

Session 204

Research Methods for ABE/ESOL Populations by Ellie Drago-Severson, NCSALL/Harvard Graduate School of Education

RESEARCH QUESTION

What methodological challenges might be encountered when conducting research that relies heavily on language (to understand the content of learners' thoughts and assess the structure of their thinking) with ABE/ESOL adults? How might we adapt measures and develop strategies to better understand ESOL learners' perspectives on their program experiences and meaning making? What are the lessons learned from adapting measures to better suit this population?

METHOD- OLOGY (sample, methods, type of data)

This mixed-methods research, funded by NCSALL, examined the internal experiences of learning and change of 41 ABE/ESOL learners in three ABE/ESOL programs.

Site and Participant Selection: The Adult Development Team (hereafter, the team) chose three Massachusetts sites that were running programs widely considered to achieve excellent results and were known to set benchmarks for other programs to emulate. These programs were nine to 14 months long, enabling us to examine the developmental dimensions of transformational learning. Selected programs incorporated supports and challenges to facilitate adult learning (e.g., tutoring, technological support), and curricula aimed at enhancement of adults' role competency as student, parent, or worker. During 1998-99, we followed 41 adults enrolled in these programs. This sample was diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, age, past educational experiences, socioeconomic status, and social roles. At Bunker Hill Community College, we studied how recently immigrated young adults (late teens-early 20s) experienced a college preparation program. At a Family Literacy Program, we followed parents (in their 30s who had lived in the US for about 9 years) who enrolled in either a pre-GED or an ESOL class. At the Polaroid Corporation, we studied workers (in their 30s/40s who had lived in the US for about 20 years) who participated in a 14-month Diploma Program.

Data Collection: 41 of 58 learners across three sites participated in the full study. We conducted 670 hours of qualitative interviews and developmental assessments (tape-recorded and transcribed), 160 hours of quantitative measures, 25 hours of observations, and various documents. Data collection occurred on three (at one site, four) occasions. It included: qualitative interviews; structured exercises; classroom observations; focus groups; and quantitative survey measures.

Interview topics centered on participants' learning experience, for example: What are your purposes in pursuing this learning? What, in your view, makes a person a good teacher? What effect is your learning having on your work, in your relationships with your child, or in your role as a prospective college student? Our questions helped us examine what the processes of transformational learning looked like, how learners with different developmental levels experienced such processes, and the practices that learners named as supportive to these changes. Revisiting the same participant at different points allowed us to ask: Are there changes in the learner's views?

Data Analysis: Data analysis included coding (e.g., theoretical and emic codes) (Geertz, 1974); organizing codes into thematic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994); creating narrative summaries (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell & Miller, 1991); analyzing and scoring subject-object interviews (Lahey et al., 1988) and vignettes; and analysis of quantitative measures/Likert scales. To explore the influence of learners' development levels on their experiences of change, we analyzed and scored subject-object interviews and vignettes and related these quantitative analyses. Next, we developed both social role and learning/teaching related analytic questions and explored how participants' conceptions of their roles changed over time (Seidman, 1998). We looked for relationships between participants' experiences of changes as they related to developmental level and created matrices that linked patterns in developmental level across the groups to other aspects of participants' experiences, (e.g., other ongoing supportive contexts and their self-described motivation). We also traced patterns across the role maps to track descriptions of self and role in each context. Having identified the learners whose experiences appeared transformational and those whose experiences changed in other ways, we analyzed supports and challenges that coincided with changes and then selected participants as case examples. Throughout analysis, we examined discrepant data to test both the power and scope of our theory (Maxwell, 1996). By attending to data at the individual and group level, we built theory that accounts for the many levels of data and perspectives on its interpretation.

FINDINGS

The larger study (Drago-Severson, 2004; Kegan et al., 2001a, 2001b) illuminates how educators can attend mindfully to the qualitatively different ways in which adults make sense of their ABE experiences and increases understanding of how ABE/ESOL learners can be better supported in programs. This presentation focuses on the value of using and adapting multiple research tools and developmental measures to inform our understanding of learners' experiences. I show how language-based measures can be employed if their effectiveness is carefully monitored, if they are properly adapted, if the adults' expressive English skills are adequate, and if multiple measures are used to triangulate findings and assess validity.

I discuss: (1) how and why we adapted quantitative and qualitative measures, traditionally employed with populations who speak English as a first language, to better understand the meaning making and experiences of the ESOL sample we studied, (2) what we learned about the benefits of employing multiple research methods – informed by various theoretical and methodological paradigms – given the challenges of conducting research with this highly diverse population, (3) how using a range of measures helped in triangulation of data and with assessing validity, and (4) the importance and usefulness of this research. Using a range of measures helped us to gain a deep understanding of various facets of the learners' experiences in the program and in other domains of their lives. I will highlight the barriers we encountered and how our team's research process of reflecting on what we were learning and how we could improve measures throughout data collection strengthened our measures and in turn our research design. I will explain why we adapted measures to better match the needs of these ESOL learners and the strategies employed to understand better what their learning meant to them, how they believed their program learning transferred to their roles as parents, workers, and students, and the changes they noticed in themselves during their programs. Using a range of measures helped the team triangulate data. I will highlight strategies that strengthened this research and the key methodological lessons learned. For example, we adapted quantitative measures (e.g., locus of control). I will explain how and why we adjusted measures to make them user friendly and understandable to learners. Also, given learners' time constraints, we adapted the subject-object interview, *soi*, to administer it in one hour. I will discuss what we did and what we learned from its administration. For example, in the *soi*, participants selected the content which allowed them to discuss their own experiences as opposed to other measures that ask learners to respond to predetermined questions and may require types of cultural literacy – which learners from diverse cultures may or may not be familiar with.

Additionally, I will demonstrate how using a range of measures (e.g., qualitative interviews, subject-object interviews, focus groups, quantitative measures, vignettes, and observations) helped in triangulating data and in assessing validity. For example, the learner interview was not initially intended as a developmental assessment tool. The soi was not designed to examine participants' program learning experiences. However, taken together data from these interviews enabled us to understand a fuller picture of participants' learning experiences, and see a broader picture of their lives. Lastly, I will discuss *participants'* perspectives on *our* research: participants reported that interview questions encouraged them to reflect on their experiences, knowing we (researchers) would be coming back supported their program persistence, and that focus groups served as opportunities to reconnect with classmates.

**IMPLICA-
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PRACTICE

POLICY

FURTHER
RESEARCH**

This study revealed the possibility and variety of **significant change** for adults in ABE/ESOL programs; **the importance of the cohort** as a support to adult learning and growth; and the variety of **developmental levels** adults bring to ABE/ESOL classrooms. Adopting a developmental perspective provides a model for better supporting adults and their success. In addition to the many better understood forms of diversity, this research suggests the importance of another form of diversity, namely, the ways of knowing that adults bring with them to the classroom. Developmental diversity calls for a variety of pedagogical approaches and an awareness that ways of knowing can evolve given the appropriate challenges and supports. Findings teach us that ABE/ESOL programs would benefit from incorporating features of the cohort design to enhance learning, better support the development of classroom community, and increase learner persistence and retention, especially if such structures could be in place when learners enter ABE/ESOL programs. Since learners experienced the benefits of the cohort and collaborative learning in developmentally different ways, and needed different forms of support and challenge to benefit from them, this program design feature and classroom practice may help address aspects of the "mixed level" problem raised by Beder and Medina (2001). The mechanism of working together in a group that is sustained over time is crucial. Last, because adults understand and demonstrate competency differently, it is critical that ABE/ESOL curricula to be shaped to (1) recognize this developmental diversity, (2) acknowledge competency development as a process, and (3) link to learners' lives.

**IMPOR-
TANCE OF
THIS STUDY**

These methodological findings have important implications for future research and supporting students' success in ABE/ESOL programs. For example, our study demonstrates that language-based measures can be administered if they are properly adapted, if the students' expressive English skills are adequate, and if there are multiple measures used to triangulate findings and assess validity. Validity can be enhanced if participants are frequently asked about how well they feel they are expressing the full complexity of their ideas. I will discuss

the limitations of protocols that require students to articulate fine distinctions between words and the challenges associated with protocols that require participants to spontaneously complete sentence stems. I suggest that future studies explore measures that are even less language-based. Significantly, the team discovered that developmental measures (e.g., the soi, quantitative measures, and vignettes) can be reliably used with adults from diverse cultural backgrounds (we did not find any skew toward the lower end of the continuum). Future researchers may want to administer developmental measures in conjunction with ethnographic measures to explore issues of culture/acclimation further (and the intersections between development and acculturation). I offer our learnings as a resource for researchers, developmentalists, practitioners, and policymakers.

The team's research methods, the challenges encountered, the strategies developed and the methodological lessons learned may be useful to future researchers and practitioners as we seek to develop research tools that will help us to better understand ABE/ESOL learners' perspectives on their learning and all that it means to them. Further meaning-centered research explorations of the ABE experience from learners' and teachers' perspectives, invoking theory-complicating rather than theory-confirming sources of data is needed. Such explorations will aid in conceptualizing the functions and purposes of ABE education and in supporting students' success.

**FOR MORE
INFOR-
MATION...**

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