Empowering effective language learners: An innovative course addressing language learning challenges in one Australian university

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Abstract

Language programs in Australian universities face the challenges of attracting and retaining students. Most Australian university students are unaware of the benefits of learning an additional language. When they do enrol, they lack adequate skills for effective language learning, resulting in high levels of attrition. This paper describes a course designed to address these challenges. Inspired by transformative learning, activities and materials were selected to increase awareness of processes involved in language learning, debunk preconceptions, and foster self-directed, independent learning. Preliminary findings based on students' reflections show the significant impact the course had on students' perceptions of language learning, their abilities to reflect on their own application of strategies and increased confidence in developing a plan to continue applying these new understandings and strategies in their language learning courses and beyond. Thus, the course facilitated students' transition from passive recipients of 'language injections', to self-directed, motivated, independent learners.

Keywords: Transformative learning; foreign language learning; higher education; language learning strategies.

1. Introduction

This short paper introduces an innovative course designed to address several challenges present in the teaching of languages in the Australian Higher Education context. This was a stand-alone, 12-week course open to students learning any language, and supplemented the language courses in which the students were enrolled. In this paper we describe the challenge of learning languages in Australia, outline the course and its rationale, and discuss initial findings from students' reflections on the course. We conclude with implications and concluding remarks.

2. Language learning in the Australian context

To understand the challenges faced by language learners in the Australian Higher Education system, we need to consider four paradoxes that characterise the state of affairs.

Paradox 1: A multilingual country, a monolingual bias

The 2016 Census of the Population showed that more than a fifth of Australians (21%) speak one of the 300 languages spoken across the country. Yet, despite this great linguistic diversity, the monolingual mindset is still deeply entrenched, and languages remain undervalued. Thus, there is little institutional support for so-called 'foreign languages' in the education system, with only 8% of Australian students learning one or more foreign languages in high school, compared to 50% of students across OECD countries (Richardson, 2021). As a result, most students enrolling in language courses at university are absolute beginners, expected to attained proficiency in a language in the three years of their degree, with the limitations mentioned in what follows.

Paradox 2: Covering more content in fewer hours

Following government funding cuts to universities, some institutions have reduced the number of languages offered, or stopped teaching languages altogether. Of the universities teaching foreign languages, contact hours have been reduced, leaving language instructors with less time to cover the curriculum and branch into other areas of instruction, such as strategies to equip students with effective learning tools. To enhance linguistic proficiency, motivated students previously chose to embark on study abroad and/or exchange programs, but Covid-19 put these initiatives on hold. Moreover, while online environments can offer a plethora of resources, this in itself can hinder the process, as students struggle to select the most effective programs/apps to use and lack the ability to self-direct their learning.

Paradox 3: Language learning is a social activity, which is hindered by Covid-19 restrictions

The current pandemic has compounded the difficulties students face. Universities moved classes online early in the beginning of the Australian academic year (February/March 2020),

before first year students had time to familiarise themselves with university culture and expectations, get to know their instructors, and establish friendships and/or study groups. These factors are conducive to learning and engagement and without them, beginner students often struggled to meet the demands of academic life. Indeed, anecdotal evidence indicates that online instruction had a demotivating effect on students.

Paradox 4: Even successful language learners are unaware of language learning processes

One of the findings of the study we describe is that students felt unprepared to fully engage with the opportunities and resources surrounding them and take responsibility for their own language learning journey. Most students reported having no or little contact with speakers of their target languages and felt intimidated and anxious about approaching them and other classmates. The drastic reduction of international students on campus further diminished opportunities for spontaneous interactions using their target language(s).

These feelings demonstrate the importance of socio-emotional factors associated with language learning. Students, however, conceptualise language learning as a predominantly cognitive activity which falls under the responsibility of their instructor. This is what we call, the 'language injection' metaphor, i.e., coming to class to be 'injected with language knowledge'. There is ample evidence that language learning involves not just cognition, but also sociability and emotions (Arnold, 2011). Furthermore, affect and cognition are now increasingly conceptualised as interdependent components of learning (Dörnyei et al., 2015). Being unaware of the impact of socio-emotional factors associated with language learning, students' feelings of dissatisfaction with their learning, anxiety about their performance, sense of isolation following Covid restrictions and the increase in mental health issues, further eroded their confidence and self-esteem, which impacted on their engagement.

The discussion above shows it is imperative to provide appropriate scaffolding to assist language learning, particularly in students' first year of study.These considerations motivated the development of the innovative course we discuss in the remainder of this paper.

3. Rationale of the course

The first-year course 1012LHS How to Learn Languages was designed to address the challenges mentioned above. While the course was created prior to Covid-19, the emergence of the pandemic further reinforced the rationale and urgency for its introduction. The course aimed to help students develop effective learning strategies to enhance competencies in all areas of language ability and to demystify commonly held beliefs about language acquisition. The course was taught in their second trimester of studies, so that students could draw on their limited language learning experience as a springboard for reflection. Overall, 122 students completed the course since its introduction in 2020.

The course was based on a series of highly interactive and experiential workshops, including short explanation segments followed by group discussions and implementation. Through small group practice activities conducted in the workshops, students were invited to reflect on their own language learning and apply the content introduced in the course to their own context and situation. They developed strategies, engaged in disciplinary knowledge, and learned how to self-evaluate their progress both in class and beyond. Thus, students developed the ability to scaffold and enhance their own learning journey, which fostered independent learning and self-reliance. We also included ample examples of our own language learning experience to reinforce that language acquisition beyond the critical age period is feasible, achievable, and worthwhile, but that it also presents challenges.

It is our firm belief that if students acquire basic strategies for successful language learning in the early stages of their degree, they will be capable of transferring these skills to second and third-year level and beyond – even beyond the context of language learning.

4. Pedagogical underpinnings

The course described here was inspired by principles of transformative learning, defined by Mezirow (1997, p.5) as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference". He describes 'frames of references' as "the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings." (Mezirow, 1997, p.5). While the theory of transformative learning has been further refined by Mezirow and others, and different interpretations of this approach are found in the literature, there is consensus that transformative learning has 'perspective transformation' as a central goal.

Mezirow (2000) lists 10 non-sequential phases related to a shift of perspective, which can be used to track transformative practices in our student cohort.

1. A disorienting dilemma

2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame

3. A critical assessment of assumptions

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans

8. Provisional trying of new roles

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

The list of phases shows that transformative learning involves processes of self-reflection and awareness, affective factors, critical thinking, and a commitment to action and change. Thus, transformative learning shares common principles with active learning, experiential learning, consciousness raising, critical thinking, meaning making, and other similar constructs, but also incorporates a strong commitment to effecting lifelong learning.

While the process of transformative learning is personal, we can use these phases as a framework to design and structure materials and activities that aim at enhancing students' likelihood of achieving particular phases. We will return to this point in the findings section.

5. Brief overview of the course and aims of each component

The content was designed around six central modules:

(1) Second language aquisition: the effects of age and context on language development.

This module included discussions of bi/multilingualism, tutored vs. untutored acquisition, child acquisition vs. adult foreign/second language learning. There were two main aims of this module. One was to introduce students to the key terms required to interpret and discuss their linguistic 'biographies'. The other aim was to help students create realistic expectations about their prospects as adult language learners, particularly in terms of ultimate attainment and time/effort required in language learning. Realistic expectations avoid frustration and shift the focus to what is achievable. Practice activities in this module included completing surveys and questionnaires reflecting on their language learning trajectories, formulating SMART goals to identify linguistic areas of personal priority. and, charting proficiency development using well-established frameworks (e.g., the CEFR, IELTS).

(2) Understanding individual variables that affect second/foreign language acquisition.

Here the aim was to introduce students to individual factors that play a role in second language acquisition and enhance reflection on how these factors affect students' own learning. This understanding heightened students' ability to organise their learning to suit their strengths. Activities in this module included self-reflections on the impact individual variables had on their learning, as well as TED talks by polyglots discussing effective language learning practices.

(3) Language learning strategies

A crucial aim of this module was to raise students' awareness of cognitive and socio-emotional processes involved in language learning. This increased awareness may normalise

feelings of anxiety and inhibition associated with using another language and assuage their fears and concerns about their learning abilities. An example of an effective activity was teaching and learning a new language to peers: Students organised themselves in small groups around a speaker of a language unknown to them and were given 45 minutes to learn something they wanted to say in that language (e.g., self-introductions). At the end of the lesson students produced basic messages in that language. This activity raised awareness about their role in guiding their own learning process.

(4) Enhancing the learning of the four macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing).

The aim of this module was to expand knowledge and practice effective language learning techniques in all areas of language, both generally and for language-specific challenges (e.g., memorising ideograms, distinguishing tones, asking for help in appropriate ways). A typical activitiy involved learners in understanding the gist of readings in languages unknown to them while noticing the strategies they used. Emphasis was also placed on metacognitive activities, such as experimenting with a range of note-taking techniques that could be used beyond their language classes.

(5) Improving the fifth macro-skill: cultural awareness.

Due to the limited contact hours in university courses, most classes focus on developing linguistic competence. However, native speakers tend to be lenient when learners make grammatical mistakes but judge them negatively when they make pragmatic 'mistakes' (Eisenchlas, 2011). The aim of this module was to enhance learners' sensitivity to pragmatic conventions and expectations in the target language/culture, which in turn required the ability to reflect on their own cultural norms and understandings. A typical activity in this module involved conducting a 'mini ethnographic study' by selecting speech acts and investigating their pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features with the assistance of native/fluent speakers, readings on pragmatics, and similar resources.

(6) Language learning software and Apps to enhance various aspects of language learning

This module introduced students to additional sources of input in the target language. We focused on specific challenges raised by the online environment, such as the large choice of available resources, the need to cope with multitasking, or the sense of isolation reported by some learners. We also addressed the need to identify and develop new strategies to meet these challenges, such as collaborative strategies, and strategies to deal with human-computer interactions. We incorporated students' existing knowledge of these tools to conduct a 'show and tell' session, where they demonstrated their favourite Apps (e.g., Duolingo, Memrise, Busu, HelloTalk,Tandem) to others learning the same language.

6. Assessment

Assessment in this course was conceptualised as an additional pedagogical opportunity, and therefore closely aligned with the activities and resources used in the course. Assessment included: (1) the completion of the MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) Learning how to Learn; (2) a portfolio of activities and short reflections (such as completing surveys and self-evaluation tests, completing worksheets based on videos or readings, etc); (3) a short initial reflection on their first semester language learning experience, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and (4) a final reflection on what they had learned during this course, identifying specific activities and resources that contributed to their learning and formulating a plan for action in their future studies.

Consistent with principles of transformative learning, the reflections were designed to help students challenge preconceived ideas, take charge of their learning, increase their repertoire of learning tools and identify what works for them. These assessment tasks also aligned with the phases of transformative learning. For example, Assessment item (3) required students to identify the challenges they experienced in their first trimester of language studies. Many of the students enrolling in university language courses enjoyed the experience of learning languages in high school and were then unprepared for the increasing demands of university study, compounded by online language learning. This unsettling experience presented a 'disoriented dilemma' that triggered transformation by raising students' awareness of the need for a change in perspective and behaviours. On the other hand, Assessment item (4) required students to reflect on the aspects of this course that led to shifts in perceptions and to reflect forward into applying their new understandings in a plan for action. The students' assignment reflections were used to ascertain some of these challenges mentioned above, as well as to present preliminary findings in the next section.

7. Preliminary findings

The effects of transformative learning may take time to manifest themselves, and thus their evaluation may require a long-term research approach. Moreover, as indicated, these effects were expected to vary widely among learners, depending on their degree of openness to new experiences, level of maturity, and individual variables. Despite these caveats, students' reflections yielded data on how they perceived the effectiveness of the course on their attitudes towards language learning, and on the areas in which they felt the course had an impact. Most students, regardless of their language learning expertise, reported satisfaction with the course and increased confidence in their abilities to self-direct their learning.

The students mentioned that the course as a whole impacted their language learning. For example, one student stated that "Discussions in this class with classmates during this trimester proved to be very important in pointing out new strategies or simply different ways

that I could put them into practice". Another student said "Overall, 1012LHS has revealed how restricting my approach was with language learning and delivered material that has truly impacted how I view study strategies and methods". In addition, there were numerous comments on specific strategies or tools that were beneficial, such as "start[ing] a language learning diary to help keep track of my emotional temperature. I also used it to plan for future language learning tasks, set goals and keep track of my learning. It has been good to organise my learning and have a study schedule". Another student mentioned starting a schedule for learning that included weekly goal setting which increased motivation, commitment, and helped them increase their confidence. Other students mentioned the lack of opportunity to travel abroad but had discovered new ways to immerse themselves in the language through digital technologies.

As mentioned, a key aim for this course was to reinforce the importance of affective strategies and the socio-emotional aspects of language learning. One student comment addressed this exact focus: "Affective strategies […] have particularly enhanced my language learning journey. I realised that the process of language learning is not just intellectual, but also social and emotional; affective strategies focus on taking one's emotional temperature through activities such as keeping a language learning diary or a checklist and have given me the ability to control any negative emotions that arise during my study when I feel unsatisfied with my progress". Moreover, another student mentioned the vital social aspect of language learning: "This trimester I have reached out to classmates for help, forcibly pushed myself out of my comfort zone to meet with people, created opportunities for group studying, and had conversations in my target languages in student chat groups. Recently we teamed up to create a language club at university and that is an idea I am glad we are taking ahead". This language club, initiated and lead by students for students, provides concrete evidence of the students' high level of engagement generated by participating in this course.

The transformative nature of this course was also evident in the students' abilities to employ metalanguage such as processes, strategies, emotional temperature, and comment on the specific categories of strategies (e.g., affective strategies) in their reflections, both to discuss their experiences and as a tool for planning their learning and future studies.

8. Implications

The transformative experience of this course and the perception of the benefits gained could lead students to reconsider the function of the language classroom and their own role within it. Language learning classes should be a space to scaffold learning and provide tools for students to continue learning outside the classroom. More importantly, the classes should foster a sense of agency in students with regards to their individual language learning journey. This functionality of the language classroom has long been recognised, however, funding

cuts to university programs, the move to online environments and Covid-19 restrictions have added urgency to the need for these changes and supplements to language learning classes. Targeted learning courses (like the one discussed in this paper) provide a means to transition from the 'language injection' perspective to one of independence and self-directed learning.

9. Concluding remarks

All true learning is in essence transformational. However, as has been widely documented in the literature and corroborated by students' reflections, learning a language per se does not result in the understanding of the cognitive, social and emotional factors that underpin the process, or in the mastery of effective strategies to cope with the task. These factors and strategies have to be explicitly introduced, discussed and applied. Once learners become aware of the factors that affect their learning and, through practice and self-reflection challenge their preconceptions, they will be better prepared to transfer this new understanding into contexts and situations beyond the classroom and into other areas of life. Thus, spending 12 weeks facilitating a change of perspective is a small investment of time, cost and effort which could yield long lasting benefits and promote life-long learning.

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