



FROM KARAMZIN TO PUTIN: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN PRACTICE

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Transformative learning theory, an important educational development of the 21st century, provides an instructional strategy for individual growth and development. Based on Mezirow's (1995, 1998, 2000) revised theory of transformative learning, this presentation addresses the practical application of the transformative theory in foreign language teaching focusing on critical reflection and rational discourse in light of students' own beliefs. Specifically, the objective of the transformational experience was to see the Crimean problem through the light of Russian history and contemporary political and polemic discourse. Over a period of four weeks, five university students of Russian read and discussed four authentic texts that could potentially change their perspectives and opinions. The students reflected on their learning processes and the discoveries they made along the way. They also shared the ways the reading materials affected their understanding of current events, Russian culture, and history. The final product of their experience was an argumentative essay where they expressed their insights on their transformative experience which itself involved elements of sharing and further reflection.

Keywords: Transformative learning theory, Foreign language learning.

Conceptual Framework: Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory provides a theoretical framework that guides both research and practice having "overshadowed andragogy, moving from the margins to the center of the study of adult learning in both adult education and a variety of other disciplines and bringing a new and exciting identity to the field of adult education, one that builds on the previous work of andragogy" (Cranton & Taylor, 2001: 16). Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory has been around for over 30 years, revised and expanded to understand how adults learn and how they capitalize on prior knowledge and experience. The evolution of transformative learning theory has been strongly influenced by the development of adult learning theory and drew on diverse disciplines such as cognitive psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, and philosophy.

The notion that adults critically assimilate their values, assumptions and beliefs from family and community are at the center of transformative learning theory and is rooted in humanism and critical social theory. The main humanist assumptions that individuals are autonomous, free, and can make major personal choices, that they have responsibility to both themselves and to others, that human potential for

growth and development is essentially unlimited, and that the goal of adult learners is to grow into their greatest potential are inherent in transformative learning theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

The focus of transformative learning theory is on how individuals can gain greater control over their lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers (Mezirow, 2012). Mezirow's argument is that adults question and change their taken-for-granted sets of assumptions (meaning schemes) and broader worldviews (meaning perspectives) when they encounter unexpected situations (disorienting dilemmas) throughout their adult lives. Transformative learning occurs when we undergo experiences that result in the changes of how we view ourselves, our purpose in the world, and the way that purpose can be realized. Mezirow termed this change "perspective transformation" - an individual's perspective is altered when he experiences and critically reflects upon a situation that is fundamentally different from his prior learning and experiences. In perspective transformation, individuals critically evaluate their thought processes and world-views as they change their frames of reference (world view) to become more open to alternative frameworks.

The Core Mechanisms of Transformative Learning

Personal experience, critical reflection, and constructive discourse are the core mechanisms of transformative learning – an individual's life experiences provide a starting point, critical reflection serves as the medium by which he questions the validity of his own world-views, while constructive discourse is needed "to engage in conversation with others in order to better consider alternative perspectives and determine their validity (Cranton, 2006: 36)."

According to Mezirow, reflection can take several forms but he argued that, on a broad scale, there is a straightforward reflection of one's actions and critical reflection, which examines not only the nature and consequence of the actions but also the circumstances that led to the actions.

Mezirow presented three types of reflection and their roles in transformational learning: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Content reflection involves looking back to what was done and thinking of the actual content, while process reflection causes a person to think of how to handle the experience. Both content and process reflection might lead to the transformation of meaning (meaning scheme). Premise reflection, on the other hand, requires an individual to see the larger view of his value system, which might lead to a potential transformation of the meaning perspective rather than a meaning scheme. In other words, learners can transform an individual meaning scheme by examining previous actions or where the actions and their related factors originated but when they consider a more global view, the reflection is much deeper and involves transforming a series of meaning schemes (premise reflection). In short, there are two types of transformation: a straightforward transformation of meaning scheme which occurs through content and process reflection, and a much more profound transformation of a meaning perspective.

Critical reflection is fundamental to adult life and drives the process of transformative learning. Since transformative learning is "a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives (Cranton, 2006: 23)," an individual needs to reflect on his actions in order to change or transform one's perspective through thought and action. In other words, one needs to become aware of and examine his assumptions and beliefs embedded in actions, which might lead to potential transformation. Critical reflection drives the process of transformative learning and refers to questioning the integrity of prior assumptions, such as beliefs, value systems, and attitudes. In essence, we realize something is not consistent with what we hold to be true and act in relation to our world. In addition to a critical reflection that challenges assumptions, transformative learning calls for a trusting, social context for the dialogue referred to as a rational or constructive discourse. Constructive discourse is the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed as individuals can share ideas, assess reasons supporting their opinions as objectively as possible, use the experience of others, and can better consider alternative perspectives, determine their validity, and act based on the resulting insight (Mezirow, 2012).

Studies regarding transformative learning have been conducted in a wide range of areas, including continuing higher education, online learning, religious studies, social studies, psychology, workplace administration, women's studies, theology, vocational training, faculty development, etc. They have revealed that engaging in the practice of transformative learning can make a difference in adult learners' lives (for a review of programs that foster transformative learning in higher education settings, see Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). Hendershot (2011) reports that 61% of the participants experienced transformation as a result of their engagement in transformative learning: they were put into contact with people from different backgrounds, took on active social roles, and were encouraged to take part in critical thinking through discussions with instructors and other students. The participants of Peiying's (2012) study developed their self-concept of cultural identity and improved their relationships with others. The results of Beaupre's study (2012) demonstrate that his students displayed new attitudes of commitment to the global community and developed more positive emotions towards learning. Several studies that explored the role of creative writing in adult learners' transformative learning also suggest that these learners can benefit from their involvement in transformative learning experiences. For example, Hubbs & Brand (2005) noted that reflective writing assignments encourage students to be engaged in critical thinking and let them personalize the information from their readings.

Transformative Learning and L2 Learning

Researchers in L2 learning and teaching generally agree that language usage is the driving force of language development (Long, 1989; Prabhu, 1987) and that the nature of interactions, the quality of the experiences, and the efforts made to use the L2 are primary indicators of language gain (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004). Required within this view is the creation of opportunities for L2 learners for critical reflection and critical self-reflection which are the key concepts of adult education in general, and transformative learning theory, in particular. The transformative learning experience is an effective way for L2 learners to develop higher order reasoning and conversational fluency by challenging them to push their linguistic competence to its limit as they learn the language and internalize the target language culture. A small but growing body of research has explored transformative learning experiences of second/foreign language learners (Brock, 2010; Deveci, 2014; Johnson & Nelson, 2010; King, 2005; Margo, 2003; Schwartz, 2013). Magro (2003) found that writing assignments in the form of personal narratives and creative writing helped ESL learners relate content to their life experiences, and therefore learning English was made more relevant. King (2005) found that 66.8% of respondents demonstrated transformative learning experience during their ESL studies. Johnson and Nelson (2010) conducted a study to examine the transformative learning experiences of adult learners of Spanish. The participants of the study demonstrated perspective transformation as they reflected upon their own culture to develop cultural tolerance, built and strengthened their personal connection with the target language culture while learning the language. Brock (2010) also reports that the respondents in her study were engaged in critical reflection, although some did not necessarily change their beliefs. Schwartz (2013) conducted her study to analyze how college-level adult learners of foreign languages experience transformative learning through educational and non-educational experiences. Based on on-line surveys and follow-up interviews (N=59), 15.3% of the participants reported to have experienced transformation. The findings revealed that intrinsic motivation, cultural exposure (active/authentic cultural participation, cultural comparison, travel experiences, movies, contact with native speakers), and personal connection with the target culture are the factors that promoted a perspective transformation. The results of Deveci's study (2014) of 32 learners of English as a foreign language revealed an increase in the learners' awareness in terms of language learning and cultural knowledge.

The Study

Over a period of four weeks, graduate students of *Advanced Russian Course: Russian through Social Sciences and Media* read and discussed four authentic texts that could potentially change their perspectives and opinions on recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In order to draw a broader historical and socio-political picture of some aspects of common history associated with this conflict, we tried to introduce students to the following selection:

1. Karamzin, History of Russian State Volume 1, Chapter IX (Vladimir) (1821)
2. A. Nevzorov polemic article “The Middle Finger of Faith” (2014)
3. President Vladimir Putin’ Address to the Federal Assembly on Re-Unification of Russian Federation with Crimea (2014)
4. Federal law of Russian Federation on Accession of Crimea (2014).

(1) Karamzin’s work is a 12-volume history of Eastern Slavs from the beginning of times to Ivan the Terrible and the Times of Trouble (1613). The first edition of the History was published in large for those times numbers: three thousand volumes which were all sold instantly. The History is a wonderful literary work with the distinguished author’s voice, which on one hand resembles the narrations of Old Slavic Chronicles, on the other, is simple, clear and reader-friendly. However, Karamzin was criticized by Russian liberals for his strong monarchist ideas, which predetermined author’s tone and his account of Russia’s past. Supposedly, Karamzin’s younger contemporary poet Alexander Pushkin wrote in his epigram:

В его «Истории» изящность, простота Доказывают нам, без всякого пристрастья, Необходимость самовластья И прелести кнута.	In his History Without partiality is proven The necessity of monarchism and loveliness of a whip
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Chapter 9 tells a story of Prince Vladimir (circa 960 - 1015), who ruled Novgorod and Kiev. His main accomplishment is considered to be the Christianization of Kievan Rus’ after Vladimir’s conversion to Christianity in 988. According to Karamzin, in exchange for conversion, Prince Vladimir demanded a sister of Byzantine Tsar for a wife and concurred Byzantine city of Chersoneses in Crimea, where he desired to be baptized.

(2) In 2015 Russian Orthodox Church celebrated 1000 anniversary of his death. Russian officials were looking for the site for Vladimir’s monument in the heart of Moscow, and this process ignited a heated public discussion not only about aesthetics and preservation of the historic part of Moscow but about Vladimir himself, his life and his legacy. In his article *The Middle Finger of Belief*, Nevzorov depicts the portrait of Vladimir who is not worthy of the monument, much less of the current debates.

(3) Federal law of Russian Federation on Accession of Crimea (2014) legally confirmed the new status of Crimea as a Federal subject of the Russian Federation. The students read and interpreted the articles of the law.

(4) President Vladimir Putin’ Address to the Federal Assembly on Re-Unification of Russian Federation with Crimea (2014) is one of the most controversial and powerful reading assignments of the project. In his address, President Putin offers a historical, political and social justification of the Russian actions in Crimea and speaks about the legal power of the referendum on the status of Crimea. In his speech, P.P. turns to the Christianization of Kievan Rus’ and calls Crimea a sacred place for every Russian. He also calls on recent history, when on February 19 of 1954 General Secretary of the Communist party N. Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine.

The students debated the connection between the two Vladimirs – Prince Vladimir and President Putin – and reflected on their learning processes and the discoveries they made along the way. They also shared the ways selected reading materials affected their understanding of current events, Russian culture,

and history. The final product of their experience was an argumentative essay where they expressed their insights on their transformative experience which itself involved elements of sharing and further reflection.

Research Questions

This purpose of this study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do students of Russian language experience any aspects of transformative learning as a result of their engagement in learning Russia through offered authentic materials?
- 2) If they do, what factors affect their transformative learning experience patterns?

Method

This study describes the transformative learning experience of Russian language students in the Slavic Department, Harvard University. These were the graduate students of Davis Center of Russian and Eurasian studies. Very often, these students have a degree in Russian from various American Universities. As a rule, these students have spent some time in Russian-speaking countries conducting research, working for American Embassy, NGOs, or attended Russian universities. Political Russian is a refreshment course, which prepares students for the course on Russian Press and Russian Civilization. A total of 5 learners with a mean age of 21 participated in the study and the data were collected in the Fall of 2015 using a questionnaire specifically designed for the study. Prior to introducing the project and the first assignment, the students had to answer 9 questions in Russian:

1. What are the main denominations in Russia? Name your source.
2. Which ethnic group(s) is Christian Orthodox?
3. In what century Kievan Rus' was Christianized? Name the source.
4. What role did Prince Vladimir play in Christianization of Kievan Rus'?
5. What else do you know about Vladimir? Name the source.
6. Did you encounter any references to Prince Vladimir in Russian press?
7. When and where did you hear about Karamzin and his main historic work?
8. What other works on Russian history do you know?
9. You are about to read one chapter from Karamzin's "History of Russia State" in old orthography. Do you expect that study of this work will improve your Russian and cultural awareness?

The questionnaire revealed that

- 100% know that most ethnic Russians are Christian Orthodox
- 60% know that Kievan Rus' was converted in the 10th century AD
- 100% know about the role of Vladimir in conversion to Christianity
- 20% are familiar with Riasanovsky's textbook
- 20 % studied Russian history in college
- 20% studied Russian history at school
- 20% use Wikipedia as the main source of information
- 20% know about Prince Vladimir's life before conversion
- 80% are familiar with references to Vladimir in today's political discourse
- 20% studied Russian history through Russian literature: Tolstoy and Dostoevsky
- 100% made grammatical and spelling mistakes in the key terms and expressions that pertain to the topic

The reading of Karamzin was assigned after instructor's lecture on Russian orthography, stylistics and a history of the reform. The students received a glossary and comprehension questions for the

portions of the text. The students had to answer the questions as part of their homework. Classroom activities included translation, reconstruction of the text (parts were mixed up or removed), writing a plan of the text, and retelling of the text using this plan. Nevzorov's article was examined through the comprehension questions and comparative analysis with Karamzin's text. Only a small number of articles from the federal law selected by students were discussed in class. The students read and listened to President Putin's speech and answered the comprehension questions. These questions helped students to pay attention to major political announcements in their cultural and political context drawn by the President, including the Kievan Rus' – Crimea – Vladimir – current events paradigm.

Assignment for the Final Assessment

To provide some authenticity of their experience, the students worked on the following task: "You are invited to participate in an essay competition for foreign students of Russian. This competition was announced by Russian newspaper "Novaya Rossiyskaya Gazeta." "Novaya Rossiyskaya Gazeta," asked the participants to describe their thinking process in the course of reading of several selected materials. The essays will be evaluated on the basis of grammatical and spelling accuracy, as well as on your ability to express your thoughts idiomatically. The best essay will be published in January issue of the newspaper." The students were asked to explain how their views and attitudes towards current events developed in the process of reading and they were required to use the following phrases in the essays:

<p>В процессе чтения...</p> <p>я обратил(а) внимание на</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ я подумал(а) о ○ я обнаружил(а), что ○ я открыл(а) для себя ○ у меня возникла идея/возникло ощущение, что ○ у меня зародилось подозрение, что <p>Мне представляется, что ...</p>	<p>I the process of reading...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I noticed ○ I found ○ I discovered ○ I got an idea/I felt like ○ suspicion arose <p>It seems to me that...</p>
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Results

The results revealed that all students went through the process of transformation by critically reflecting on their assumptions, analyzing their thinking processes, and participating in constructive discourse. 100% of students demonstrated that they experienced content reflection; 100% of students demonstrated that they experienced process reflection; while 80% demonstrated that they examined their long-held beliefs and assumptions about the issue. In other words, both Content & Process reflection led to a perspective transformation of meaning. The respondents were found to raise their awareness in terms of language learning, cultural knowledge and the help they could access.

Key Points in Students' Reflections

Students Drew Parallels

1. They made a connection between the two V's: "I suspect that the possibility of NATO having a stronger presence in the Black Sea horrifies President Vladimir as much as Pechenegs in the South of Rus' horrified Prince Vladimir."

2. They reflected on common trends in political discourse in Russian Federation and US: “I discovered that the circumstances of the Christianization of Kievan Rus’ have political importance for today’s Russian authorities, just like it was in Prince Vladimir’s time. <...> He [Putin] very well understands a historic connection between Orthodox Christianity and the ruler of Russia. This is why he called Kiev “Holy city of Russia.”

Students Noticed How Religion and Law Support Current Political System

3. They became aware of the ties between Orthodox Church and power in Russia and Ukraine: “I discovered that the circumstances of the Christianization of Kievan Rus’ have political importance for today’s Russian authorities, just like it was in Prince Vladimir’s time. <...> He [Putin] very well understands historic connection between Orthodox Christianity and the ruler of Russia. This is why he called Kiev “Holy city of Russia.”
4. Students questioned their previously held beliefs about “right” and “wrong” in Crimean conflict between Russia and Ukraine:” I was sure that Russia stole Crimea from Ukraine. I assumed that Russian claims for Crimea are unfounded. <...> But I changed my opinion. For example, I thought about [President] Putin's argument that one-morning Russian people woke up in different countries, and what kind of shock” it must have been”. “In the Federal Law I read about the special status of Crimea and Sebastopol, this is why I got a feeling that Russia followed the international law.” “I read President Putin’s speech only in Russian. The language of his address greatly influenced me. Honestly speaking, before I read this address, I believed with all my heart that Crimea belonged to Ukraine. Now, I better understand Russian motivations. Instead of suspicion that I felt towards Putin, I have respect. One sentence particularly touched me. President Putin said that people of Crimea were handled [by the Soviet rulers] “as a sac of potatoes”; that they [people of Crimea] went to bed in one country, and woke up in another. I discovered, that Crimean problem is more complex than I expected.”

Students Reflected on the Change and Transformation of Their Opinions

5. Students reflected on common trends in contemporary political discourse in Russian Federation and US: “As an American, I remembered about our history, and about those myths which we always repeat. For example, it is Revolutionary War, great freedom, and a multiethnic paradise of possibilities. When I compare Putin's address and the speeches of American presidents, I see the same use of national myths.”
6. Students noticed how the language of law transforms, but supports national mythology:

“This source [Law] demonstrated how judicial style echoes the myth. The language and style of law used to formally explain what had happened and the new rules”.
7. Students declared transformation of their views: “Having read about Russian history and current events, I learned a lot, and now I think that I have a more objective view on what was happening with the annexation of Crimea”.
8. Students examined readers’ reaction to the text they read in class: “In the process of reading, I discovered the power of myths politics use in their speeches and their influence on the readers”. “Offered readings helped me to reformulate or reconsider my previously held opinions. <...> These sources helped me to see Russian history from a different point of view, and made me examine my own thoughts and attitudes”.

Interesting, that two skeptical students accepted President Putin’s speech very positively. But Russian journalist earned comparison with Donald Trump “who says whatever crosses his mind regardless consequences. In general, openly declared transformation of their own views, questioned their previously held beliefs about “right” and “wrong” in Crimean conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and examined the origin of the readers’ reaction to the texts.

Discussion

Research has demonstrated the importance of dealing with social issues in the classroom as it teaches students to actively participate in a democracy (Bomer, 2004); promotes reflection and high levels of critical thinking (Johannessen, 2003); encourages the transformation of social realities (Cummins, 2000); refines cognitive abilities to deal with complex issues (Angell and Avery, 1992), and prepares them for authentic dialogues (Harwood and Han, 2000). Within Mezirow's transformative learning theory, learners can become aware of the realities via critical reflection on their experiences. Mezirow's argument is that as adults, we transform our sets of assumptions governing particular situations (meaning schemes) and broader worldviews (meaning perspectives) so that we could explain the unexpected situations that cause us to question assumptions we encounter throughout our adult lives (disorienting dilemmas).

Bruner (1996) identifies 4 modes of meaning making: (1) establishing, shaping, and maintaining intersubjectivity; (2) relating events, utterances, and behavior to the action taken; (3) construing particulars in a normative context – deals with meaning relative to obligations, standards, conformities, and deviations; (4) making propositions – applying rules of the symbolic, syntactic, and conceptual systems used to achieve decontextualized meanings, including rules of inference and logic and such distinctions as whole-part, object-attribute, and identity-otherness.

Bruner's list is incomplete. Transformation theory adds a fifth and crucial mode of meaning making: becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and those of others and assessing their relevance for making interpretation (Mezirow, 2012, p. 74).

The goal of adult education and FL teaching, in particular, is to help adults realize their full potential for becoming responsible and autonomous learners – to make more informed choices by becoming more critically reflective. What counts in fostering transformative learning and what constitutes a starting point for a discourse – is what the individual learner wants to learn. This leads to a critical examination of normative assumptions underpinning the learner's value judgments or normative expectations. We need to create protected learning environments in which conditions for TL are fostered. This involves “blocking out power relationships” including those traditionally existing between teachers and learners and helping learners become more aware of the context of their problematic beliefs, and “more critically reflective on their assumptions and those of others, more fully and freely engaged in discourse, and more effective in taking action on their reflective judgments.

The results of this study show that university students studying Russian as a foreign language experienced transformative learning as a result of their engagement in learning Russia through offered authentic materials. Some students were found to develop critical thinking skills. A small number thought reflective writing tasks they were asked to perform helped them to become more tolerant towards nonconformist views. More time is needed to determine if their world views have changed and this was not the goal of the current study.

Conclusion

Grounded in Mezirow's (1995, 1998, 2000) revised theory of transformative learning and emerging from the experiences of Russian language learners, this paper addresses the practical application of transformative theory in foreign language teaching focusing on critical reflection and rational discourse in light of students' own beliefs. The study shares the perspective of developing transformative learning opportunities as language teachers take on the role of facilitators and learners bring transformative learning to life by learning the language, internalizing the target language culture, and examining current political issues through the light of history and contemporary political and polemic discourse. Within the theory of transformative learning, education does not stop in the classroom but touches all aspects of a learner's life. The focus of transformative learning theory is on “how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers

(Mezirow, 2012: 76).” Since relatively little research has examined transformative learning among adult language learners, it is hoped that this study has contributed in some way to scholarship in the area through some of its most salient findings: transformative learning is an effective means of building foreign language learners’ confidence, changing their views of the language learning process, promoting reflection on multiculturalism, and developing language skills. More research is needed to explore the role of transformative learning in promoting positive change in the lives of adult language learners.

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