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A R T I C L E

Teaching language through biographical sketches

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Using action research as methodological interpretation of instructional experiences, the aim of this paper is to examine the use of biography and personal experience as expressions of self within cultural contexts in language teaching and learning situations. In particular, this paper will inquire into the connection of biographical recognition and reflection on experience to language learning while providing an analysis of how language learning can be better facilitated through a personal teaching and learning style that recognizes cultural aspects of linguistic development. Focusing primarily on the instruction of English in adult learning situations, this discussion will include a brief summary of theoretical positions in language learning and assess how those support a biographical and experiential teaching style that addresses culture and cultural influences in educational settings. Examining past and current literature on language teaching and learning, this paper inquires into how reflective learning and cultural exploration through the examination of experience encourages a respectful, dynamic and engaging learning environment, recognizing the value of personal experience in constructing linguistic meaning.

A biographical approach to language education is one that unites learner history and personal experience to the development of cultural awareness through reflective learning. Learning through the use of biographical sketches involves applying real life values to learning experiences and relies on the interpretation of lived experiences to learning contexts. With an emphasis on personal interpretation of experience in a shared environment of diversity, this approach to teaching and learning seeks to recognize how culture impacts behaviours and forms thoughts that contribute to and sustain linguistic knowledge. Because of a dual focus on elements of individualism and collectivity, this learning style reflects constructivist and social constructivist approaches to education where learners are encouraged to reflect on and apply their own experiences to the larger lens of culture and cultural orientation (Richardson, 2003).

Using biographical sketches to develop a reflective sense and explore language is a way to invoke learning through individual interpretation of meaning within collective instructional settings. The practical nature of this approach to learning responds well to the need for learning to be personal, experiential, and meaningful for learners, particularly adult learners (Dewey, 1944; Jarvis, 2010; Lindeman, 1961). In essence, the focus on using personal experience for the purpose of examining issues of relevance and participating in problem solving activities to analyze and discuss real life situations creates motivational learning situations for adult learners. Reflecting a unity of theory and practice, teaching through biographical sketches is best explored as a type of participatory

action research (Ledwith, 2007) where teaching and learning experiences can be examined through an interpretation of instructional situations that have the goal of reducing cultural gaps and improving intercultural communication.

Biography and Language Learning

Opposing more prescriptive techniques that have dominated language learning in the past, using biographical sketches to invoke learning and deepen linguistic comprehension could be viewed as an extension to communicative approaches to language instruction that were introduced in the early 1980s. Infusing biography into an experiential model of language teaching methodology harks back to Lindeman's (1961) idea that significant learning, particularly in adult education, is best achieved through recognition and acknowledgment of prior experience. Lindeman believed that in order for education to be purposeful, active and meaningful, it must address learner needs through the examination of the learner and the learner's individual life situations. Similarly, in order to explore learner individuality and group culture in language learning situations, recounting life experience can serve as a starting point for linguistic recognition, adaptation and growth.

Prior to the introduction of communicative language teaching to language learning, language teaching methods primarily focused on developing a cognitive understanding of linguistic structures and grammatical function in language without practical application of knowledge to real life situations (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). However, with the progression of English into a global language and the phenomenon of language learning, particularly English becoming a worldwide activity, structural methods of learning language based on the sole acquisition of grammatical knowledge were no longer seen as effective in developing communication skills in language teaching and learning (Richards, 2003). In actual practice, traditional methods were found to be insufficient in producing real language knowledge and needed further supplementation by other techniques and approaches in order to produce language learning that could be translated to an active use of language (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 17).

In response to the need for language teaching and learning to have more practical applications, communicative language teaching offers a more humanistic approach to education that invokes learning individuality rather than relying on behaviourist ideology and mechanistic learning techniques characterizing traditional language

learning methods (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). It is the turn to humanism through the focus on individual needs and perception that has opened up opportunities for learning to become a practical and applicable real-life activity. As such, the communicative approach became one of the first methods to recognize and introduce the notion of social function and situational contexts into language teaching (Savignon, 1983, p. 13). This move to inquiry in language education through the recognition of personal and contextual dimensions exemplifies constructivist and social constructive aspects of language learning and use, leading to cultural exploration and the development of cultural and intercultural, or multi-cultural, knowledge in language learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Hang & Wang, 2009).

In effect, communicative language teaching has led to a merging of linguistic and sociolinguistic theory where the goal is for learners to attain what has been termed as "communicative competence" in linguistic use (Hymes, 1972). As Larsen-Freeman (1986) suggested, the merging of theory to practice opened up avenues for self-exploration in language development and the application of linguistic knowledge through an emphasis on developing communicative competence by using language appropriately in specific social contexts (p. 131). Insisting on language use rather than knowledge establishes a significant precursor to experiential and biographical approaches to language learning where language use may be recognized by exploring narratives that depict and encourage cultural and intercultural contact, or a "meeting of worlds" (Hang and Wang, 2009).

Exploring individual experience for language instruction expands on the goals of communicative language use through an integration of personalized cultural knowledge and exploration into the construction of knowledge and cognitive understanding. Using real life situations in combination with a teaching methodology that includes reflective critique encourages learners to examine and apply real life experiences, issues of relevance and even those of important or immediate concern to improve linguistic knowledge. Moreover, combining a sense of individuality within collective learning environments presents motivating opportunities for learners to explore and develop language use while recognizing that individual situations are unique yet connected.

This type of learning reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) notion that social interaction plays an essential role in the construction of knowledge, particularly in regards to linguistic understanding and use. As Vygotsky (1978) and others in the field of language

studies have noted (Barkhuizen, 2011; Hinkel, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Gholson & Stumpf, 2005; Miekley, 2014, Nelson, 2011), social engagement and personal exchange within instructional settings is a provocative way for learners to work collectively using or demonstrating personal construction of meaning as a primary reference for learning. Additionally, exploring past and current experience, particularly as a starting point for language instruction, helps learners form a sense of belonging where they realize that their own struggles and challenges in learning a language are not necessarily unique; though they may share different backgrounds and views, their learning process and progress may be linked and achieved in a unified manner.

Interpretation of Experiences

As many educators have noted, leading with a focus on learner experience and interest enhances cultural and social understanding in language learning situations while creating motivating opportunities for learner engagement. In effect, employing a problem-solving method of examining learner experience allows learners to assess previous experiences of language and culture and apply that knowledge to generating new insights and skills in another language.

An essential element involved in employing biographical sketches in learning is to establish and maintain instructional settings that allow mindful or reflective learning to take place. According to Hedberg (2009), reflection involves "observing, being, and listening" rather than an unconscious musing or scattering of ideas or actions (p. 10). This probing through self-examination within teaching and learning contexts aligns closely with concepts of mindfulness and mindful learning as explored by Langer (2000). Basing much research on Langer's concept of mindful learning, the ATESL curriculum (2011) outlined how mindful learning supports a reflective learning style by offering opportunities for learners to develop and increase awareness about themselves, behaviours and interactions with others. The connection of reflection, mindful learning and the development of cultural awareness in language teaching and learning is detailed in **Figure 1**:
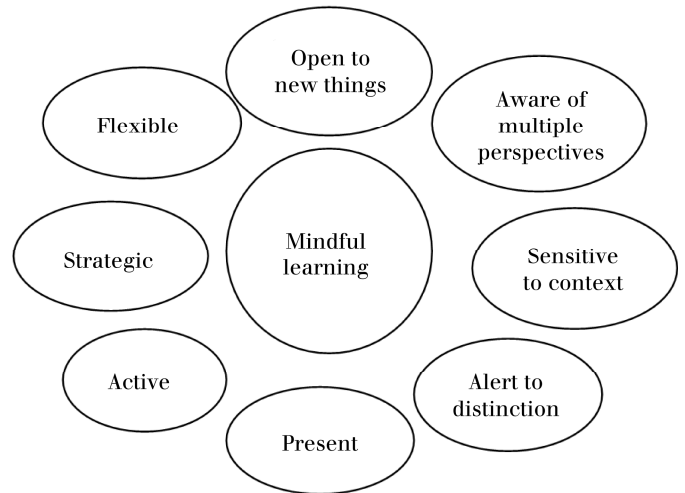

Figure 1. Aspects of mindful learning (adapted from ATESL Curriculum Framework, 2011)

Investigating individual biographies in diverse instructional settings allows learners to explore their own personal and cultural idiosyncrasies within well-ordered collective contexts, which improves knowledge of one's own cultural orientation and increases sensitivity towards other ways of being and thinking. The reflectivity and mindfulness that comprises an essential aspect of biographical sketching in diverse instructional settings enables learners to compare and contrast personal experiences, motivations, ideas and behaviours, helping learners to recognize that they are indeed products of their own cultures and, as language learners, are explorers in a new cultural heritage. Once learners have examined actions and behaviours in previous or historical situations, they are more able to align themselves appropriately and contextually within a new language and culture. In addition to providing a basis for thoughtful reflection on language and culture, an experiential style of learning helps learners to discover and develop their own voice in the language they are learning and position themselves as they want to "be" in their new language.

Still, understanding and knowledge construction through the use of biographical inquiry is a social activity that must include a probing of ideas and in-depth scrutiny of thoughts in order to be an effective tool for development of linguistic and cultural understanding (Barkhuizen, 2011; Nelson, 2011; Miekley, 2014). Linking biographic knowledge to narrative understanding, Miekley (2014) explored how using narrative inquiry as a tool to examine culture improves cultural communication in language study by reinforcing an active recognition of the cultural and linguistic elements of language and by focussing on increased learner perception

and critical awareness of self and others through significant interaction. According to Hay and Wang (2009), it is not the analysis of cultural similarities that establishes significant culture learning, but the contrast and recognition of cultural peculiarities and uniqueness of culture that result in an enhanced understanding of cultural differences.

For meaningful interaction to occur, however, an acceptance and focus on group dynamics to invoke personal responses and foster group awareness is an important part of using biography to introduce linguistic and cultural elements in instructional settings. Lewin (1943), whose studies in psychology and group behaviour have influenced educational practice and research, emphasized the importance of recognizing collectivity in uncovering individual and group awareness in learning environments in the following:

> We are slowly coming to realize that all education is group work. Education of children and adults, education in families and schools never deals with the individual on the one hand and the subject to be taught on the other. It is common knowledge that the success of a teacher ...depends as much on the social atmosphere he creates as on his mastering [of the language] or the laws of learning.

> (p. 115)

Recognizing the value of group effort and diversity in learning can contribute to active and engaging learning atmospheres through the examination of individual and group similarities and differences. As indicated in **Figure 1**, cooperative movements in instructional situations enable learners to develop a reflective sense about themselves, their beliefs, customs and actions and recognize distinctions in individual and group behaviours. Introducing a reflective sense in language learning increases learner self-awareness that later contributes to and enhances group meaning and understanding.

Instructional Situations

In general, educators found that making cultural connections to learning through discussing various habits of certain groups of people, family routines or workplace scenarios within learning environments not only motivates learners to engage in the learning process, but also helps learners apply their experiences to current learning situations. To pursue this type of information and invoke a congenial atmosphere of reflection and learning, the task for language instructors is to recognize their role as knowledgeable guides and position ways of knowing along with disciplinary knowledge that accompanies language instruction in participatory educational settings (Johnson, 2006). In effect, encouraging learners to make choices about their own language learning through the use of biography allows for flexibility in coming to decisions about how language is used within well-defined instructional boundaries. Personalizing learning in this way makes learning more significant and therefore memorable to the learner. Similarly, invoking personal recognition within the learning, these are the experiences that most likely 'hit home' with each student individually and as members of diverse groups.

After teaching for some time employing a biographical and inherently cultural application of language to learning through the interpretation of personal experiences, educators noticed a distinction in the way culture was referred to or taught in English language classes (Johnson, 2005; Gholson & Stumpf, 2005). Realizing that typical notes at the bottom or margins of texts explaining cultural topics or suggested cultural activities were usually based on broad cultural concepts like special holidays, historical facts or figures, and religious traditions made several educators aware of how the notion of culture may be viewed as reductionist in the absence of personal exploration.

Educators remarked that with a greater understanding of the learners and their needs, the more readily they would tend to address simpler cultural issues such as peculiarities in daily exchanges or the habits and behaviours of certain cultural or sub-cultural groups that make up populations of people. Essentially, deriving examples of these cultural behaviours from the learners themselves provided a basis for biographical sketches to support learning and uncover cultural awareness in meaningful ways.

As a result of the need to engage learners through a personalized learning process and to supplement teaching resources with real life materials and situations, educators relied on student feedback to direct courses of action. For them, it seemed infinitely more interesting for learners to discuss particularities of group behaviour, habits and thought rather than to learn about general cultural traditions and historical facts. Details such as why people shook hands, waved hello, took off their shoes before entering a home; or, in which situations could you initiate a conversation or even hug someone appeared to receive much more response and interest than talking about the details of Christmas, for example, when many students may not even be interested in celebrating Christmas.

Recognizing how culture reflects the lived experiences of individuals, educators quickly realized that it was not the upper case *C* Culture that was sought in developing cultural awareness and cultural recognition, but a small *c* reference to culture (Johnson, 2005, p. 6) that describes the particularities of everyday life. As educators noted, references to small *c* culture were more often enhanced and highlighted through delving into individual stories that depicted culture through experience than discussing generalities of culture and cultural behaviours demonstrated through language.

Many educators claimed that part of their interest in language teaching originated from a willingness to venture into unknown territories and unfamiliar terrain. This willingness to accept and welcome the unfamiliar allows educators and learners alike to reflect on everyday aspects of culture and the differences in cultural behaviour and attitudes that are revealed through language. In fact, using information about learners, their own experiences and prior knowledge to bridge cultural gaps in language learning provides an effective point of departure in language teaching. Because "understanding culture, one's own and that of others, must begin with an understanding of ordinary everyday life" (Barer-Stein, 1993, p. 164), sharing ideas and thoughts about typical life experiences are important aspects of cultural integration and developing cultural understanding. As a result, educators stated that they tend to focus on sharing ideas and thoughts about typical life experiences such as making dinner, organizing family outings or planning future or free-time activities, which are important aspects of cultural integration and developing cultural understanding.

Deepening the reflective process by inquiring into specific aspects of thoughts, attitudes and behaviours explored through biographical sketching encourages reflection on social and cultural notions that are expressed in language and behaviour. As Damen (1986) suggested, learning about a new culture involves "seeking out information, asking questions and making observations" (p. 34). Required to arrive at personal understandings of information and content through dialogue and discussion, learners begin making their own cultural connections by relying on perceptions of language and coming to conclusions about language and culture. As an added feature, positioning language use in this way lessens the need for teacher explanation and reliance on teacher verification or text memory for linguistic construction.

Implications

The move to inquiry in teaching relies on a more personal style of teaching based on recognition and use of personal interpretation of experience in practical teaching situations positioned within specific cultural contexts. Responding to a need to provide effective language teaching solutions based on personal experience signals a return to John Dewey's (1944) influence in education that focuses on learner autonomy and problem solving within a multicultural framework (Bell, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Winch & Gingell, 1999). Kumaravadivelu (2001) used the term "social autonomy" to describe these types of collective learning situations where, "unlike academic autonomy, which is mostly intrapersonal, social autonomy is interpersonal and is related to learners' ability and willingness to function effectively as cooperative members of a classroom community" (p. 546). As seen in Figure 1 (page 4), using individual and collective experiences to explore language requires flexibility and critical recognition of self and context on the part of the learners and the educators.

Kumaravadivelu (2006) suggested that due to limitations inherent in any language method, there is a need to go beyond the constructs of any one method to find alternative ways of designing effective language teaching strategies that will be contextually appropriate for learners. In effect, this type of eclectic teaching practice requires educators to reflect on specific contexts of the language teaching situation and address unique challenges within learning environments in order to produce contextually effective teaching strategies rather than relying solely on one particular method of instruction to achieve goals in language learning. To deal with intangible factors that may arise in this type of language instruction, using a variety and combination of teaching strategies may be the best response to the need for providing contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive teaching methods and materials while continuing to apply principles of linguistic communication and flexibility in language learning and use.

As Larsen-Freeman (1986) discovered in examining communicative language teaching methodology, attempting to recognize the importance of cultural appropriateness in language education by going "beyond methods" provides an alternative to following established practices in language teaching where the role of the instructor moves from a theoretic stance of ideology to a practical model of inquiry (p. 3). Johnson (2006) suggested that teaching contexts seeking cultural

understanding require knowledge of specific interpretative paradigms that reflect individual and unique teaching situations. To define these situational paradigms, Johnson stated that context "is not necessarily limited to specific geopolitical boundaries but can be sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and socioeconomic contexts that shape and are shaped by local and global events, for example, the globalization of English or the recognition of World Englishes" (p. 245). These are distinct learning environments where educators need to account for the needs of the learners, the specific context of the learning environment and the socio-cultural aspects of the larger community or communities to which the learners belong.

Limitations

In an analysis of reflective critique, Hedberg (2009) noted how reflection should not be a "substitute for action or a convenient way to procrastinate" (p. 31). To support this view, Nelson (2011) stated that to avoid the risk of self-indulgence that may result from biographical examination, one needs to acknowledge the broader social function that this type of learning and reflection can represent through detailed reflection and application of ideas to the appropriate social and cultural contexts in which the learning is situated. In other words, biographical or narrative exploration must be accompanied by thoughtful reflection and discourse for it to be a relevant and effective tool for language cognition and development. This supports the idea that exploration through biography must reinforce linguistic competencies and goals for it to provide useful resources for teaching and learning.

Moreover, in soliciting personal response in instructional settings, issues of privacy must be acknowledged and addressed. In this case, care needs to be taken in order to maintain professional distance and a culture of respect in instructional situations. To support an intentional analysis of learning that makes up reflective critique, Solloway (2010) emphasized the importance of developing respectful attitudes and allowing the personal space necessary for self-exploration. Developing active awareness through mindful teaching and learning, acknowledging learner differences and recognizing individual sensitivities are essential skills for educators to acquire in these instructional settings in addition to being an important part of the learning process for individual learners.

In writing about personal engagement in learning, Brookfield (2012), Dewey (1933), Hedberg (2009) and Langer (2000) noted how becoming aware of self and one's impact on others is a fundamental aspect of

building an effective discursive and reflective educational environment. Although giving and receiving biographical information helps learners and educators forge a connection to each other, the learning environment and outside contexts, Sharkey (2004) suggested that "self-censorship" may influence the validity of biography due to a need to be well received in collective environments. She explained that in biographical exploration, there is a risk that individuals may alter or change biographical positions that "may challenge the norm" in order to be accepted into learning environments (p. 507). For this reason, it is essential that reflection on self includes a critical aspect that recognizes inequalities, judgements and situations of power that may be at play in these instructional settings.

Conclusion

A biographical and experiential approach to language teaching relies on educator and learner ability to relate prior and current experience to existing learning contexts. In addition to developing cultural awareness and thus improving cultural knowledge and intercultural communication, these types of educational environments help facilitate the acquisition of skills that may be transferable to other areas of learning. These dimensions of learning include: openness to new ideas; awareness of multiple perspectives; sensitivity to context; alertness to distinction; achieving presence of mind and spirit; and, becoming active, strategic and flexible learners. Through a process of language learning that encourages cultural perception and individual reflection on experience, learners are able to explore and assess how language reflects individual and group thought process and apply this knowledge to real life situations. Overall, allowing learners to develop their own cultural cognition in language based on recognition of previous experience enables learners to acquire a sense of confidence and proficiency in using languages for communication.

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