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(IJEPC)**www.ijepec.com**PROBLEMS AND COUNTERMEASURES ON APPLYING THE
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY TO CHINA'S
COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING**Jiaquan Wang^{1*}, Wendy Hiew², Suyansah Swanto³

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This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

The literature review resources on applying Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in China's college English teaching are very scarce. This paper aims to contribute to more literature in the field English teaching in college. The study adopted a qualitative design and utilized open-ended interview with eight college English teachers in China. The participants were purposefully selected. Findings from the interview showed that most of the college English teachers did not know about TLT and the measuring method of the transformative learning. The complexity of the TLT and teachers' paradigm prevented the teachers from using TLT in their college English teaching. The difficulty of altering the student's perspectives and beliefs was also obvious. Therefore, the present researchers proposed five countermeasures to apply TLT in China's college English teaching and learning: i) introducing more works of the TLT and measuring methods, ii) building up inter-disciplinary research groups to explore the application of TLT, iii) introducing and exploring the measuring methods of transformative learning, iv) exploring the use of the TLT to solve practical teaching problems, and v) developing open-minded attitudes towards research methods. If college English teachers and administrators of the higher education can be enlightened with the these suggestions, it is hoped there will be more application of the TLT in China's college English teaching in the future.

Keywords:

Transformative Learning Theory, College English Teaching, China, Countermeasures

Introduction

China's college English connects non-English major students to their college English teachers tightly. On the one hand, non-English major students' English learning is a challenging matter in China; on the other hand, College English teachers face the difficulty to improve their teaching effects. Many students have tried very hard to learn college English in the hope of passing the College English Test Band 4 or the College English Test Band 6 (CET-4 or CET-6) but in vain. However, many companies or working units that have vacant positions for new staffs require the applicants to have the certificate of CET-4 or even CET-6. The college English teachers need to seek solutions to help more students improve the effectiveness of English learning so that they can pass the CET-4 or CET-6.

Literature Review

The TLT was first proposed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s. Through decades of development, it has become a complete theory that is used widely in the world. In the viewpoints of the TLT, Mezirow (2000) contends that every adult has a frame of reference that contains habits of mind and a point of view. According to Mezirow, habits of mind refer to the general, abstract, orienting and routine ways of adults' thinking, feeling, and acting, which are influenced by their assumptions of the world; habits of mind are expressed in a specific point of view that is the mixture of beliefs, value judgments, attitudes, and feelings that can direct or limit adults' action (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000: p. 18) further states: "A point of view comprises clusters of meaning schemes — sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments — that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality". From the illustration of the TLT foregoing, one can see that the frames of references determine adults' action or practice because their perspectives, beliefs, values, attitudes restored in their frames of references through the process of socialization, determine adults' approaches and acts to solve problems that they encounter in their further learning.

However, the process of socialization or internalization of adults' perspectives, beliefs and value judgments is not always critically examined in adults' daily lives (Bowers, 1984). Therefore, some inappropriate predispositions, assumptions, perspectives and beliefs in adults' frames of references are in a state of being taken-for-granted existence. Some presuppositions, assumptions and beliefs in adults' frames of references thus become restrictions for their further learning. In Mezirow's opinion, adult learners must recognize these psycho-cultural restrictions adopted from the society, to understand their experiences better and eventually overcome the restrictions in their learning so that they will develop more inclusive and more differentiating and durable frames of references (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning is thought to be effective for adults to carry out their learning, especially when they face the complex learning situation because it can enhance adults' learning autonomy and raise their consciousness about their inappropriate assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). In addition to being used in the adults' educational field, the TLT is also widely used in the higher education by some scholars. For example, Helskog (2014) and Harahap (2017) carried out the transformative learning in the college environment among the college students and achieved good results respectively.

Since the TLT was created, it has been used to carry out their research by many scholars to realize their research objectives. It also entered China and was used by some scholars. Based on the analysis of the research done in China, the TLT can be classified into the following categories.

Introduction-oriented Research on TLT

Among the research conducted by Chinese scholars about the TLT, some are introduction-oriented. The research of Tao and Gu (2015), Jiang, Yang, Huang, and Hu (2018) belong to this category. Their research primarily focusses on concept of the TLT: Its definitions, concepts, basic ideas, and the basic reason why the adult people need to carry out the transformative learning in the further learning. Their works give others some basic knowledge about the TLT.

Alteration-oriented Research on Respondents' Beliefs and Values

Some Scholars focus on changing the respondents' beliefs, thoughts and value judgement of learning. For example, Jia (2010) used the narrative inquiry method to illustrate the participants' beliefs alteration by the transformative learning, which give others an example on how to examine the occurrence of transformative learning in qualitative method. In teaching practice, Cheng (2016) found the students' learning value judgement was not appropriate in her teaching, and then Cheng adopted the transformative learning to alter students' value judgement of learning successfully in his teaching research.

Advance-oriented Research on Transformative Learning among Medical Students

Some researchers conducted research to improve the learning results of medical students using TLT. For instance, Chen and Ning (2019) investigated the problems of the nursing education major students and carried out the perspective transformation activity in their respondent classes. As a result, the medical students' clinical abilities were effectively improved by the transformative learning. Qiu et al. (2018) recognized some students in their classes lack of creativity in their medical biochemistry study. They used the transformative learning to change their instructional approaches, which led to the improvement of the students' creativity in their study.

Advance-oriented Research on Teachers' Professional Development Using Transformative Learning

Some researchers implemented TLT to enhance the teacher's professional development in China. Huang (2018) investigated the demerit in the current teacher's professional development and pointed out that critical thinking was commonly deficient in teachers. Therefore, they adopted transformative learning in their teaching, and found that the teacher's critical thinking was greatly improved in their research. Liu (2013) used transformative learning in the study to change the teachers' perspectives and thoughts in teaching in different settings. He found that the teachers' perspectives and thoughts were effectively altered, which successfully advanced the teachers' professional development in the study.

Countermeasures-oriented Research on the Inappropriate Use of TLT

Some scholars critically examined the application of TLT in China and found some inappropriate aspects of its usage; they provided some countermeasures to solve the problem. For example, Qiao (2016) examined on teacher training and found that the focus of the research was on teaching method or technology, but little attention was focused on the viewpoint of teachers' teaching. Qiao believed that this was similar to the analogy of putting cart in front of horse, and this practice must be corrected because the teachers' teaching viewpoints were essential to change their teaching practice. In another study on examining prisoners' thought transformation at a detention center in an anonymous district in China, Wang (2020) found some problems in the prisoners' thought transformation, such as insufficient attention and

management from the leaders. So, Wang (2020) proposed changing the management and raising leader' consciousness as one of the countermeasures of the thought transformation of the prisoners in that detention. The foregoing analysis of the use of TLT and the countermeasures give some insights to the following researchers.

Review-oriented Research on TLT

Chen (2016), Feng and Zhao (2017) reviewed literatures on transformative learning and found very little benefits of transformative learning to solve practical problems. These researchers also could not find studies on the use of TLT in college English teaching and learning in China at present. The researcher used "transformative learning and college English teaching and learning" as the theme or key words to retrieve journals on CNKI, the broadest website containing Chinese language journals, but were still unsuccessful. The scarcity of TLT used in college English teaching and learning in China indicates a gap in this field that Chinese scholars should take note of in order to use the theory to improve the effectiveness of English teaching and learning among college students. This study aims to investigate the reasons why China's college English teachers seldom apply TLT in their teaching and later propose some countermeasures in the hope of providing some references for China's college English teachers to solve similar problems in the future.

Methodology

The study uses the qualitative research design to carry the research. Firstly, the study makes the comprehensive literature review about the application of the TLT; secondly, the present researcher used convenience sampling methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012) to interview eight university English teachers, who are easily available for the present researcher, and who come from Hainan University, Hainan Normal University, Qiongtai Normal University and Haikou University of Economics, to see whether they know and use the theory in their teaching and their reasons; thirdly, the study carried out an analysis on the reason why they seldom use the theory in China's college English teaching; fourthly, the present researcher proposes the countermeasures to solve the problem of scarcity of using the TLT in the China's college English teaching.

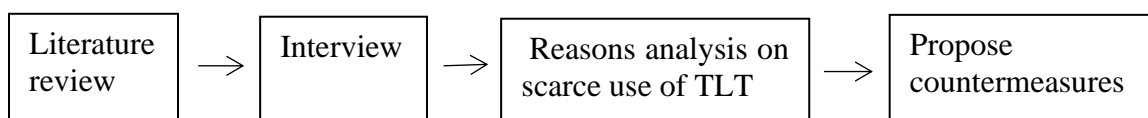


Figure 1: Research Design of The Study

To find out the reason of the deficiency of applying the TLT in China's college English teaching, the present researcher designs brief interview outline to investigate the China's college English teacher's states of knowledge and practices of the theory. The interview includes two questions: One is whether the interviewees know the TLT; the other is whether the interviewees have ever used the TLT in their researches of their college English teaching and learning, and give the reasons. Because there were only two questions in the interviews, the member checking (Birt et al., 2016) of the interview data was carried in time on the spot of interview in this study to guarantee what the interviewees said was their real expressions of their opinions.

Findings

After the interview outline was finished, the present researcher randomly interviewed 8 college English teachers from November, 11 to December, 10, 2021. The answers of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of College Teachers' Cognition and Use of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT)

Teacher	Age	Gender	Knowledge of TLT	Use of TLT in college teaching	Reasons for not using TLT in college teaching
T1	45	Female	No	No	Don't know how about TLT, don't know to use TLT
T2	34	Female	No	No	Don't know how about TLT, don't know to use TLT
T3	36	Female	No	No	Don't know how about TLT, don't know to use TLT
T4	40	Female	Yes	No	Don't know how to use TLT due to the theory's complexity
T5	32	Female	No	No	Don't know how about TLT, don't know to use TLT
T6	31	Male	No	No	Don't know how about TLT, don't know to use TLT
T7	33	Male	No	No	Don't know how about TLT, don't know to use TLT
T8	50	Male	Yes	No	Don't know how to use TLT due to the theory's complexity

Table 1 indicates that only two teachers (one male and one female) (25%) who knew about TLT. As for using TLT in their college English teaching, none of the teachers have ever used it. Six teachers (75%) reasoned that they did not know about the theory, therefore, they did not know how to use TLT; two teachers (25%) reasoned that they did not know how use TLT in their teaching due to the complexity of the theory.

Discussion

In order to fully understand the reasons of the teachers who did not use the TLT in their college English teaching, the present researcher further illustrated the reason according to the transcription gained from the teachers.

The Complexity of TLT Prevents Teachers' Adoption of the Theory in Teaching

Six teachers do not know the transformative learning theory. Two teachers reflected in consensus that they knew something about TLT but they did not fully understand the theory because of its complexity. For instance, T4 (teacher 4) said "Some concepts of the TLT are related to psychology. For example, the predisposition, presuppositions, meaning perspectives, meaning scheme, and habit of mind and point of view, are too abstract for me to understand them clearly". T8 (teacher 8) said "The psychoanalytical theory, as one of the theoretical basis of the TLT, is hard for me to understand the change of people's mind. I cannot understand the critical theory that is related to the TLT. It is hard for me to apply the TLT." The two teachers' opinions are consistent with the scholar's opinions that think there are challenges or difficulties of complexity in understanding and applying TLT in academic research (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012). Of course, it is natural for the teachers, who lack the knowledge of psychoanalytical theory and critical theory, not to apply TLT in their teaching. Therefore, it is evident that the complexity of the TLT blocks the China's college English teachers from adopting it in their college English teaching.

Difficulty for Teachers to Change Students' Beliefs and Values

In the transformative learning, learners have to alter their old beliefs, values or attitudes while facing problem that they cannot solve using the routine approaches. In some situations, it is challenging to change learners' beliefs, values or attitudes. In the interview, T4 thinks that it is hard for her to alter the students' beliefs and values in her college English teaching. T4 thinks the students' beliefs and values are rooted in their cognitive structures due to years of socialization of the world. T8 said: "Some students think English is not important because they do not use English in their daily lives nowadays and they do not think they will use English in their future lives in China because their majors are not English. Some students' English basis is very weak, they don't think they can learn English well". It is hard for teachers to persuade the students to change their values and beliefs mentioned above. The two teachers' viewpoints support the ideas of the psychotherapist Betchen, which claims that it is hard for people to give up their values and principles for the sake of avoiding anxiety or sadness aroused by utilizing new values and perspectives (Betchen, 2010).

Teachers Lack Effective Methods to Alter Students' Perspectives

Another reason the teachers did not adopt TLT in their teaching is that they do not have effective methods to change the students' perspectives. Critical reflection and rational discourse are thought to be effective in altering students' perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). However, T4 and T8 did not carry out such reflection with the students in their college English teaching. They thought that critical reflection should be carried out by the students themselves voluntarily. Otherwise, the reflection was not deep enough to touch the students' deep emotion and to change their viewpoints. Other teachers also thought that the students' English learning was the latter's own responsibility. The teachers opined that their main responsibility was to teach the students how to master the specific knowledge and skills of English language. Unfortunately, such thoughts of their English teaching did not work well while they were improving the effectiveness of non-English major students' English learning. The two teachers' teaching practice conforms to Mezirow's ideas that the transformative learning needs perspectives changes caused by self-reflection to accept the new ideas and carry out new practice; otherwise, transformative learning cannot occur (Mezirow, 2000). The two teachers did not accept reflective teaching to trigger students' self-reflection that is the requirement for

students' transformative learning. Therefore, they cannot carry out reflective teaching practice in their college English teaching.

Teachers' Research Paradigm Hinders the Application of TLT in College English Teaching

When it came to how to measure the occurrence of the students' transformative learning due to alteration of their perspectives, beliefs, and values, T4 thought that she did not find an effective method to measure it. When the present researcher mentioned about narrative inquiry to alter students' perspectives, beliefs and values, she opined that narrative inquiry was not hard evidence to support her research because her research orientation utilized quantitative method instead of qualitative method. Next, when the present researcher introduced learning activities survey (King, 1997, 1998, and 2009) as a measuring method, her response indicated that she lacked the knowledge of the learning activities survey. She also expressed her willingness to try this method in the future by saying "I will try to use the learning activities survey to investigate the students' transformative learning and its effect on the college English learning someday". These findings showed that the teacher's quantitative research paradigm hinders their adoption of TLT in her teaching, which conforms to scholars' opinions in the academic field. For example, Kivunja and Kuyini (2017, p. 26) stated that "research paradigms determine methodological aspects of their research project to determine the research methods that will be used and how the data will be analyzed". T4's quantitative research paradigm defines her research within the domain of using quantitative methods. She refuses to use qualitative methods to carry out the transformative learning in her English teaching practice.

Countermeasures to Apply TLT in China's College English Teaching and Learning

The lack of application of TLT in China's college English teaching is a prominent gap in China's higher educational research. College English teachers should be aware of this gap for it always becomes a new starting point for creative teaching and research because every sound learning theory can arouse scholar's research interests and apply it in their practical teaching. For example, the stimulation-reaction learning theory, the cognitive learning theory, and the constructionist learning theory are always applied by many scholars in their teaching (Wang, 2014; Zhou, 2005; Jia, Lan & Zhang, 2011). In order to overcome the gap in applying TLT in China's college English teaching, the present researcher proposes the following countermeasures.

Introducing More TLT-Related Works in China Higher Education Institutions

Based on the feedback of the interviews, the ignorance of TLT among China's college English teachers is the main cause of the lack of adoption of TLT in their teaching research. Though there have been some introductions of TLT in the educational field in China, they are far from enough. In order to obtain further understanding of TLT, it is necessary to introduce more TLT-related works to China's college English teachers, especially those that are related to the application of TLT to solve the practical problems. In this way, the college teachers can gain more accesses to TLT and its applications. The ignorance of TLT among college English teachers will mostly likely improve if there are more TLT-related works in the libraries of Chinese colleges or universities because humans have a natural inclination to learn, to grow and to develop fully to make self-realization (Maslow, 1971).

Building Inter-Disciplinary Research Groups to Explore the Application of TLT

At some universities, especially the normal universities directly led by the Education Ministry of China, the research on instructional theory or learning theory is much preferred to further

their understanding of TLT because they obtain more funding and more advanced teaching equipment, compared with other normal universities in China. In order to further the understanding of TLT, normal universities should build inter-disciplinary research groups to explore the use of TLT in practical teaching (including college English teaching and learning). This is because TLT is an inter-disciplinary theory that requires the knowledge on pedagogy, psychology, psychoanalytical theory, and critical theory. Inter-disciplinary research groups can solve inter-disciplinary problems that are raised in research. The inter-disciplinary group members can make up for the deficiency of subject-related knowledge for one another while carrying out research. Compared with other teachers, the English teacher in China has the advantages of good English ability to consult the literature reviews from foreign countries, they should take active actions to do the job in the inter-disciplinary research groups. After careful analysis of the difficulty in the social science, Wen (2008) has ever proposed building up the inter-disciplinary research group to make creative innovation in the social science filed.

Introducing And Exploring Measuring Methods in Transformative Learning

Findings from the interviews showed that college teachers do not apply the TLT in their English teaching due to their lack of knowledge of measuring method in transformative learning. Therefore, the introduction of measuring method in transformative learning seems relevant for the China's college English teachers. The university libraries should purchase more books about measuring methods to test the student's transformative learning occurrence. These measuring methods that test whether transformative learning occurs during teaching and learning originated overseas research. Although they are good and effective to test the occurrence of students' transformative learning, some testing methods, such as King's learning activity survey (LAS) is very complex and the researcher must be skillful in using it. Otherwise, it will not be applied very effectively. In this case, inexperienced teachers might have trouble in mastering and adopting it. The present researcher proposes that Chinese scholars should develop a localized measuring method to test the occurrence of transformative learning among students. This method could also greatly enhance college English teacher's teaching quality and their professional development.

Exploring the Use of TLT to Solve Practical Teaching Problems

In order to expand the application of TLT, English teacher in China's colleges or universities should investigate ways to use TLT to solve problems in their English teaching and learning. For example, if they can use TLT to improve students' scores in the CET-4 or CET-6 exam in China, TLT can be substantially applied in China because improving student's CET-4 scores or CET-6's scores is a main problem for the China's college English teachers because the compared with other subject, college English is harder to get high scores for most students' learning.

Developing Open-minded Attitudes Towards Research Methods

According to T4, she rejects qualitative methods in her research because her research paradigm is quantitative. In fact, her research paradigm seems to restrict her research development. All research methods, whether they are quantitative or qualitative or mixed methods, are acceptable in the educational field if they are suitable for the research project or study. Otherwise, some good research projects will be overlooked by teachers who insist on using a single-type research method. Therefore, as college English college teachers, they can develop more open-minded attitudes toward research methods that can help to enrich their research methods and help them to carry out more research with the help of different research methods. In this way,

it will be easier for them to apply TLT in their English teaching. This should enhance their teaching on the one hand and help students to improve their English learning on the other hand.

Conclusion

TLT is scarcely used in the research of the college English teaching and learning in China due to the following reasons: 1. teachers' unaware of the theory; 2. the theory's complexity prevents teachers from using the theory; 3. the researcher's paradigm, and 4. the difficulty to change the students' perspectives, beliefs and values prevents college English teacher from applying the theory in their research and English teaching in China's colleges or universities. The present study proposes introducing more works related to TLT and more measuring methods, the English teacher explore the measuring method of the transformative learning, keeping more open-minded attitudes towards the research methods and applying TLT to solve the practical problem. If administrators and English teachers in higher educational fields in China can be enlightened from this study, TLT will be probably used more widely by college English teachers in China's colleges and universities in the future.

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