

Understanding the relationships between learning and teaching: a review of the contribution of applied linguistics

Synopsis

This review covers theory and research in applied linguistics about classroom processes, and in particular about the active role of the learner in learning. It focuses firstly on factors which affect learning-teaching events from outside the classroom: participants' beliefs, participants' intentions and participants' resources, learning and teaching curricula and materials, the political and institutional context, socio-cultural factors and issues of inequality. It then reviews research on the nature of learning-teaching events themselves: characteristics of context, approaches to teaching, social interaction and the construction of social identities. Recognition of the complexity of the relationship between learning and teaching leads to a conceptualisation of teaching as the 'creation of learning opportunities', in which the management of learning, and engagement in learning are crucial factors. The review identifies six different types of potential outcome from learning-teaching events: learning about content, learning how to learn, learning about language, learning about social relations, re-constructing identities, and wider benefits of learning such as increased confidence. The review emphasises throughout the implications for teaching of viewing learning from the perspective of the learner. The review was undertaken as part of the Adult Learners' Lives research project as part of the NRDC's work in support of *Skills for Life*.

Key Points

- ▶ Learning is infused with the complexity of learners' lives. A variety of different factors are interrelated and integrated in the learning-teaching process. Learning is therefore not predictable as a product of input, but created through constant negotiations between individuals, social environments and broader social influences.
- ▶ Teachers and researchers need to pay attention to the beliefs about learning, teaching, language, literacy and numeracy which learners and teachers bring with them to the learning-teaching encounter. Beliefs also shape curricula and teaching materials. There are likely to be matches and mismatches among these beliefs.
- ▶ Both teachers and learners come to class with purposes and intentions. Teachers and researchers should identify participants' intentions as a key factor in learning events.
- ▶ A full understanding of learning in adult LLN must take account of social aspects of learning, including the political and institutional context in which it takes place, the broader socio-cultural context in which learning is situated, and the social life in classrooms.
- ▶ Social interaction is the key mechanism through which learning takes place. Its characteristics need to be studied in detail as a means to understanding the dynamics whereby teaching can facilitate learning.

✘ Teaching is best characterised as the creation of 'learning opportunities' through the management of interaction. The concept of 'learning opportunities' accounts for the way in which different learners learn different things from the same learning-teaching event, and provides a rationale for approaches to teaching which do not attempt to specify precisely what is to be learned.

✘ There are several different types of potential outcome from learning-teaching events: learning about content, learning how to learn, learning about language, learning about social relations, re-constructing identities, and wider benefits of learning such as increased self-assurance.

✘ Researchers and teachers should seek to ascertain learners' perceptions and interpretations of teaching-learning events.

✘ Rather than trying to make generalizations about particular teaching methods, it is more useful to try to understand how learning opportunities and possible outcomes emerge in particular contexts. the language and the linguistic awareness to do this. For the process to be meaningful, ESOL learners' other languages and/or interpreters need to be used.

Background

This review was carried out as part of the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives Project based at Lancaster University.

Main elements of the review

The main aim of this review is to evaluate insights about the learning-teaching relationship obtained from applied linguistics, to examine their applicability to adult LLN, and thereby to indicate fruitful areas for future research and practice. By studying existing applied linguistics theory and research, and also by identifying gaps in this literature, we develop a working model of factors which should be taken into account in studying learning in adult LLN provision. The review provides an integration of theoretical perspectives on learning by focusing on the range of factors which contribute to learning rather than on the characteristics of teaching.

Messages for policy makers, teacher educators and researchers

The issues outlined in this review are actively informing the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project, and will be taken into account in the report on the nature of learning and teaching observed on the project. We consider that other projects within NRDC would also benefit from the findings of the research reviewed here regarding the complexity of the relationships between method and outcomes.

The implications of the research reviewed here for initial teacher training and for staff development are that courses

for all adult LLN practitioners should incorporate a significant element devoted to a socially situated understanding of learners and learning. They should include ideas about how to adapt provision to different contexts and groups, and should encourage ongoing reflection on learning processes not only by teachers, but also by policy makers and by learners.

The review also brings to light certain issues which might directly inform policy. In particular, the theory and research outlined here points to the relative futility of attempting to make broad generalisations about what best teaching practice consists of across all settings, and cautions against promoting any single teaching method over all others, as it shows clearly that learning outcomes and their specific meanings vary from context to context. Instead, the research supports policies which provide time for teachers to gain knowledge of a variety of different methods, and to develop their capacity to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of these in relation to the particularities of settings, and of the learners with whom they are working.

Research team

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This review was carried out as part of the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project, based at Lancaster University and directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanič. The authors are grateful for valuable feedback from other members of the Adult Learners' Lives team, especially David Barton and Karin Tusting.

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