

Research Experience as A Decoder for the Trajectory of ELT Student-Teachers' Perceptual Change

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Abstract

This study investigated the probable impact of educational research experience on the way six juniors of the English Language Teaching department of a Turkish university conceptualised themselves as researchers. The participants' research experiences were observed, the changes they went through were identified and interpreted on the basis of Mezirov's (1978) phases of transformative learning theory. The participants wrote about their concerns, expectations from their research experience and difficulties they faced during this stage in the form of field notes. They also evaluated themselves as researchers at the beginning and at the end of the process. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were held at the end of the study in order to identify the changes, if any, the students detected in themselves. They additionally commented on whether this study had, in any way, contributed to them as prospective language teachers. The findings reveal that research experience does not only contribute to students' perceptions of selves as researchers but also enhanced the student-teachers' professional and academic credentials.

Keywords: Teacher education, Perceptual change, Educational research, Professional development.

1. Introduction

As part of the teacher education programmes, almost all the undergraduate students have to take a research methods course. One of the most effective ways to help undergraduates to enhance the skills and knowledge needed to research, organise, evaluate and apply new information and consequently develop a spirit of critical inquiry and intellectual integrity can be said to be achieved through research (Bernstein, 2005; Campbell, 2000). However, as the students do not have prior experience in this field, they enter the research methods course with somewhat negative attitudes and concerns (Leckie, 1996; Papanastasiou, 2006; Yildirim & Ilin, 2009). In spite of the negative connotation the word bears, concerns may serve to positive outcomes. For example, in Concern Based Adoption Model webpage <http://www.sedl.org/>, Hall and Hord (n.d.) explain the stages and ultimate function of concerns as triggering the desire to change in individuals.

As they put it, things start with the unconcerned individual in the first moving toward the informational phase where the individual develops the idea that a certain phenomenon is interest generating. Then the individual reaches a point that s/he feels concerned about her /his personal changes within the context of that phenomenon and the required time to concretely observe the consequences of this change on the audience involved within this process. In the last phases, the individual starts to value collaboration with others and eventually, refocuses on the issue putting forward new ideas. As Freeman (2002) states, "Any endeavour ... has to establish a logical starting point. To some degree, that starting point will always be arbitrary; however, there should be some declared logic to it (p.2)".

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Coinciding with Freeman's idea, this study takes Hall and Hord's explanation for concerns as a starting point, sets out with the exploration of junior English Language Teaching students' concerns at the beginning of a pre-designed research process and proceeds with the interpretation of student-teachers' experiences on the basis of the phases Mezirov's transformative learning theory. Mezirov (1978) a leader thinker in adult education who developed a characterization of transformative learning views learning and change as somehow equivalent or interconnected to each other and discusses that teachers should consciously and explicitly try to arrange learning contexts that would enable their students to experience transformations in their thinking. He briefly defines learning as similar to "a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships" and he elaborates on the realisation of this change as an outcome of sequence of some phases. Passing through these certain stages may lead us toward contractual relationships with others, institutions and society. Consequently, some observable behavioural changes may eventuate due to such transformation. To further the details, in Mezirov's transformative learning theory, as listed by Cranton (2006), the first phase shows itself in the form of a disorienting dilemma in a person followed by a self-examination period. In the third stage, one goes through a critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions which end up with recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Having achieved a certain level of awareness, a person starts to explore options for new roles, relationships, and actions. We may presumably consider these as a mile stone in an individual's learning experience leading to a planning of a course of action, and acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing these plans. Then, as Mezirov explains, provisional trying of new roles, building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships are attained. Finally, reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective is realised.

Various studies in the field of educational development have been designed with the inspiration by this theory. For example, Hart, Conklin and Allen (2008) studied leader development and probable transformation of leadership qualities. On account of teacher development and change Arroyo, Kidd, Burns and Lamb (2015) investigated how teachers made practical meaning of their teaching philosophy through reliving their experiences, their learning of themselves and in addition to their own transformation during teaching. As they set forth, transformative learning is incremental in nature. Teacher development being their research focus, Osterling and Webb (2009) studied the pre-service and novice teachers' personal transformation through the educational process they experienced in a graduate school of education. In a similar vein, Fraser (2015) delved into teachers' professional development through change. Study findings lay emphasis on the role of critical reflection and transformative learning on development and change. From a divergent perspective, Mantas and Schwind (2014) utilised critical reflective dialogue on a past arts-based workshop experience to trigger transformative learning in two educators from different disciplines. Chmil-Intolubbe, Spreenand and Swap,(2012) investigated long-term international collaborations and field based experiential learning opportunities purposively organised between two distinct cultures with the aim to lead to purposeful and culturally grounded transformations. Contrary to the studies that dignify transformative learning theory, some such as Taylor (1998) who writes about gaps and controversy of the theory, Boyd whose notion of transformative education reflects more of a psyche- or soul-centred psychology (in Dirkx, 2000) and Nohl (2015) who brings a critical look at the theory uniformly propound a necessity for revision.

1. Method

As distinct from the briefly summarised above research, this case study tries to find out whether involving in educational research lead to any transformations in the six ELT student-teachers' perceptions of "selves" as researchers. The study takes place at a Turkish university. In the study, the changes the student-teachers experience throughout their research process are interpreted on the basis of Mezirov's (1978) phases of transformative learning theory. Similarities and differences with the phases of the theory and phases that the students go through, if any, are sought after. To sum, the theory is used as a dual means; first to initiate and shape the study and second to constitute a base for the interpretation of the consequences of the experiences on the participants. To illustrate, six junior students, two males and four females, took part in the study which lasted through a fourteen week semester. As the first step of the study, for a four week period of time four class hours each week were devoted to an induction stage by means of which the meaning of educational research, research types and designs as well as principles of data collection, data analysis and various formats for writing a research paper were briefly introduced to the students.

Having become comparatively familiar with research, the students went through a hands-on experience stage in which they functioned in different contexts as researchers. According to their individual curiosity in the field, the participants made their own decisions on a research topic they could work on. They then arranged for themselves research contexts; three determined secondary schools as their research environment, while others conducted their studies in courses at various levels in their own department. Following this, necessary arrangements were made to constitute a ground for the participants to collaborate with their lecturer on a weekly basis in the form of tutorial sessions. In these, they shared experiences, discussed and reflected upon issues that emerged within each specific week and research phase. Taking these issues as a base, the lecturer and participating student-teachers came to terms on the following step to make the following week.

In a synchronous manner, to serve the purposes of this case study, the students were invited to write about their concerns, expectations from their research experience and difficulties they faced during this stage in the form of field notes. In addition, they were asked to evaluate themselves as researchers at the beginning and at the end of the process. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were held at the end of the study in order to identify the changes, if any, the students detected in themselves. Through the interviews, they additionally commented on whether this study had, in any way, contributed to them as prospective language teachers. The data gathered and triangulated via the above mentioned instruments were subjected to content analysis.

2. Findings and Discussion

Going back to the starting point of this study, we find that Hall and Hord (1987) point out “people who are in the earlier stages of a change process will likely have more self-focused concerns, such as worries about whether they can learn a new program or how it will affect their job performance. In time, individuals become more comfortable with and skilled in using an innovation, then their concerns shift to focus on broader impacts, such as how the initiative will affect others or relationships”.

Parallel to the above proposition, the analysis of the data gathered to find answers to the concerns students had at the beginning of the research study reveals various worries. These are, as displayed in the table below, are all self-focused.

Table 1 Student-teachers’ concerns

no	Can I...?	Fr.
1.	Catch up with the working schedules	5
2.	Find adequate resources to prove research hypothesis	4
3.	Finish the project	4
4.	Collect data	2
5.	Function effectively in a group	1
6.	Accomplish the required tasks	1
7.	Use academic language	1
8.	Do everything decently	1
9.	Behave reasonably as a researcher	1
10.	Maintain motivation throughout the research process	1
Total		21

The findings demonstrate that the participants went through a phase that they strongly experienced “a disorienting dilemma” in Mezirov’s words. That is, they did not seem to fit themselves in the research context and appear to be highly indecisive. Rather than dealing with research issues, they were mostly concerned about catching up with the working schedules (5), as they were assigned to complete a different phase of their research each week; they seemed to worry about the time management. They did not seem to have come to a certain understanding of how things would proceed in this period of time. The research study was the students’ first experience and thus, it appears that they (4) adhered to some false beliefs as seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1: I thought that in any kind of research type, drawing a hypothesis and proving this hypothesis at the end of the study was a must. If not, I thought that my study would be worthless.

According to them, if they found similar studies conducted in exactly the same way as their studies and these studies somehow proved their hypothesis, this would mean that they were on the right track. However, they do not have trust in themselves in achieving this either. They also fear that they might not manage to finish their projects which they perceived as a far reached aim. In the interviews held, the students emphasised that they were not even able to picture in their minds the day they finished and handed in their research studies (4). The following three concerns, the participants (2), group work (1) and observations (1) are more related with the data collection period. In order to collect their data, the students had to visit some schools, collaborate with the teachers and students at these schools. However, the students were also worried about whether or not their participants would genuinely collaborate with them during the data collection stage. These concerns derived from the fear that the school teachers are generally too busy with catching up with the syllabus requirements and may view the student-teachers as extra burdens in their classes. Furthermore, some school teachers did not seem very enthusiastic about trying out new ideas in their classes. Another stress giving possibility could well take its source from the student-teachers' young age causing their research participants in their observation classes not to take them seriously. In addition, it appears that some participants do not highly estimate themselves as researchers corresponding to second phase of transformative learning, namely "self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame". For example, they did not seem to trust themselves as group members. The following excerpt demonstrates how a student-teacher gives poor evaluations of herself.

Excerpt 2: I am not cut out for group work. I can do better when I work alone. It takes time for me to adapt myself to situations and people so I feel myself guilty that I slow my group friends down.

Surprisingly enough, the students did not have to work in groups for this study. On the contrary, according to their own choice; they had the opportunity to work individually, in pairs or in groups of three. Although they themselves preferred to work in groups, they attributed inferior evaluations to themselves as group members. We may infer that student-teachers found themselves in a dilemma and they perceived working in groups as a way out of that situation. However, as revealed in the analysis their own choice led them to further concerns such as below:

Excerpt 3: I am not sure whether or not I am doing everything properly, whether before the end of the course I can become a real researcher. I also doubt whether I really have the necessary motivation to accomplish this job. I feel myself desperate.

Considering the findings, we may associate some of the susceptibilities student-teachers experience to the third phase of the theory. As evident in their data, they criticise themselves somewhat rigidly and feel discontent regarding what they are. All in all, considering the results so far we see that at the beginning of the study, the student-teachers lacked confidence in themselves by any of the necessary means for a research study. Despite the formidable concerns they had, we witness that the students developed a wide range of positive expectations from the research experience toward the middle of the study.

Table 2 Students' expectations

no		Fr.
1.	Becoming a successful researcher	6
2.	Making a step toward an M.A. degree	2
3.	Becoming aware of mechanics of research	2
4.	Overcoming prejudices toward academic work	1
5.	Gaining self awareness	1
6.	Gaining self discipline	1
7.	Developing a sense of confidence	1
8.	Becoming an effective group member	1
9.	Improving academic writing ability	1
10.	Becoming more successful in other courses	1
11.	Receiving constructive criticism in tutorials	1
Total		18

The analysis reveals that all the participating students were motivated toward the research experience and expected to become successful researchers at the end of the process (6). The interview data demonstrate that the humble meaning they attached to the words “successful researcher” was limited to successfully completing their research studies. They conceived the experience as a first step they made into the field of educational research and hoped that they would learn the basics of research which, as they wished, would lead them toward further studies like M.A. and Ph.D. in the future (2). At the very beginning, probably resulting from inexperience the participants uniformly seemed to develop a biased assumption that conducting research was difficult, boring, time consuming (1) and requiring some specific personal qualities which they did not possess (1). It appears that with the help of this study, they started to expect gaining some qualities such as self awareness, discipline and confidence as well as learning how to work in a group with good accord (1). In addition, the students expected improving their academic writing ability, which in turn, would lead to becoming more successful in other courses (1). Lastly, we find that they moved into a phase that started to expect appreciation (1). As they invariably commented, they wished to receive appraisal and constructive criticism from their tutor regarding their work. The excerpt below displays the expectation clearly:

Excerpt 4: I am more confident about my work as compared to my feelings in the beginning. I now know where I am and what I am doing. I can understand what my teacher is expecting from me and I want her approval more than before because I know I am doing a good job.

The interview excerpt also signals that the student-teachers’ “view of self” became more positive as compared to the beginning of the study. They went through a self-assessment phase and becoming more aware of research related issues and developing a mutual understanding of things with both the teacher and peers, they reached a level that they highly evaluate themselves. These findings may seem to cohere with the phases by where a critical assessment of assumptions is realised and a certain level of awareness is attained. The findings reveal that student teachers transformed into people who started to “explore for options for new roles, relationships, and actions” such as becoming an effective group member, a M.A. or Ph.D. candidate, among others.

The comparison between how the students deemed themselves as researchers at the beginning and at the end of the research skills course reveals dramatic changes. In the table below, these changes are demonstrated.

Table 3 Students’ self view as researchers

no	At the beginning of the course	Fr.	At the end of the course	Fr.
1.	I am not qualified as a researcher	2	I feel confident	6
2.	I know nothing about research designs	2	I am ready to conduct other studies	6
3.	I have no confidence in myself	2	I am more experienced as a researcher now	6
4.	I cannot formulate a research statement	2	I now know what research is	5
5.	I cannot finish this project	1	I am successful	5
6.	I cannot identify relevant information	1	I have no concerns about tutorials anymore	2
7.	I cannot narrow down my topic	1	I feel like a professional	2
8.	I cannot organise myself for such a job	1	I gained a lifelong asset: critical thinking and looking at matters from different perspectives	1
9.	I am not disciplined enough for this job	1	I am a more disciplined person now	1
10.	This work is too hard for me	1	I am a more objective person now	1
11.	A.P.A. format scares me	1	I can use academic language easily	1
12.			I am aware of A.P.A format now	1
13.			Research is enjoyable	1
14.			I have a lot of research topics in my mind	1
Total		15		33

At the beginning of the study, we see that the students viewed themselves as people who did not bear adequate personal qualities to conduct research (2). This may sound to have a logical ground considering that they lacked experience in the field (2). This also shows itself in their concerns; they would not be successful because they were not knowledgeable in research designs and research writing formats, they were not capable in making appropriate decisions on selection of topics (2). In addition, formulating a research statement (2), utilising the relevant information for their research were excessively hard for them, and finally, they feared that they would not, in any way, manage to finish their research studies (1).

On the other hand, when we explore the way they viewed themselves as researchers at the end of the study, we come to the conclusion that the phases of the course contributed to the development of a sense of confidence in all the participants (6). This is evident in their remarks such as feeling ready to conduct other research (6); feeling more experienced as researchers (6), reaching an understanding of what research was (5), among others. At the end of the study, we also see that the students appeared to have gained certain researcher's traits which they perceived highly important. As they put it, they transformed into more disciplined, organised and objective people who were satisfied with the work they did (1). Additionally, it seems that toward the end of the course, the students did not have any considerable concerns when they were attending the tutorial sessions (1).

Regarding the consequences of the experiences the student-teachers had gone through in the research study, we observe that the changes identified, in some ways, followed a somewhat similar path to how Mezirov described transformations. Once the student-teachers "acquired knowledge and skills" for research, they displayed a shift from negative attitudes toward research to planning further studies. These signal that the student-teachers "built competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships", and by means of this experience, they went through a process of development.

The last but not the least, this study aimed to find out about whether the research students would, in anyway, benefit from this experience as prospective language teachers. The table below displays the results.

Table 4 Consequences of the experience

no		Fr.
1.	Professional content knowledge	5
2.	Academic qualities	4
3.	Understanding of classroom incidents	3
4.	Problem solving skills	2
5.	Classroom management	2
6.	Positive climate setting	1
7.	Time management	1
8.	Objectivity as a teacher	1
9.	Ability to link theory and practice	1
Total		20

The analysis reveals that the experience had positive consequences on the students. To illustrate, as they worked on topics such as "the probable effects of drama activities on the improvement of young learners' speaking skill", "the qualities of teachers from whom students seem to learn more", "how do teachers' non-verbal behaviours contribute to the classroom management", "the effects of portfolio use on students' attitudes toward writing classes", they learnt from their research topics as prospective language teachers (5). In order to find answers to their research questions, the students had involved in a lot of fieldwork for a ten week period of time by means of classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, as well as searching for, adaptation or preparation and administration of questionnaires. Eventually, these all positively contributed to their understanding of matters related with teaching and learning processes, made them more aware of research related issues and ways to implement what they learnt into classroom situations.

Excerpt 5: I did not only learn doing research in this course. Going out to schools, observing classes, talking to students, holding reflective discussion with my teacher and peers gave me other lessons as well. It was like having a pre-practicum stage.

Finally, the experience indirectly contributed to the student-teachers' professional content knowledge (5) as well as their academic qualities (4). They developed a deeper understanding of classroom incidents (3) as a consequence of interactions they had with the involved parties of the study and they started to feel themselves more equipped with problem solving skills (2). They deemed themselves better at classroom management (2) at the end of the study, and they developed the belief that they would set a positive climate in their classes without putting much effort (1). Research also contributed to their capacity for time management in and out of the classroom and they turned into a more objective person (1). As the last fringe benefit of research, one of the participants declared that s/he improved her /his ability to link theory and practice in the classroom. Thus, we may suggest that the research experience implicitly served to various academic and personal purposes as well.

3. Conclusion

In this study, we tried to track the probable phases of Mezirov's transformative learning theory throughout a research experience third year ELT student-teachers lived for a period of one semester. We observe that the participants in some ways went through similar stages of transformations which shaped their thoughts, views and actions. In brief, the feeling of disorientation of the first phase, feeling of guilt and shame of the second phase, critical assessment of self and recognition of discontent of the third stage, raised awareness of the fourth phase and finally reintegration of self into the new context and developing confidence of the last phase of the theory were detected in the students' developmental processes. The transformation identified in the participants did not only show itself within the boundaries of the topic of this study. That is, while their "view of self as a researcher" changed positively, the experience also enhanced the student-teachers' professional and academic credentials. The findings additionally echo the value of hands on and field work experiences in teacher education programmes. Regarding the components that contributed to the transformation in the student-teachers, adequate and comprehensible input to begin with (periodical tutorial sessions), observation (of language classes), collaboration with peers (discussions held pre, while and post tutorial sessions), interaction with people in different school contexts and teaching learning environments (schools where classes were observed), student-teachers taking the responsibility of their actions (research phases to be completed on a weekly basis), periodical reflective discussions (tutorials) and finally self-evaluation can be denoted. Based on these findings, we may recommend that activities designed in a manner that would emancipate teachers from the walls of the classrooms be incorporated in the syllabi of relevant courses at the teacher education programmes, and lived experiences should be let transform reserved student-teachers into self-reliant, resourceful teachers.

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