



Using Appreciative Inquiry to Engage and Motivate Adult English Language Learners

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1. Introduction

Language is a vehicle that conveys our thoughts and the glue that binds people together in a culture [1] and learning a new one involves learners' self-identities [2]. Learning a new language entails more than simply learning the grammar and vocabulary of a new language. It often requires finding new ways to look at things by connecting with the culture of that language group [3]. In terms of acquiring language, second language (L2) learners face gaps in their L2 language ability which often trigger feelings of anxiety [4] and then feel like children again [5].

1.1 Learner anxiety

Steven Krashen [6] addressed the topic of learner anxiety in his affective filter hypothesis which claims that students' negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, or being self-conscious, form an affective filter or a block to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). When students possess an affective filter, their language learning is stopped or hindered until it is removed. Students who do not possess the affective filter are able to make continued progress.

Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope [4] revisited the topic of anxiety and foreign language learning, and found a link between anxiety and poor second-language performance. From their study, they outlined three "conceptual foundations: 1) communication apprehension; 2) test anxiety; and 3) fear of negative evaluation".

1. Communication apprehension stems from the learners lack of sophisticated control over what he or she can say. If the learner is already fearful in talking in front of others, doing so in a foreign language will augment this fear. In addition, adults think in a complex way but are limited to expressing their ideas in their L2a child-like way [5] which is a source of anxiety. Horwitz et al likened this to "stage fright" when speaking in public.

2. The second area, test anxiety, is "fear of failure" or simply put, students experience testing anxiety.

3. Lastly, students fear of negative evaluation. Since language is a social vehicle, adults not only have command of their native language but also of the social and cultural values that people of their native language group hold. In speaking another language, anxiety occurs when values or attitudes from the native language group are not the norm in the L2 community. An example may be when it is appropriate to use a person's first name. There are unknown social and cultural values that may be inadvertently trampled on by the adult language learner causing an awkward moment and a negative judgment against the learner. Horwitz et al called for instructor sensitivity and awareness to foreign-language-learning anxiety.

1.2 Learner motivation

In 2005, Dörnyei [7] proposed a new approach to understanding L2 motivation. He calls this the *L2 motivational self system* by integrating the work of different L2 and self-research psychology. The *L2 motivational self system* has three components. Dörnyei calls the first component the *ideal L2 self*. The ideal self refers to all forms of intrinsic motivation (such as hopes, desires or aspirations) an individual wishes to have and the *ideal L2 self* applies this to the individual in his or her L2 learning. In other words, if a learner's hopes, desires and aspirations are to master a particular L2, then he or she will. The second component is called the *ought-to L2 self* which refers to the extrinsic motives which an individual thinks he or she ought to have. In other words, the hopes, desires and aspirations that come from an external (i.e., peer group) source. These may actually be perceived desires and not what the individual actually wants. The last component is called the *L2 learning experience* which refers to the motives related to the immediate learning environment. This component is outside the learner, but interaction with the learning environment can either foster or curb the learner's motivation.

1.3 Institute Location and Description

The study took place at a community college in the New York City metropolitan area. Community Colleges in the United States have a two-fold mission: 1) provide the first two years of university study at a low cost and 2) provide life-long learning. This institution serves the entire county in which it is located and operates 9 satellite sites in addition to the main campus. The institution serves approximately 12,000 full- and part-time college credit students. Adding continuing education students, who are considered lifelong learners, brings the total number served by the college each semester to more than 20,000.

English Language Institute (ELI), which resides within the Continuing Education division, serves over 5,000 English as a Second Language students and runs over 130 sections of classes. While The ELI student body comes from over 100 different countries, the vast majority of students come from Latin America. The break down by native language is as follows: 80% Spanish speaking, 15% Brazilian Portuguese and 5% representing over 50 different languages. The ELI offers a variety of non-credit ESL courses including intensive and semi-intensive



ESL as well as specialized courses. Of the specialized courses, the ELI offers two levels of pronunciation each meeting for 3 hours a week for a total of 42 contact hours for high intermediate to advanced speakers (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages skill levels B2 to C1).

1.4 Course development

Students asked for a pronunciation course with more contact time and more opportunity to speak in class. The new course, Pronunciation and Conversation Workshop/ESL, was created about through these conversations in the spring of 2008. The course outcome is for students to improve their comprehensibility, fluency and build confidence. The course meets twice a week for a total of 55 contact hours. The class was set up as half pronunciation instruction and half conversation. The in-class conversations were based on individual writing assignments done at home or topics generated from the text book. When the course first began, little attention was paid to outside readings and discussions; however, feedback from students indicated they wanted more reading. As the course was taught from semester to semester, the instructor adjusted the execution of the course based on student input, such as the inclusion of more readings, and on the instructor's new understanding gained on his doctoral coursework in order to create a more centered ESL classroom.

2. Methodology

2.1 Question

The question was crafted using the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) since AI is able to bridge the separation of the theory and practice [8] by inquiring as to what is working well rather than looking at a problem to solve. Additionally, Lander states that it "is an attractive evaluation methodology for adult educators whose practice or applied research involves marginalized individuals, organizations/groups that face turmoil and low morale difficulties and environments" [9]. Cooperrider [10] developed an Appreciative Inquiry model as a method of analysis to devise solutions to questions stating "The underlying assumption of Appreciative Inquiry is a solution to be embraced rather than a problem being solved." Thus, Appreciative Inquiry will bring both practical solutions for future endeavors and ensure that all voices are heard in the process.

According to Cooperrider and Whitney [11], there are five basic principles of Appreciative Inquiry which provide the theory base for Appreciative Inquiry and are as follows:

- The Constructionist Principle: Human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven.
- The Principle of Simultaneity: Inquiry and change are not truly separate moments but are simultaneous.
- The Poetic Principle: Human organizations are more like an open book than say a machine.
- The Anticipatory Principle: The infinite human knowledge we have for generating constructive organizational change is our collective imagination and discourse about the future.
- The Positive Principle: That building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding-things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together.

According to Coghlan et al. [12] "Social Constructionism reflects a belief that there is no reality or truth; rather truth is grounded in the multiple and contextually determined realities of individuals perceptions, dialogues, and shared understandings". Landers [9] states that "The Social Constructionist underpinnings of Appreciative Inquiry contend that what we focus on becomes our reality. There are eight assumptions based on all of the five Principles. The eight assumptions are as follows:

- 1) In every group something works
- 2) What we focus on becomes reality
- 3) Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
- 4) The act of asking questions of a group influences the group in some way
- 5) People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry parts of the past
- 6) If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
- 7) It is important to value differences
- 8) The language we use creates our reality

These assumptions determine how Appreciative Inquiry is conducted in groups.

2.2 Data collection

The study was conducted over the summer and fall terms of 2011. Each class had 21 enrolled students. Being a non-credit class, students are not obligated to hand in any assignments. The assignment was for the students to recount a successful experience they had using English. Out of the 21 enrolled in each term, 9 turned in the initial assignment the first term and 11 in the second term. The papers were corrected and the instructor made positive comments encouraging students' efforts and engaging students in a dialog about the experience. The students then follow with two series of group presentations.



2.3 Analysis

Content Analysis was the methodological technique used to examine the social communication [13] from homework assignments from summer and fall semester terms in 2011. The Instructor for the course coded the homework assignments. The themes were open coded and the coding frames were developed. Coding Frames were used to organize the data and identify findings after open coding. The coding frames developed were "anxiety" and "motivation".

3. Conclusion

Two coding frames were discovered. The frames were "Anxiety" and "Motivation". Of the 20 students who responded, 15 noted anxiety as the issue that they had to overcome. The remaining 5 stated that they were in a situation where they were motivated to help someone at the time. Additionally, the last two semesters have seen a decrease in student attrition from an average of 4 students a term to three in the summer and one in the fall. Additionally, the topics of student presentations are more complex. For example, previously, students typically presented on topics such as what to do if a tourist visited their countries. After the introduction of the AI essay, student topics have included discussions on the root of poverty or the mortgage crisis in the US. Students seem more willing to tackle topics out of their comfort zones.

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