

# Transformative Language Learning and Teaching: Reflections on Theory and Practice

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*Transformative learning theory is being widely discussed in the field of adult learning. Some scholars suggest that the application of this theory to world language education is an effective way to reach higher levels of proficiency and intercultural competence. The purpose of this article is to share my ideas, reflection, and thoughts on transformative education in the context of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), after having read the book Transformative Language Learning and Teaching (Leaver et al, 2021). The book offers key insights into learner engagement and autonomy as well as teacher reflection. I have found the concepts in the book to be inspiring to me as a language teaching professional and in this article outline how I apply these concepts in my teaching routines.*

**Keywords:** *Transformative Education, Intercultural Competence, Proficiency*

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## INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, when I encountered the term “transformative learning” as a key concept in the field of language education, I took it as perhaps yet another buzzword making the rounds among field practitioners. However, some of the key principles of this theory, such as the learner’s critical reflection, learner changes in perspectives, and learner autonomy led me to examine the idea further. The concept of how teachers can reflect on their own profession and craft appealed to me as well. Taken together, these principles resonate with my teaching experiences and philosophy in world language education. This article will briefly explain the terms “transformative learning” and “transformative language learning and teaching” (TLLT) and examine the application of TLLT in the DLIFLC context for both students and faculty.

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Mezirow (2012, p. 76) defines transformative learning as:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

Transformative learning theory suggests that adults can learn in four distinct ways: by expanding existing frames of reference, by acquiring new perspectives, by changing perspectives, or by altering habitual ways of thinking (Mezirow, 2012). The catalyst for the changes in frames of reference is what Mezirow (1978) terms “disorienting dilemmas”—situations in which the learner is confronted with varying perspectives that lead the learner to question previous assumptions and ways of thinking and acting (p. 7). Disorienting dilemmas provide the learner opportunities to engage in critical reflection and reframing of perspectives. As Leaver (2021) observes, disorienting dilemmas “shake learners’ belief systems and cause them to reflect, dissect, and analyze” (p. 17). Learner-focused reflection can ultimately lead to personal transformation as the learner discards the original frames of reference for new ones.

Regarding TLLT, the primary goals of TLLT are to develop bilingual/bicultural competence and learner autonomy through transformational language-learning experiences (Leaver, 2021). I agree with these goals for current and future language education in today’s increasingly interconnected world. These goals are in keeping with those of the DLIFLC: “To provide exquisite, culturally based foreign language education” (Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, 2023).

Leaver (2021), a leading scholar and early adopter of TLLT in government programs such as those at DLIFLC, outlines the concepts behind TLLT. She compares three major educational philosophies as they relate to language learning: transmission (grammar translation), transaction (communicative approaches), and transformation (personal transformation that leads to bilingual/bicultural competence). TLLT posits that personal transformation involves cognitive, emotional, and cultural shifts occurring within the individual as one develops self-awareness, resolves disorienting dilemmas, identifies cognitive distortions like black-and-white thinking, manages emotions, and ultimately integrates both the home culture and the target culture on their own terms (Leaver et al., 2021; Lyman-Hager et al., 2021).

After extensive reading about transformative learning and TLLT, I had three main questions: (a) What is TLLT’s essence?; (b) how can I apply it in my classroom?; and (c) how does TLLT impact my own teaching? In recent decades, transformative education theory has been well-researched, especially in the field of adult learning, but not many scholarly works have dealt with the application of this theory to language education. The book, *Transformative Language Learning and Teaching* aims to fill this gap and provide valuable and readable studies of both the comprehensive theory of TLLT (chapters 2–4) and its application (chapters 5–15). I have found the concepts in the book to be inspiring as a language teaching professional, and in this article, I outline how I apply these concepts in my teaching routines.

## **THE APPLICATION OF TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE DLIFLC CONTEXT**

### **Innovations in Curricular Design**

Besides presenting TLLT theory, the various contributors of this edited volume share their professional experiences for applying this philosophy in various contexts. They relate both successes and challenges in government, university, study abroad, and K-12 programs. For example, Campbell (2021), who participated in initiatives on Open Architecture Curricular Design (OACD), a fundamental principle of TLLT, at DLIFLC, provides evidence that OACD can contribute to achieving higher proficiency among graduates. She presented two case studies actualizing OACD in the context of Continuing Education at DLIFLC where proficiency on the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) increased. Some reasons for the success are learner-centered instruction, differentiated instruction, and the use of authentic materials. In parallel, impressive DLIFLC statistics exist for the period when OACD was being practiced: Between 2008 and 2013 in the intermediate, advanced, and “refresher” language courses in all languages, attainment of graduation proficiency requirements rose from 50% to over 80% for 850 intermediate- and advanced-course students (Leaver & Campbell 2015).

OACD has been discussed as a unifying curricular design framework that can enhance transformative learning in the context of adult world language education. Key principles of OACD are a theme-based syllabus (rather than a textbook) that integrates interchangeable unadapted authentic texts, tasks, and other activities; ongoing learner involvement in the selection and delivery of content, as well as the design of activities; and continual and systematic (vs. occasional and limited) tailoring to learner and cohort needs.

Concerning the OACD principles and features just outlined, I have observed that ongoing learner involvement in the learning process increases individual motivation, responsibility, and achievement. For example, when we implemented a Weekly Current Social Issues Project, where students reported and discussed current social issues using the news, in a 19-week Korean Intermediate, and Advanced Program, the teaching team asked students to choose their topics, listening or reading texts based on their interests and needs to empower learner decision-making. While providing teacher guidance in student selection of the news, allowing student ownership over the learning process was shown to enhance educational benefits, including linguistic and cultural competencies. Most students gave highly positive feedback, noting that this significantly aided their language skills, fostered critical thinking by understanding different perspectives, and raised their awareness of global issues (Lee, 2024).

### **Innovation in Assessment**

A fundamental feature of TLLT is the use of formative, with occasional summative, assessments. Formative assessment is typically contrasted with summative assessment because the former

aims to provide feedback for the ongoing teaching and learning process, while the latter focuses on reporting the results of learning (Bachman, 1990).

In TLLT and in contemporary language learning, use of formative assessments such as well-designed real-world tasks incorporating authentic materials, short- and long-term projects, presentations, and learner journals related to the learner's personal interests and needs are a key part of the learning process. TLLT practitioners believe these tasks can facilitate change in learner frames of reference or perspectives. I agree with this belief and have implemented formative assessments for my teaching team. I have observed changes in learner perspectives and increased intercultural competency through tasks such as learner journals, student essays, and discussions, which, for example, facilitate the changing of stereotypes about the target culture.

### **Teacher Transformation**

Kubler (2021) mentions the evolution of the instructor's role from that of a facilitator to that of a mentor, coach, or advisor, focusing on the transformative aspects of teacher education and the difficulties faced by teachers who practice TLLT. Kubler points out that teachers who grew up in Asia, where heavily teacher-centered education has been practiced for a long time, may have some difficulties transforming their beliefs and behaviors regarding language and culture education. This is my case. When I studied in my native country, South Korea, teachers led classes, and students were merely expected to follow their teachers' instructions. Students were rarely if ever involved in designing the content or curriculum of a class or a course. These aspects made me reflect on whether I had ever practiced transformation in my learning. And if not, how might I implement the principles of this philosophy effectively in my teaching? As Kubler suggests, teacher education and training programs may need to implement transformative learning activities that shake teachers' thoughts about education via critical reflection.

In alignment with this idea, to leverage transformation, I initiated the practice of maintaining a learning and teaching journal, encouraging critical thinking through reflections on my learning and teaching experiences from various sources. These include my professional development opportunities, daily instruction, and feedback from students and peers on my teaching. I dedicate a portion of my time each week to self-reflection, questioning my assumptions or biases regarding a topic or teaching approach before engaging with it, and contemplating what I have learned, or the different perspectives gained on both my learning and teaching practices. For example, I frequently reflect on the implementation of the learner-centered approach in my teaching and document what proved effective or did not, aiming to enhance my teaching. This practice is not only crucial for embodying the essential features of TLLT but also represents my ongoing transformation from someone rooted in a teacher-centered culture to someone who embraces and practices learner-centeredness. Through this practice of self-reflection, I have identified areas for future professional development that guide my own learning choices.

## CHALLENGES WITH THE APPLICATION OF TLLT IN THE DLIFLC CONTEXT

Although formative assessments have the aforementioned benefits, some DLIFLC learners do not fully understand the value they offer, especially for short- and long-term projects and presentations, because they tend to be driven by a focus on the multiple-choice standardized exit test—the DLPT, which is designed to measure language proficiency and is composed of authentic materials followed by content questions. Some learners ask teachers to focus on test-taking activities that replicate the DLPT format. Therefore, some teachers at DLIFLC might encounter difficulties in implementing the formative assessments that are a key feature of TLLT.

My observations indicate that learners who effectively engage in formative assessments tend to achieve higher scores on the DLPT and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). For example, learners who are more conscious and proactive in their learning process are better able to identify their weaknesses and adjust their study strategies. Therefore, guiding learners to become aware of the various learning strategies and encouraging them to reflect on their strategy use in learner journals can significantly enhance their learning efficiency and outcomes. Instructors at DLIFLC may need to explain to their learners how these activities related to formative assessments are advantageous in achieving their goals, extending beyond their DLPT and OPI scores.

Explaining why we do what we do in the classroom is a key part of teaching, yet some instructors may not find it necessary. Additionally, some may not fully realize the impact of sharing learning goals with students. TLLT encourages instructors to clearly communicate their pedagogical choices to foster learner engagement and align shared goals with students.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, TLLT's over-arching goal is personal transformation into a bilingual/bicultural autonomous individual. All language teachers promote bilingualism, but how much do we systematically focus on facilitating the learner's journey towards bicultural competence, where the learner integrates both the first and the second culture, each on its own terms? Although the application of this approach to the classroom needs further discussion depending on the educational context, TLLT has allowed me to critically reflect on my teaching and ponder ways to continuously improve it to help learners become bilingual and bicultural autonomous learners. First and foremost, I would like to adopt TLLT for my personal and professional growth toward becoming a cross-cultural lifelong learner. How else will I be able to coach learners to become bilingual and bicultural linguists?

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