

Adult Learning in the Language Classroom

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION: 44

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MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Johnson, Stacey Margarita, author.

Adult Learning in the Language Classroom/Stacey Margarita Johnson.

New Perspectives on Language and Education: 44

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English language--Study and teaching--Foreign speakers. 2. Second language acquisition.

3. Adult learning. I. Title.

PE1128.A2J645 2015

428.0071--dc23 2015015293

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-78309-416-5 (hbk)

ISBN-13: 978-1-78309-415-8 (pbk)

Multilingual Matters

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Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services Limited.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Short Run Press Ltd.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the series editor Viv Edwards for her investment in this book, as well as the commissioning editor, Kim Eggleton. I would also like to thank Cheryl Johnson for her tireless efforts on behalf of this project.

Preface

Given that most adult language students will not go on to achieve fluency in the second language, L2 study should promote intercultural competence and other kinds of personal development in addition to language development. Adult learning theory explains the ways that adults grow, transform and develop over their lifetimes through both formal and informal learning experiences. This book explores the connections between the fields of foreign/second language teaching and adult learning. This interdisciplinary approach serves as a framework in order to: (a) understand the teaching methods that promote the deeper, more critical sort of language learning advocated by scholars and professional organizations, (b) understand how adult students learn and transform through language study and (c) reinforce the immense value of beginning language courses.

This book details the results of a semester-long case study of one Elementary Spanish (Spanish I) course at the college level. The participants, the instructors and the students are introduced, as is the classroom setting. The hallmarks of this instructor's personal teaching style were direct grammar instruction, L1 use, small-group L2 production, cultural sidebars, student learning journals, a film and the frequent application of critical pedagogy. Student learning fell into seven general categories: content, skills, personalized or contextualized learning, learning about learning, learning about differences, learning about connections and learning to make sense of accents.

Transformative learning theory provided a useful framework for exploring student responses to their learning experiences. Key indicators of perspective transformation were identified in the data; participants explored new sources of knowledge, became more self-directed and critically assessed their own language and culture. These indicators of perspective

transformation have clear connections to topics in L2 teaching. Students initiated more real-world contact with the L2, became more motivated or invested and developed higher levels of ethno-relativity consistent with diversity development. Finally, the findings of this study are interpreted in light of current issues in higher education.

Taken as a whole, this book describes the transformative potential of introductory language study for adults and explores how teachers can promote deeper learning in their own classrooms.

1 Introduction

As a young adult, I discovered language study and was quickly hooked. The world opened up to me as I gained communicative proficiency and intercultural competence. My obsession with languages led to an undergraduate and graduate degree in language, followed by a career in language teaching at the post-secondary level. For me, learning Spanish as a foreign language was a truly transformative experience; it changed the trajectory of my life. Now, as a language instructor, I see many of my own students undergo the same profound learning that I did. I watch them discover differences, explore connections and take steps into a new culture.

However, unlike me, the college students who take my Elementary Spanish class as a required course in their degree program, or perhaps another professor's Beginning Arabic or German course, are unlikely to go on to become language majors. In fact, they will probably not pursue further language study of any kind after they leave our classes. They will pursue careers in medicine or engineering or education. They will travel to other countries on vacations and meet people from other cultures in their daily lives. But chances are they will not continue to study language in a classroom context. Some of my students admit to me that they do not understand why taking a foreign language class is important at all. They wonder what value it will add to their lives and future careers. I perceive the important learning taking place in my classroom, but many of my students want to know if that learning has any real-world value.

This conversation about the practical value of language study is a part of larger trend. Traditionally, studying foreign languages has been a cornerstone of a liberal arts education and the hallmark of international education. However, around the English-speaking world, there are discussions in the public sphere about the economic and political value of adults learning languages other than English. In a report on the state of language education and policy in Australia, Ingram (2000) wrote:

It is very significant that the policy seems to see the main justification for fostering language skills as their contribution to economic reform. Despite the value attached to multiculturalism and the maintenance

and teaching of community languages as indicated in the goals, the policy places less emphasis than previously on community languages and most on the economic and international reasons for language teaching.

On a system-wide level, as well as for individual students, stakeholders want language study to produce practical benefits.

These discussions take place amid two conflicting forces: a general cultural push for more proficient speakers in business and government (for examples from news outlets, see Chau, 2014; Chauvot, 2013; Davidson, 2012; Zhou, 2013), and the cutting of programs and funds at all levels (see Lane, 2013; MLA, 2011; MLA, 2012). In the United Kingdom, for example, the importance of language study is widely promoted (The British Council, 2014), yet, in practice, few resources are available to adults who wish to pursue language study (The British Council, 2013). In the United States, many post-secondary students are required to study at least one semester of a foreign language as part of their general education degree requirements and such courses are more popular than ever (Associated Press, 2010), while entire language programs are threatened by widespread budget cuts (Foderaro, 2010; MLA, 2011). World language programs in compulsory schooling enjoy overwhelming public support (Rivers *et al.*, 2013), while the public grants that support such programs are defunded (US Department of Education, 2012).

Is Fluency the Goal?

The common thread in many of these larger conversations about language study is a focus on linguistic competence, or fluency, as the ultimate goal of language study. It is assumed that in order for language study to be useful, learners must acquire an advanced conversational ability in the target language. Thus, there are many reports on the benefits of bilingualism (see Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Fortune, 2012), but fewer on the benefits of limited, short-term language study.

The idea of language as primarily a skill that must be mastered only captures a portion of what happens when adults begin to study a language and culture different from their own:

Divergent views concerning language and its many functions are reflected in differing approaches to the study of language. At one end, language is considered to be principally instrumental, a skill to use for communicating thought and information. At the opposite end,

language is understood as an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translangual and transcultural competence. (MLA, 2007)

In addition to the instrumental view of language as a tool for communication, there is also the view that we study language in order to better understand ourselves and others. Through language study, students acquire not only conversational ability, but also the ability to make sense of cultural differences and to understand social interactions across borders.

With the scarcity of resources available for adult foreign language study, our larger public debates about who should study languages other than English (LOTE), in what settings and for how long must be evaluated. Do business and governmental agencies require the skill of advanced fluency from their employees? Or would society's needs best be met if workers had a deeper transcultural competence that allowed positive, productive interactions across languages and cultures?

My intent in this section is not to dissuade anyone from pursuing fluency as a primary goal, but rather to explore why some adult learners feel that fluency is an objective beyond their grasp. While in many countries, foreign language instruction is being expanded at the elementary and secondary levels through traditional language classes and immersion schools (Asia Society, 2014), adult learners rarely have similar opportunities. Even at the college level where it stands to reason that adult students would have the most opportunity to pursue language, few continue on to advanced levels of study (Malone *et al.*, 2005).

The United States government (National Virtual Translation Center, 2007) estimated that in order to attain only a general proficiency in a language linguistically and culturally similar to English, one needs about 600 hours of instruction. On a typical US college schedule of 45 classroom hours per three-credit, semester-long class, 600 hours equals more than 13 semesters of foreign language instruction. To put the numbers in context, 13 semesters is enough language study to qualify as a language major in most American Bachelor's degree programs. Advanced proficiency in a language requires even more classroom hours. In addition, if one studies a language with significant linguistic and cultural differences, such as Hindi or Russian, the number of required hours jumps to 1100, or more than 25 semesters of language instruction, nearly twice the amount of study required for a college degree. A general proficiency in Arabic, which English speakers find very difficult to learn, would require 2200 hours, or more than 50 semesters of instruction,