanding of themselves, their relationships with others, and issues of gender, body awareness, and alternative approaches to living.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

My analysis revealed the individual perspectival transformations, not to one trigger event, but rather as a culmination of experiences. This research has numerous implication for practice. Some of which deal with issues of overseas teachers being placed in classrooms with students, and having very little to no multicultural teacher training or training that helps teachers deal with diversity in the classroom.

My analysis of the data revealed, in those moments, that educators require specialized training on how to handle some of the classroom issues faced by the research participants. There is a demonstrated need to develop more thorough programs in Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification programs/online TEFL programs, to address multicultural issues in the classroom. Taylor (1994) mentioned regarding many of the Americans who have chosen to live and work abroad, but who have been unsuccessful in their intercultural experience. Whether they plan to live and work abroad or not, the first-hand experience of working with people different from who they are will assist them in the development of the skills needed today in our more globalizing world.

References


