

INTERNATIONAL ESL ADULT LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRIOR-EXPERIENCE-BASED INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: International higher education is growing in response to diversity, globalization, and internationalization. The US is a prime destination for international students, the majority of whom speak English as Second Language. Although research in adult education holds the use of prior experience in learning as foundational, little research has been done concerning its use for international higher education second language students. To fill this void, a qualitative study was conducted, in which six international English as a Second Language (ESL) higher education students studying at universities in a Southern state were interviewed to gather perceptions concerning the use of prior experience in their learning. Responses revealed that such use enhances learning in various ways, including personal growth, ESL improvement, and critical thinking. Moreover, students reported preferring its use as it makes learning richer and more enjoyable. This research suggests that those involved in instruction of international ESL higher education students should incorporate prior experience into learning to enhance the success of their education programs.

Keywords: International higher education; international adult learners, English as a Second Language (ESL), prior experience

International students have consistently comprised a substantial portion of the higher education student body in the US. For most of this population, English is not the primary language. Fostering a robust international higher education student population in this country is important and beneficial for a variety of interests in myriad ways. To accommodate and support this beneficial group, effective instructional techniques must be used to promote inclusion, academic learning and personal development, thus maximizing educational success. Benchmark theories in adult learning, socio-cultural learning and second language learning (Dewey, 1938; Diaz-Rico, 2012; Gay, 2018; Lindeman, 1961; Lohr & Haley, 2018; Mezirow, 1978) support the use of prior-experience-based instruction in optimizing the learning experience of international English as a Second Language (ESL) higher education students; However, current research lacks informative examination of these students' perceptions of the function and effects of such instruction. In an effort to help fill this gap, the researcher conducted a qualitative study, which was informed by and founded in adult learning theory, socio-cultural theory and second language theory to answer the following question: How do international adult ESL higher education students perceive the role of prior experience in their learning and instruction? Results inform best practices to maximize effective learning and positive learning experiences for international higher education students studying in the US and perhaps other countries, which ultimately fosters diversity, inclusion, and beneficial international relationships at various levels.

Literature Review

A review of the literature illuminates the importance of international higher education and the deficit in understanding the role such experiences play in ultimate outcomes.

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Diversity, globalization, and internationalization are interrelated concepts; all are affected by, and have an interest in, international higher education. Moreover, foundational concepts in learning, sociocultural, and second language theory point to the importance of prior-experience-based instruction in maximizing positive effects of the international higher education.

Diversity, Globalization, and Internationalization

Diversity is a concept that has been evolving for decades. It concerns the idea that people identify, and differ from each other, in myriad ways, including, but not limited to, ethnicity, age, ability, education, skills, social identity, gender identity and expression, sex, sexuality, political affiliation, religion and socio-economic status (Queensborough Community College, 2020; Smith, 2016), not to mention the value and effect on identity each factor is given by a given individual. Research shows that embracing diversity fosters – while resisting diversity impedes – social well-being (Tienda, 2013; Vos et al., 2016).

Globalization describes “the opening up and coming together of business, trade and economic activities between nations, necessitating the need for homogenization of fundamental political, ideological, cultural and societal aspects of life across different countries of the world” (Maringe & Foskett, 2010, p. 1). Such homogenization takes various subtle and unsubtle forms; English being adopted as the international language of business and science, and the integration of accepted international knowledge are more obvious examples (Altbach et al., 2016; Rumbly et al., 2012). Although criticized for pressuring the cooption of less economically powerful cultures (Altbach, 2016), globalization has been largely accepted as a permanent reality (Altbach & Knight, 2016).

Among its many interpretations, *internationalization* is an attempt to balance diversity and the homogeneity pushed in globalization; it mainly consists of various methods used in higher education and government to comprehend and manage globalization and its affects for maximum positive outcomes (Altbach et al., 2016). Within higher education, measures introducing and promoting international and intercultural concepts are infused into traditional areas of teaching, scholarship and service; they include, but are not limited to, internationalizing curriculum, cultivating international partnerships and relationships, developing programs and opportunities for study abroad, transnational research projects, and increasing the number of international students and faculty (Altbach et al., 2016; Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Rumbly et al., 2012). Spurred by globalization, internationalization has become a crucial practice for higher education institutions worldwide in order to remain competitive (Altbach et al., 2016; Maringe & Foskett, 2010).

International Higher Education in the US

As globalization expands, so does internationalization. The internationalization of higher education is a key feature of the twenty-first century, as more students seek education and other opportunities outside their home countries (Bound, et al., 2021; Egron-Polak &

Marinoni, 2022; Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Larnyo et al., 2021; Weber et al., 2008). As competition increases among institutions to accommodate such students and provide the desired learning and cultural experiences, the increasing number of international students, along with the resulting increases in the internationalization of curricula, exchange and cross-border programs, and transnational research projects, has become a prominent indicator of effective international higher education institutions (Deardorff et al., 2022; Foskett & Maringe, 2010).

The US enjoys a reputation for being one of the world's most advanced countries conducting cutting-edge research in multiple fields. Its higher education institutions benefit from, and strive to maintain, this repute, as it attracts relatively among the highest numbers of international students from a broadening pool of applicants (Adams et al., 2012; Cantwell, 2015; Chow, 2015; Rumbly et al., 2012). U.S. higher education institutions are making internationalization more prominent in their missions, which essentially involves graduating people ready to function in diverse and global environments. The resulting increase in international students boosts revenue and bolsters reputation, ultimately enhancing the viability of the organization and its affiliates (Adams et al., 2012; Cantwell, 2015).

The abovementioned trends persist. In the US, the international higher education student population exceeded one million for the first time in 2016 and continued to grow, setting an all-time high in 2019, with Chinese students routinely representing the largest segment (Ge et al., 2019; Institute for International Education, 2019). Although the coronavirus pandemic understandably disrupted growth, steady economic recovery and resumption of pre-pandemic travel and border policies arguably signify further expansion of international higher education and its student body.

Theoretical Framework

The use of prior experience is an established concept in adult education (Dewey, 1938; Lindeman, 1961; Mezirow, 1991; Wlodowski, 1999). Using students' prior experiences is an important and effective practice in culturally responsive education and aides in facilitating ESL instruction (Banks, 2001; Diaz-Rico, 2012; Miettinen, 2000), both of which are relevant and pertinent to the effective learning of international higher education students. This study grounds its theoretical framework in three groups of theories: Adult learning theory, socio-cultural theory, and second language theory.

Adult Learning Theory

John Dewey's (1938) concept of *the continuity of experience* postulates a person's past experiences shape how they develop moving into the future; thus "appropriate educational methods and materials" should be devised and used to provide positive direction to new learning (p. 21). This idea was embraced by numerous early theorists of adult education, such as Eduard Lindeman (1961), who identified "the learner's experiences" as "a living textbook" and "the resource of highest value in adult education" (pp. 9-10), Myles Horton, who founded the renowned Highlander Folk School

understanding that past experience is integral to the process of understanding new ideas (Peters & Bell, 2001), and Jack Mezirow, whose Transformative Learning Theory is based on adults' thinking critically about past experiences (Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow; 1991). Prior experience is considered a critical tenet of adult education (Merriam et al., 2007), and experience-based learning is an established approach and a core concept of the field in the US. (Miettinem, 2000).

Socio-Cultural Learning Theory

Until the late twentieth century, adult learning theory focused on cognitive processes internal to the individual learner (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). In the 1990s, this concept expanded to recognize and include the learners' social and cultural contexts. These newer theories emphasize that learning occurs within a social world (Gogoff, 1995), and that development of learning theory and practice should consider personal, interpersonal and community areas and processes, which are interrelated inseparably. Moreover, socio-cultural theory expands beyond the mere influences of physical location to include individual, institutional, social, cultural, and historical dynamics (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Alfred, 2003). Thus, "when a person learns, they construct their own knowledge and, learning according to what they already know, within the social, historical, and linguistic contexts of their learning" (Alfred, 2003, p. 245). In short, a socio-cultural perspective broadens the focus of learning from an individual action to one that inextricably occurs within a larger context (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000).

Second Language Learning Theory

Krashen's (2003) Input Hypothesis argues that language is acquired when learners understand a message containing "comprehensible input" (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006, p. 58). The major hypotheses of second language acquisition have supported the idea that learners acquire language when they receive comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation and setting where knowledge is consciously learned (Krashen, 2003; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Mason and Krashen, 1997). Comprehensible input is most effectively reached as a goal by employing activity connected to learners' cultural backgrounds; so, prior experience plays a major role in obtaining comprehensible input, or language acquisition, and language learning topics and teaching strategies should incorporate it generously. Moreover, incorporating prior experience – particularly in terms of culture – into second language learning reduces stress, while increasing the learner's motivation and confidence. (Diaz-Rico & Weed 2006; Krashen, 1982).

Methodology

Including gaining expertise in a particular discipline, the general purposes of educating adult ESL international students can be reduced to personal growth, socio-cultural competence, and improvement of English language competency (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Ferguson, 1998; Neito, 2002; Smoke, 1998). To answer the question "how do international adult ESL higher education students perceive the role of prior experience in their learning and instruction," this study employed qualitative

research methodology to collect the type of data desired (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2011). Specifically, after collecting demographic information, the researcher used a semi-structured interview process, asking six open-ended questions and additional clarifying or depth-adding follow-up questions to six adult ESL international higher education students to gather their perceptions on the role of prior experience in their learning and instruction.

The researcher used a convenience snowball technique (Noy, 2007) to obtain participants. The researcher approached one international ESL higher education student to which she had access. Once agreeing to participate, that student recruited another three participants, two of whom, in turn, each recruited one more. The six participants were graduate students at one of two different universities in a Southern U.S. state. Two of the participants were male; four were female. Five participants were Chinese, one (a female) was Japanese. Programs of study among the participants included education (two participants), business and economics (two participants) engineering, and computer science (one participant each). Interviews were conducted in-person (three) or using the WebEx video conferencing platform (three). Each interview lasted one to one and a half hours. Participants voluntarily consented to be interviewed, with their identities remaining confidential. Interviews were video-recorded and transcribed.

Prior to the interview process, the initial six interview questions were reviewed by two research colleagues and then revised based on feedback to ensure validity. Also, to ensure clarity and validity of responses, member-checking was employed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher restated response during the interview to ensure accuracy of communication, and then sent transcriptions to each participant for verification prior to coding. Data were analyzed using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and coded using a three-step (open coding, axial coding and selective coding) process to identify themes (Neuman, 2006).

Findings

Interview responses identified six themes with respect to personal growth, socio-cultural competence, and improvement of English language competency to answer the research question, “how do international adult ESL higher education students perceive the role of prior experience in their learning and instruction?” According to the six themes, prior experience in learning does the following: (1) it fosters a sense of safety, confidence, and belonging; (2) it helps improve English communication skills; (3) it helps improve critical thinking, self-awareness, and personal growth; (4) it helps improve social skills; (5) it improves understanding of diversity and cross-cultural competence; and (6) it promotes student-centered learning. Each theme is examined further below.

Fostering a Sense of Safety, Confidence and Belonging

All six participants expressed that incorporating their prior life and learning experiences into current learning allowed them to feel safer and more comfortable in their learning environments as well as enhancing a sense of belonging within their learning

communities. They also felt more confident engaging in discussions and general communication. One participant, in her first year, reported feeling like an outsider in class and was “very silent” during her first month of studies. Then one of her instructors had students complete, reflect on, and later discuss, a learning styles inventory. In the discussion, she was able to talk about her reflections on the teacher-centered education she experienced in China in comparison to what she was experiencing in the US. According to her, all were interested in the topic, and several of her peers asked questions, which generated a lively discussion. After that occasion, the participant felt a sense of belonging in class and was more confident speaking.

Another participant reported an early sense of fear in studying in a completely new environment which the use of prior experience helped alleviate. Her own words describe the situation.

I felt . . . a little shamed when American students discussed topics based on American culture that I know very little about. They used some buzz words . . . that I did not know. When my own culture and background could be involved in the class discussions, I felt safer and much less stressed and more confident... because my limited English and different cultural background make it hard for me to be part of a conversation.

Another participant summed up generally, “to be able to use my prior experience in new learning in a different educational and cultural background seems to be a bridge, connection, and transition between old and new learning.”

Still another expressed a specific example best described in his own words:

In [an online] discussion on educational policy, I felt much better when a classmate replied to me and asked “what about China? What would you do with this situation in China?” I replied to her with a long post describing one of my experiences in China. Other classmates also did a heated discussion, including a discussion about the differences, the pros and cons. This experience help[ed] me gain my confidence in learning back. I began to love class because of this!

Helping Improve English Communication Skills

All participants expressed a general sense of communication skills improvement resulting from the use of prior experience in learning. Four specifically conveyed being able to express themselves better in speaking and writing English. One remembered particular writing assignments encouraging the use of individual “interesting life stories,” which he credited with improving his English writing skills. Another participant reported getting better grades when able to incorporate prior experience into assignments and perceived his command of the English language to be improved. Relating to this theme, another had this to say:

I felt my writing skills were not bad at all when I elaborated [on] some marketing theories by using my past experience when I was a college student in Chinese college campus as examples. I felt like I had a lot to write, and I did get a good grade that gave me a lot of encouragement and confidence.

Still another relayed the following:

My speaking English . . . improved when everyone had to do a presentation of [their] own topic choice. I chose the topic of Chinese college student life and did a well-received presentation. I felt like vocabulary that I thought I did not know; I actually know . . . [it came] to my mind, I could express fluently. Besides, I had the most motivation to learn new vocabulary to prepare this presentation. It . . . felt good when I could present fluently in class.

Helping Improve Critical Thinking, Self-Awareness, and Personal Growth

All participants generally conveyed that the promotion of personal growth and development as a human being by prior experience in learning was substantial. As one participant recalled, “I feel like I significantly grew as an individual when there were opportunities allowing me to reflect on my past experiences and compare them with new experiences.” As already seen in some responses described above, comparing past experiences with new ones in another country and culture prompts critical thinking on, and analysis of, past and present perspectives, actions, and practices at all levels. It also facilitates, if not elicits, critical comparison and examination of cultures. Regarding self-awareness one participant explained that “without those opportunities of looking back and reflecting on my past experience, I might not be able to come to the realization and understanding of myself as I am now.” Another further explained, “I feel like the part I learned most is how I could reflect on my prior experience and know what I really want to be.”

Helping Improve Social Skills

All participants also generally suggested that the use of prior experience in learning was important in improving social skills, as can perhaps also be seen in some of the abovementioned responses. One participant provided relatively rich detail on this point.

I am an introverted person, and I am from a different culture. I am always the silent one in class. The second semester I had this professor who seemed to be very interested in my culture and asked me questions like “what would you do in China?” I became very motivated in answering the questions by associating with my prior experience in China. In Chinese New Year, I volunteered to present about the customs of Chinese New Year in class. After that, it opened the door for me to enjoy talking with them and even become friends with a few of them.

Improving Understanding of Diversity and Cross-Cultural Competence

This theme overlaps with the third theme discussed above. It bears its own discussion for being broader in scope, reaching the benefit of others beyond the participants and international ESL higher education students. More precisely, participants indicated that using their prior experience in their learning benefited not only them, but their American counterparts and other classmates as well. These peers were able to gather information from another culture in a way otherwise inaccessible to them. They learned of another culture through first-hand experience from a representative of that culture. This would prompt, among those peers, comparisons between cultures and inform these comparisons with richer, more personal, information, as well as foster a more complete understanding of their own international counterparts. Moreover, regarding diversity, the exchanges described so far provide an understanding and appreciation for aspect of diversity that go beyond appearances. One participant summed up simply that the use of prior experience in the ways described and others, “improves all our cross-cultural competence.”

Promoting Student-Centered Learning

This theme can also be seen in the interview responses discussed above. Directly addressing student-centered learning, one participant explained, the following:

Utilizing my prior experience makes me think I am important in the learning process and having more voice in the learning process. I respect the instructors . . . interested in my culture, and always put me in the center of learning. This is different than my previous learning experience of teacher-centered education.

Another commented, “this is what I observed, that I feel like prior experience is more valued here than in China.” Responses from all six participants indicate that they all value the use of prior experience and perceive that it is at least in agreement with student-centered learning, which they all prefer.

Discussion and Conclusion

Six international ESL higher education students studying at universities in a Southern state were interviewed to investigate the perceptions of international adult ESL higher education students on the role of prior experience in their learning and instruction. Responses revealed perceptions that the use of prior experience in these students’ learning enhances learning in various important ways, including personal growth, as well as improved ESL, social, and cross-cultural competence, which is consistent with research in the literature (Alfred, 2003; Diaz-Rico, 2012; Gay, 2018; Krashen, 2003; Lindeman, 1961; Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1991; Wlodowski, 1999). Moreover, students value and prefer the use of prior experience in learning, perceiving the learning experience to be much richer, more comfortable, and more enjoyable. They also believe using prior experience improved their critical thinking skills. This research suggests that those involved in instruction of these students would do well to better accommodate their learning by incorporating prior experience into their education programs. Such

incorporation is easily done by simply adjusting or creating assignments (like the examples in responses described earlier) that prompt or allow students to think about, apply and express their prior experiences in classroom settings and other learning situations. Results are better learning (perceived and measured) on various levels, which should translate later into more engaged, effective, and productive international citizens of the world. The study is limited to students from two different nationalities studying at institutions in a U.S. southern state. Future research should expand to international students from more countries and cultural backgrounds.

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