

Promoting Transformative Learning of College English Teachers through Online Training Courses : A Case Study

Wenbo Zhao^{1, a} and Zhijian Zhao²

¹Jilin Engineering Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, China

²Jilin University, Changchun, Jilin, China

^a1060138576@qq.com

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Abstract. The present paper explores the transformative learning of three college English teachers who participated in a three-month online training courses. The study was conducted to understand how online training courses contributed to their teaching and research competences and their ways of thinking. The reflection journals and interviews were used to clarify the phases of their transformative learning and identify the outcomes of their transformative learning during and after the online courses.

Introduction

Teacher education is primarily concerned with professional and intra-personal learning. Professional learning and intra-personal learning involve a synchronicity of learning about teaching and learning, and learning about oneself as a teacher and learner [1]. Over the centuries, philosophers and educators from Aristotle to John Dewey have acknowledged the close connection between experience and learning, even theorizing how and when experience induces learning [2].

Based on the previous researches, Mezirow put forward the transformative learning theory in the early 1990s, which regards the past experiences' as a guide for future events through human interaction [3]. Transformative learning, within the framework of educational practices, is considered a learner's exposure to a learning process, and thus a subsequent change in their life. Transformative learning theory has played a prominent role in the literature of adult education for several decades and provided a detailed theoretical foundation for adult learning [4].

As the online training courses are increasingly available for in-service teachers, the study of the transformative learning on the Internet has become a focus for the contemporary researches. Additionally, in-service teachers are willing to pursue online courses for several perceived advantages. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to present the phases and the outcomes of transformative learning experiences of three college English teachers who took part in the online training courses in 2016.

Literature Review.

Transformative learning theory focuses on an adult learner's ability to reflect and make new meaning of experiences and environments [5]. In 2000, Mezirow revised his theory and devised the process-oriented transformational learning model which includes the following ten non-sequential learning processes. Over the past decades, the phases and outcomes of Mezirow's transformational learning model have been tested by numerous researchers in various contexts and ongoing research has shed light on how reflection, context, emotions, relationships, and dialogues enhance transformational learning. Thus, participation in certain training courses can sometimes have a transformative impact on learners' moral, political, intellectual, personal and spiritual perspectives during the different phases [6]. The findings of the related studies also suggested the positive outcomes of transformative learning were evident in ideas, beliefs, habits, or assumptions for approximately one-fourth of learners.

In 2010, Henderson conducted a synthesis of research related to online transformative learning

which fostered learners' further progression [7]. The online environment provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on past experiences and assumptions resulting in transformation. Furthermore, discourse with peers on the Internet is an essential component of critical self-reflection and promotion of transformative learning [8].

The literature related to transformative learning seems to be lacking with regard to the phases and outcomes of transformative learning at college level. Therefore, in an effort to understand how online courses foster the academic competence of college English teachers while receiving the critical reflection and support from their peers and online instructors, the following two questions were used to guide the study:

Question 1: How do online training courses facilitate college English teachers' progression through the phases of transformative learning?

Question 2: What are the outcomes of transformative learning upon completion of online training courses?

Online Training Courses for College Teachers.

To promote the global competences of college teachers, Ministry of Education National Network of University Teachers Training Center has been opening a variety of online courses for college teachers in China. Bases on the national college teachers network training platform and mobile learning platform, the courses are divided into synchronous live training and online on-demand training.

The online training courses suitable for college English teachers include basic and advanced courses. During most of courses, college English teachers are expected to propose a focused question that addresses a dilemma in their teaching and researching process. And then, they should systematically gather literature that provides possible resolutions to their dilemma and complete assignments. Online instructors encourage formal peer review and feedback process throughout the course. Thus, critical reflection upon and discourse about their own experiences are inherent in the program design through the writing assignments and interaction with peers and instructors.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was chosen for the study, for in this kind of study the researchers often gain in depth insights into participants' experiences. Data came from the reflection journals and interviews and significant quotes relevant to the participants' experiences were highlighted.

Participants of this study were three college English teachers coming from a key comprehensive university in Northeast China. None of them had ever taken part in online training before. Two of them were female and one was male. They completed *The Methods for English course teaching* and *Teachers Research Ability Enhancement*, in the first semester of 2016-2017 academic years. From the 3-month online courses, they learned some skills in facilitating their teaching and researching competences.

To examine closely the phases of transformative learning, participants were encouraged to write reflection journals after each online class. They may include questions, paradoxes, or whatever comes from their own experiences. The follow-up interviews were conducted to better understand how three participants experienced transformative learning during and after the online courses. Each interview lasted for about 40 minutes. The interviewees were told to freely give an account of their experiences of taking online training course from the beginning to the end. Three interviews were recorded and then transcribed for later analysis.

Results

Three participants offered a variety of accounts from their reflection journals and interview scripts, which were analyzed to answer the two research questions:

As to research question one, all the participants experienced some but not all of the phases of Mezirow's (2000) transformational learning model.

"This was the first time I had to reflect on my teaching critically!" (Chen, 2016)

"It taught me to reconsider my roles in classroom." (Wang, 2016)

"I get to grasp how to conduct research in teaching practice." (Li, 2016)

It was clear that participants came across several disorienting dilemmas during the process, and acquired the knowledge and skills to move through the disorienting dilemma into transformed practitioners.

As to research question two, all the participants reported at least some of the cognitive and behavioral changes are the outcomes of the transformative learning.

"It offers new opportunities to learn new things" (Chen, 2016)

"Learning activities help me to practice ways of thinking and conceptualize the principle to educate students." (Wang, 2016)

"I have to learn by sharing knowledge, taking positive thinking, and having a reason before doing something" (Li, 2016)

Evidently, they reported some positive outcomes of transformative learning. They will learn to pursue a new practice, try new roles, and develop positive thinking.

Discussion and Conclusion.

The qualitative analysis demonstrated the multiple phases of the transformative learning process occurred when college English teachers took online training courses. They experienced disorienting dilemmas and had multiple opportunities to reflect critically and think independently throughout the courses. This results support the notion that transformative learning process can occur in the online training courses as evidenced by their written reflections and interview scripts. As for the outcomes of the transformative learning, they reported individual growth, increased self-awareness and the shifting perspectives. They also reported the impact of the outcomes of the courses on their engagement in practice and leadership within their professional roles.

It is anticipated that other educational programs and in-service teachers may benefit from promoting transformative learning for the sake of their teacher education. Strategies such as active learning, assignments to play new roles in work settings and use of critical reflection have been shown to be effective in facilitating transformative learning in an on-line learning environment. Nevertheless, further research is needed to ascertain more systematically the extent to which transformative learning are effective to teachers' personal and professional development in a long run.

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