The Transformative Learning Experiences of Learners of English as a Foreign Language at a University Preparatory Programme

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Abstract:

This study describes the transformative learning experiences of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in the School of Languages, Sabanci University, Turkey. A total of 32 learners were involved with a mean age of 19. The data were collected using an adapted version of the Learning Activities Survey (King, 2005). The results revealed that 25% of the population completed the cycle of transformation stages. It was noticed that the number of learners moving up the10 stages decreased as the stages progressed. However, certain patterns of transformative learning experience were identified. The respondents were found to face various disorienting dilemmas causing their awareness to be raised in terms of language learning, cultural knowledge and the help they could access. It is maintained that language schools play a key role in helping first year university students assume academic skills, which can potentially encourage them to undergo transformative experiences.

Key Words:

EFL, transformative learning, disorienting dilemma, critical thinking

Introduction

Given the competitive nature of professional employment, the desire to get a university degree may be stronger than ever. However, the relief many people feel when they find out they have been placed in a university can easily disappear due to the fear of anticipated changes. Some may not feel that they are prepared to take on the responsibility for their own learning, which appears to be a key skill at the university level in particular. Others may be worried about leaving home for the first time if they are to relocate, while those who opt for education in an English medium university may face additional challenges if English is not their native language. This is mainly because they have to master a foreign language in order to pursue their academic studies. Such a challenge will be even more intimidating if students lack an aptitude for learning

foreign languages or their previous experience of language learning was not a successful one for one reason or another. When this is compounded by other challenges, the excitement of university life may turn into a disorienting dilemma, which causes a significant level of disturbance in a person (Mezirow, 2000). This disturbance will likely cause mixed feelings such as anger, fright and excitement. Such challenges are likely to encourage people to address the issues confronting them from different perspectives, even to the point of adapting or changing their outlook altogether, which is a transformative learning (TL) experience.

When students who lack an adequate English proficiency level arrive at universities, foundation programmes, also commonly known as preparatory programmes, are their first experience of university education. Although these programmes may not be yet seen as a complete start of university life, they play a critical role in acting as a bridge to the various faculty disciplines. It is true that the main aim of language preparatory programmes is to equip university students with the language skills such as reading, writing and speaking required for their freshman studies. However, teaching these skills using a curriculum deprived of academically meaningful contexts would fail to serve the needs of university students. Therefore, many preparatory programmes appear to focus on students' academic needs by incorporating critical thinking through content rich materials. Sacco (1987) points out the importance of critical analysis and interpretation skills in language learning. It is not enough for language learners to learn language forms per se; they would be expected to exercise critical thinking skills and "consider … a myriad of social-cultural aspects" (Thadphoothon, 2005, p. 4). Thadphoothon (2005) also states that such learners form their ideas by using their reasoning skills and metacognitive ability for reflection on their own learning. Critical thinking also allows university students to develop knowledge and skills such as reading, note-taking, writing and presentations required at university (Klimoviene, Urboniene & Barzdziukiene, 2006).

Once mastered early on during their studies at language preparatory programmes, these skills could be reinforced more easily in their departments and lead to both academic and personal growth. Thus, teaching in language preparatory programmes should be geared towards critical thinking skills, and support students who take opportunities for TL. However, very few researchers seem to have turned their attention to TL in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) (Jafari, Ameri, Tajali & Rajeian, 2013), albeit some interest in English as a second language (ESL)[1] (Manson, Poitras & Hong, 2010; King, 2009; Magro, 2003). It is hoped that this study will fill the gap regarding learners' TL experiences in an EFL context by identifying the most commonly occurring TL patterns. This is hoped to shed light on which particular stages of TL are most commonly experienced by such learners. It is hoped that faculty who become more aware of their students' transformational experiences would be more likely to create opportunities for critical thinking that supports TL.

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[1]ESL refers to learners that learn English in a country where English is spoken as the native language while EFL generally refers to learners learning English in their home countries where their exposure to English may be limited outside class hours. This means differences in terms of learners' interaction patterns in and outside of class, the kind of activities in which they can get involved, the help they can get, etc.

Transformative Learning

Mezirow (1991) defines transformative learning as learning that has learners face some sort of a disorienting dilemma causing them to see the world differently from the way they did in the past. Mezirow (1991) believes that with the help of critical reflection on their experiences people can become aware of the realities that give shape to their lives. They do this by raising their awareness of 'meaning schemes' and 'meaning perspectives'. While the first one refers to specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions, the latter includes our sense of self. Meaning schemes may not necessarily involve self-reflection. Meaning perspectives, on the other hand, involves critical reflection when one is confronted with a disorienting dilemma. This kind of reflection paves the way to perspective transformation by helping us become aware of our perspectives inhibiting our comprehensive understanding of the world around us.

Mezirow (2000) identifies10 stages of TL: a) facing a disorienting dilemma, b) examining one's own feelings such as fear, anger and shame, c) examining and assessing beliefs and feelings about assumptions, d) becoming discontent with the assessment results and noticing that the possible transformation process is experienced by others, e) exploring alternative options of new actions, roles and relationships through dialogue with others and further self-evaluation, f) planning a course of action to carry out initial plans, g) gaining necessary knowledge and skills to implement plans, h) trying out new roles and new actions to see how effective they are, and if content, i) further practicing roles and actions to build competence and self-confidence, and j) reintegrating into new life with new perspectives.

It should be noted that learners in general may not proceed through these stages at a conscious level. Also, some people may opt out at a certain stage and not complete the whole process due to feelings of insecurity in a new situation or the fear of what is awaiting them at subsequent stages. Although such a decision may be given unconsciously, King (2009) argues that it is always the decision of the learners whether or not they wish to complete the whole cycle of TL. However, educators who are aware of TL cycle can support learners' throughout the TL process. King (2009) also warns that some transformative learning experiences can actually be negative and therefore such experiences need to be approached cautiously. Taylor (1988) also believes it would be wrong to expect all learners to have inclination for TL.

Mezirow's (1991) TL theory was taken up by other researchers and their critique of TL helped develop new understandings. Taylor (1997), for instance, drew attention to the role of context in transformative experience and said that learners' readiness for change could be determined by their previous experience and goals. Cranton (cited in Mezirow, 2000), on the other hand, took a Jungian approach to TL and suggested that aim of adult education in general and TL in particular is to promote the development of learners' individuality through personality integration, which materializes when they become aware of habits of mind. This process, according to Cranton (cited in Mezirow, 2000), may not necessarily take place at a conscious level.

King (2005) also focused on context and individual learners' experiences and developed the Contextualized Model of Adult Learning (CMAL), which encourages learners and researchers to question their assumptions about their realities with a heavy

emphasis on personal assessment and transformation opportunities. The starting point of CMAL is learners' individual accounts of their learning experiences.

Transformative Learning and University Education

One general aim of universities at large is to foster students' critical thinking skills, which are also the basis of TL. Thomas (2009) points out that university education needs to provide students with opportunities for critical thinking. This encourages them to relate to the process of learning and acquire skills of improvising, adapting and innovating. Brookfield (cited in Merriam, 2004) sees critical reflection as a must for transformational learning and states that learners need to be involved in a fundamental questioning and reordering of the way they think or act. Similarly, Facione (1990) underlines the importance of purposeful and self-regulatory thinking for learners to practice critical thinking in order to interpret, analyze, evaluate and explain experiences. Students with critical thinking skills such as analysis of information, reasoning from text and quantitative reasoning will consume information more wisely, solve problems more successfully and make decisions more effectively (Shavelson, 2009).

Critical thinking, therefore, is of great importance when university students face various disorienting dilemmas, one of which is becoming accustomed to a new environment where they have to assume new roles and meet expectations of their new professors, their parents and peers. When faced with such issues, some students may feel inclined to think critically and question their existing beliefs and assumptions, while others may not have the inclination to do so. This is one reason why some researchers focused their attention on university students' experiences of different TL stages. Studies revealed that university students tended to develop a new identity as a result of their TL experience. Peiying (2012), for instance, found that the participants of his study developed their self-concept of cultural identity and therefore improved their relationships with others. In another study by Hendershot (2011), university students were put into contact with people from different backgrounds, asked to take on active social roles, and encouraged to take part in critical thinking through discussions with teaching staff and other students. The results of the study showed that 61% of the participants were found to have experienced transformation and developed an identity as a global citizen, which resulted from their engagement in TL. Beaupre (2012) also reports the results of his application of TL on an interdisciplinary course, where his students displayed new attitudes of commitment to the global community and developed more positive emotions towards learning. The findings of these studies suggest that university students can benefit from their involvement in TL experiences, which might be purposefully fostered by curriculum designed within different faculty programmes, and language preparatory programmes should not be immune to this.

Considering their role as a bridge between high schools and various faculty disciplines, language preparatory programmes cannot depend on teaching students linguistic competence per se. They need to recognize various student needs during their adaptation to university life, and create opportunities for them to face and tackle challenges. Some students may take this opportunity to undergo a total TL experience, while some others may learn from only certain aspects of TL. As Cranton (cited in Mezirow, 2000) warns, this experience may take place at an unconscious level. However, in either case, it is important for language instruction to involve students in

critical thinking and support them through language instruction that is compatible with TL. Before embarking on such a journey, university language teaching programmes may benefit from investigating their current teaching philosophy, classroom practices and student experiences. This very important need for a TL approach to foreign language instruction for academic purposes gave the current study its impetus.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1) Do students at the School of Languages, Sabanci University experience any aspects of transformative learning as a result of their engagement in learning English for academic purposes?

2) If they do, what factors affect their transformative learning experience patterns?

Methods

Participants

A total of 32 Turkish learners of English as a foreign language at the School of Languages (SL) Sabanci University in Istanbul participated in this study. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 21, with the mean age of 19. Twenty participants were female while 12 were male. The students were chosen from among volunteers who were about to finish their year-long studies at SL. The students' experience of a full academic year at SL was hoped to help them reflect on different aspects of their language learning experiences. Prior to data collection, the students were informed about the aims of the research, and they were told that their responses would be used in the research report without using their real names. No written consent was received from the participants as the institution (SL) did not require one.

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, two data gathering techniques were adopted: a survey and a semi-structured interview.

The instruments used for both techniques were based on Learning Activities Survey (LAS) developed by King (2009). The survey asked respondents to give their opinions on important experiences that may have triggered a process of transformation. They are not provided with a theoretical explanation of disorienting dilemmas since it is regarded as meta-language for the researcher. Respondents were also asked for their opinions on any language learning activities, extra-curricular activities and people that may have facilitated their process of transformation.

King (2009) refined LAS and strengthened it with thorough reliability and validity studies. Special care was given to the reliability by using several individual evaluations where the respondents' responses to different items in LAS were evaluated to reach a decision whether or not they experienced perspective transformation. In terms of the validation of LAS, King (2009) carried out several pilot studies where the respondents were interviewed to strengthen the understanding of the items in LAS. Also, expert opinions were sought for suggestions (King, 2009).

King (2009) developed LAS to use with ESL learners in the American context. Therefore, it was felt that adaptation of the survey would be necessary in a way as to address learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). It was felt that the participants could provide more effective reflection in their mother tongue. However, a simple translation of LAS into Turkish would not guarantee the established validity and reliability of the original tool. Flaherty at al. (1988) caution that careful attention needs to be paid when translating data-gathering tools into different languages in order to reduce any potential distortions in meaning, and in doing so, content, semantic, technical and conceptual equivalences need to be obtained. Therefore, LAS was translated into Turkish by two language teachers working separately. Later, the two translations were compared and in cases of any discrepancy, further assistance was sought from an adult educator who was a proficient speaker of Turkish and English. The adapted version of the instruments was piloted on 5 EFL learners. Upon feedback from these students, the wording of certain questions was modified for clarity. King (2009) states that involving learners in the validation process helps eliminate technical jargon and can provide insights into possible areas that researchers may not be able to notice themselves, which makes the instrument more user-friendly and relevant to learners.

The interview instrument included further questions to support the data gathered with the survey in order to have more in-depth information and to collect examples from participants. Britten (1995) explains that semi-structured interviews lend themselves to focus on certain issues identified to gather more information about them through the interviewer's probing questions for further details. Interviews were held with 10 participants who expressed interest to do so. Al-Busaidi (2008) emphasizes that sampling strategy is determined by the purpose of the research. Patton (2002) notes that sampling of participants in qualitative research is purposive in order to generate rich information, so generalizing from sample to greater population is not sought. Therefore, in this small scale qualitative study, which does not aim to generalize results beyond its population, the low number of survey respondents and interviews was not considered to be a serious issue.

The Analysis Procedures

The data collected were read by the researcher and coded according to the headings that reflected each of the ten stages of the TL cycle. Two other adult educators were asked to verify the accuracy of the coding. Mays and Pope (1995) say that when transcripts are assessed by additional researchers and the agreement between them is compared the analysis of qualitative data is enhanced.

Following coding, data frequencies and proportions were determined. Ishak and Ashar (2012) note that narrative reporting of qualitative research findings together with frequency tables, diagrams and charts helps data presentation become more meaningful.

No statistical analyses were done since qualitative studies do not necessitate number values that aim to arrive at a *p* value. This is because qualitative research does not aim at statistically testing hypotheses using tests such as a *t-test* that compares two groups (Suter, 2012).

Results

Transformative Learning Experiences

The first research question asked whether or not the learners of English as a foreign language at SL experienced transformative learning during their studies. Table 1 shows the data analysis results from LAS in response to this question.

Table 1. Transformative learning experience

Stages of TL	N=32	
	f	%
1. A disorienting dilemma	27	84.38
2. Examination of feelings	27	84.38
3. Assessment of assumptions	18	56.25
4. Recognition of discontent and awareness of others experiencing similar feelings	18	56.25
5. Exploring alternative actions, roles and relationships	10	31.25
6. Planning a course of action	9	28.13
7. Acquiring new knowledge and skills	8	25
8. Trying out new roles & actions	8	25
9. Building competence and self-confidence	8	25
10. Reintegrating into life	8	25

The participants' responses to the questions in LAS indicated that not all participants completed the whole cycle of TL experience. It is important to note that the number of the participants decreased as the stages of transformation process progressed. Although 84.38% of the participants completed the first two phases, a radical decrease was observed at the third stage, which reveals that quite a large number of the participants were not willing to assess their assumptions when faced with a disorienting dilemma. This is despite the fact that they appeared to think critically about their feelings evoked by the disorienting dilemma. An interviewee who was identified as having stopped at this stage gave the indication that the feelings she had at the time prevented her from going further. She said, *"I felt so hurt by some of the things I heard in class that I decided not to get involved in further discussion with anyone on the topic of abortion."* That topic clearly caused this interviewee to have intense feelings, and it is natural that feelings evoked by a classroom discussion may inhibit progress. However, Gould (2002) argues that strong emotive experiences could also encourage learners to embrace learning.

Those who appeared to have experienced the third stage were also identified to experience stage 4, where they had their awareness raised regarding their unhappiness with the given situation and recognized that they were not the only ones feeling that way. However, 44.5% of these participants were found not to proceed any further. One participant, when asked what kept him from behaving differently after realizing he was not happy with his way of thinking, expressed that he did not like the way he was treated by his peers: *"I started reading more about environmental issues. My roommates, however, were having a good time chatting up girls on the net and kept saying I was becoming a nerd always studying. Soon, I started just getting by with what we covered in class."* This shows that the student's need to be accepted by his peers superseded his desire for continuous learning, and limited his TL experience.

Ten out of 32 participants made it to the fifth stage, which meant a significant drop (31.25%) in the total number of the participants. At this stage, another participant was found to opt out, and 8 of the remaining 9 participants appeared to complete the whole transformation process. That is, only a quarter of the whole population experienced transformation.

The responses given by different participants who appeared to have experienced transformation highlighted various important elements of TL. However, to see the process as a whole, the transformation experience of one particular participant, for whom I shall use the pseudonym Ercan, will be briefly described.

The first stage of the transformation process for Ercan was triggered by a disorienting dilemma, namely starting university, which both excited and worried him. Ercan recalled the day when he found out the results of the entrance exam: *"I had been waiting for the day impatiently. When it finally did come, I did not want to hear the news first. I was worried I would not get what I really wanted. When I saw the university I was admitted to, I was very happy. Then the idea of living in Istanbul without my parents got me scared."*

This quotation shows that the changes imposed by starting university studies made Ercan uneasy. When asked the reason for this in the interview, he said he was worried that the unexpected conditions in a totally new context might be a formidable challenge, especially because of his lack of experience in a foreign language. This suggests that Ercan's worries acted as triggering events even before he started his language learning experience for academic studies. When he finally made the move, he felt challenged and started feeling even shakier with the thought of having to learn a foreign language. However, this did not stop him from moving to the second stage of transformation when he started to examine his feelings of anxiety. He expressed that he felt the urge to think about his mixed feelings more critically to find some peace of mind: *"It felt like Istanbul was haunting me. On top of that, I was getting more and more assignments. One day I asked myself 'How old are you? What is this eating at you?' I could not keep going on like a baby."* This shows that Ercan was starting to examine his feelings of anxiety and shame caused by the challenges he was facing, but he would like to grow out of his feelings of insecurity. He also said *"I couldn't go on like that. What made me think negatively? Was it myself?,"* which shows his tendency to question what he had always thought was correct and evaluated his own feelings about this perceived reality critically, indicating evidence for the third stage of assessing assumptions. This also signals his

discontentment with his way of thinking, which is among the characteristics of the fourth stage. When asked what made him feel at more ease with that uncomfortable feeling, he referred to his friends in a similar situation, who can be considered a facilitator of the process.

Ercan was identified to have challenged his feelings of insecurity by thinking of how he could reduce the severity of the problem. In doing this, he found himself thinking critically about his role of a university student: *"I thought to myself: Now you are a grown-up university student. You are your own parent."* which seems to offer the evidence that he was at the fifth stage where he was exploring alternative roles.

In response to the question that followed this, he explained that he had the fortune of attending some seminars offered by the student counsellors as part of an academic development series for language learners, which gave him more confidence to take an action. He explained that he tried to adopt certain behaviors that would help him face the issue more effectively. This indicates that he had moved to the sixth stage, which required the planning of a course of action. The seventh stage, on the other hand, was apparent in Ercan's transformation experience when he decided to learn more about the city and how Istanbul dwellers tackled the hectic life there. In doing so, he appeared to benefit from classroom activities and assignments given by his tutors. This shows that his experience of EFL in his academic context assisted his acquisition of new knowledge and increased his curiosity, and as a result he developed some survival skills. Finally, when he explored different parts of the city with friends to take pictures of the places they would speak about, he gained more self-confidence. He appears to have started trying out his new role as a university student as an active seeker of knowledge. When his initial efforts were successful, he became more confident. These highlight the characteristics of both eighth and ninth stages.

He remarked that he felt how childish he was at the beginning of the year. He explained he could easily travel to different parts of the city. He also explained that his improved linguistic knowledge and skills encouraged him to plan for a work-and-travel programme in the USA. In addition, he said he enjoyed talking to his parents about how his experiences of EFL contributed to his personal development. His parents made the comment that he was speaking differently, not like the young son they used to know. Taken together, Ercan's language learning experience initiated by his move to a new city to pursue a university education encouraged him to question his conceptions, assume new responsibilities and try out new roles. These provide evidence that Ercan reintegrated into his new life effectively and therefore completed the transformative learning cycle successfully.

Factors Contributing to Transformative Learning Experiences

The second research question asked about the factors that affected the patterns of the participants' TL experiences. Not many participants seemed to have completed the process of transformation; however, their experiences offer some explanation that help identify the factors involved at different stages of a potential transformation process. This section outlines the emerging factors in the analysis of the participants' responses.

a) Disorienting Dilemmas

The participants were found to experience various disorienting dilemmas such as their involvement in some civic involvement projects (CIPs), moving into the dormitories, and a tragic death of a loved one. All these factors would be expected to contribute to TL; however, given the focus of the current study I will describe those related to language learning.

A total of 27 participants were identified to mention their experiences of starting university and taking up a foreign language class as disorienting dilemmas. The fact that their preparatory English programme was the first stage of their university life might have had them see these two as synonymous. However, language learning in particular seemed to create a serious tension. The students' responses suggested that their negative experiences in previous language classes led to this tension. The nature of rote-learning encouraged in many schools seemed to have inhibited the students' language development. The university entrance exam they had recently taken required them to focus on science subjects and discouraged them from prioritizing English. However, the fact that they would pursue their academic studies in an English medium university caused them to suffer from anxiety. This was particularly true for those who had studied foreign languages other than English. Therefore, it can be suggested that the participants' EFL experience had the potential to trigger TL due to severe feelings it might cause in learners, leading them to question their abilities as well as aptitude for foreign language learning.

b) Changes in Attitudes

The data analyzed revealed that the participants experienced certain changes in their perceptions of languages, personal development and cultural consciousness, all of which seemed to affect their TL experience to a certain degree.

Languages

One of the emerging themes regarded their approaches to languages. There appeared to be three sub-themes under languages, which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Language awareness

Sub-themes	N=32	
	f	%
Learning English language	24	75
Learning a foreign language in general	23	71.9
Native language	11	34.4

Firstly, a significant percentage of the respondents (75%) expressed their feeling of increased attachment to English. They seemed to give more importance to it with the hope of becoming more successful in their studies and future professional lives. One participant noted "*My grammar has always been good, but I just realized that it is not enough and to pass my exams here I have to read and write a lot. I have to learn many more words, too.*" Another student said "*I used to think that doing homework would*

suffice, but now I see learning English is more than a lesson, but a life-style." These excerpts give indications of how learning English penetrated into some learners' lives. Although this may encourage some language learners to seek further learning opportunities, it could challenge others to a degree that may inhibit their TL experience.

The second sub-theme identified was learning a foreign language. A total of 71.9% of the participants seemed to be more motivated to learn a foreign language. They frequently expressed the joy they got out of their learning experience. One participant stated, "*When I was at high school, I was bored in language lessons. Here I've started thinking that it can actually be fun.*" Others mentioned language games as a contributing factor. These show that learner' beliefs of how a foreign language can be learned can change over time. This would be expected to have a positive effect on their motivation levels, and therefore reinforce their TL experience.

Finally, slightly more than one-third of the respondents were found to question their beliefs about their native language. They seemed to become more aware of the grammatical rules and organizational aspects of their mother tongue. The reason for this was their urge to make frequent comparisons between the two languages. This had them paying more attention to the rules in Turkish, and therefore can be regarded a contributor to learners' empowerment. However, it was also interesting to note that three of the participants started to think that their mother tongue was less important than English. One of these participants said "*I used to think Turkish was widely spoken and therefore I would be safe speaking it only. Now I see that …Turkish won't be of much help.*" Although this may be seen as a negative development related to the student's reduced interest in his native tongue, his realization of the need for learning English for academic success can be regarded a contributing factor for TL experience.

Personal Development

Another significant change that emerged from the respondents' responses was related to personal development. Table 3 shows the main areas of personal development experienced.

Table 3. Areas of personal development

Different areas	N=32	
	f	%
A questioning mind	18	56.3
Raised awareness	17	53.13
Tolerance	12	37.5
Self-confidence	8	25
Perceived role	5	15.63

As seen in Table 3, 56.3% of the respondents developed personally by adopting a questioning mind. They appear to have become more critical thinkers as a result of their language learning experience. When asked in what ways they thought they had become

more critical, some students stated that the kind of readings they were assigned by their English teachers exposed them to new ideas which challenged their conventional beliefs regarding issues such as abortion and cultural superiority. Twelve respondents (37.5%) were also identified to have developed greater tolerance towards alternative beliefs. Some noted that they became more accepting.

Others were found to adjust their aims as language learners and individual members of their communities. They pointed out the role of the tasks they were assigned in promoting their lifelong learning skills. They were encouraged to go beyond what was presented to them and to be active agents of their own learning: *"My teacher inspired me to be more responsible for my own learning."* said one student. Others appear to have gained more self-confidence as a result of improved skills. Eight participants (25%) noted that they gained more world-knowledge, and this contributed to their interpersonal skills. In the words of a student, "*When talking, I now refer to what I am learning here. When I tell them that I have learned all this at the university, they listen to me more seriously.*"

Slightly more than half of the students (53.13%) indicated that they had a more developed personality as a result of having their awareness raised about environmental issues in class. One participant recalled an occasion when he raised his voice against an inappropriate behavior of a friend: "*A friend wanted to burn the recycling box, which I had to stop. Formerly, I did not worry about such incidences.*"

Some respondents' personal development was in terms of their new perception of roles. Five out of the 32 respondents started to perceive themselves more than students. Some participants made the following remarks: "*Before university, I was a son who was supposed to listen. But now my parents started to listen to me.*" "*Just being a learner of English is not enough. I feel [I need to] contribute to my immediate surrounding by taking an active part in social organizations.*" This appears to build the students' self-confidence and give them a new identity, which is clear evidence of TL experience.

Cultural Consciousness

The final emerging change was in terms of cultural consciousness. This was apparent in terms of both respondents' own culture and that of countries whose language they were learning. Table 4 summarizes data gathered on this theme.

Table 4. Cultural consciousness

Different aspects	N=32	
	f	%
Foreign culture	25	78.3
Own culture	11	34.4

As seen in Table 4, respondents had their consciousness raised in terms of other cultures. Some were happy to learn that what they were taught did not necessarily

reflect reality. One respondent said: *"Americans in the films are like models. It was interesting to read that obesity is a very common problem there."*

Some respondents also expressed their appreciation of learning the meanings of body-language in different cultures, leading them to increase their intercultural competency.

About one third of the respondents were also found to have been exposed to various local cultures they had just heard of. They appear to have become more accepting of people whom they had previously stereotyped and gained more knowledge about indigenous cultures, an example of which can be seen in the following excerpt: *"I would not imagine anything nice about having an extended family. But [during classroom discussion] my friend [Cenk] told me a lot of nice things about it."*

Taken together, these examples show that the students experienced some aspects of TL by having their meaning perspectives adjusted. They seem to have reframed their assumptions about other cultures through reflection on their preconceptions, providing evidence for the third stage of transformative learning experience where learners assess their assumptions.

c) Facilitators

The analysis of the data revealed that the participants' TL experience was facilitated by certain factors such as CIPs and language learning resources. Since the former is beyond the scope of this research, I will describe the findings related to the latter below. A summary of language learning resources identified can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Language learning facilitators

Facilitators	N=32	
	f	%
Teachers	27	84.38
Text-books	25	78.13
Discussion topics	24	75.00
Information technology	22	68.75
Writing assignments	5	15.63

The majority of students (84.38%) pointed out the role of their language teachers in helping them become aware of their meaning schemes and meaning perspectives by encouraging them to be active readers and have a questioning mind. One respondent said: "*Our teacher said we were university students so we needed to keep reading."* Another comment: "*The teacher always asked why. This made me evaluate my ideas."* These excerpts show that language teachers encouraged their students to think critically about the realities that surrounded them, and helped them change their meaning perspectives regarding what foreign language learning might mean.

About three quarters (78.13%) of the students, on the other hand, expressed that their text-books made them more insightful about the kinds of issues they would not normally be aware of. Some also remarked that learning grammar and vocabulary through content-rich books helped them gain world knowledge. This was found to be supported by the class discussions. When asked what made them helpful, one participant stated: "*Positive atmosphere encouraged me to speak my mind openly.*" This clearly indicates that the positive rapport created in the classroom can facilitate language learning and encourage students to be active agents of the learning process. In turn, this can have a determining effect on the students' (sub)conscious decisions whether they should keep proceeding through TL stages.

Use of information technology, namely the Internet, was another facilitator frequently mentioned (68.75%). The convenience factor was often mentioned: "*The Internet was always there when I needed to search for different arguments on different topics*."

Lastly, some participants (15.63%) mentioned that the writing assignments helped them gain new understandings. Among the frequently mentioned assignments were free writing, diary-keeping and formal essays, which seemed to improve the students' language skills as well as encourage them to face their 'negative' feelings towards English.

Discussion

The results of this study show that students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at a university preparatory programme were likely to experience certain aspects of TL. This is despite the finding that a relatively low number (25%) completed the whole process. Considering the intensity of a complete transformation and the complexities inherent in the process, this might be an expected result. The data gathered seem to suggest that the participants were offered the potential to experience certain levels of TL experience mainly because of the language curriculum and teaching philosophy adopted by the institution. Coupled with the challenges of a fresh start at university, the heavy content of the curriculum of the institution may have caused majority of the students to require more time to experience TL more comprehensively. The finding of a lower number of language learners completing the TL cycle is supported by some previous research. For instance, King (1997) found that only 32.5% of respondents demonstrated TL experience during their educational studies, although a later study (King, 2005) reported a much higher rate (66.8%) with ESL learners. On the other hand, Schwartz (2013), who used LAS with 59 adult language learners, found that only 15.3% of her participants had TL experiences.

The results of these studies suggest that a complete TL experience may be limited to a certain number of students in a given context. Brock (2010) also reports that the respondents in her study were engaged in critical reflection, but some did not necessarily change their beliefs or role-expectations and therefore did not experience the full cycle of TL. However, she warns that some of the further stages of TL might be experienced subconsciously, and people might go back and forth between the stages. This may be true for some of the participants of this current study, that is, some (sub)consciously avoided being involved in critical reflection on their previous experience due to intense feelings aroused in discussions. However, these learners

might choose to face such challenges through inner talk and be likely to face their feelings of insecurity at a later time when they feel more empowered.

Alternatively, some may not confront these feelings at all, and they may still be content with their life without having to face a disorienting dilemma. This attitude may occur as a result of subconscious thinking, and therefore it may not be possible to have learners verbalize their experiences. This was the case with the 15% of the students in this study who did not appear to be willing to start a TL journey at all. This, however, does not mean they did not or will not experience any aspects of TL throughout their studies at university. Mezirow (1985) warns that TL needs to be seen as a gradual process where the whole experience may take longer than expected. The fact that this current study involved EFL learners in a one-year programme may be considered a limitation of the study as one year may not be enough to detect language learners' TL experiences. Hence, following these students beyond the language programmes might yield more informative results. Brock (2010) also found that the levels of TL experienced by the respondents in her study could be as high as 75 per cent by the end of their fourth semester at university. This suggests that educators could offer content and activities that may spark a flame of TL at different stages of students' university experience if not in preparatory programmes.

This research also shows that the number of language learners progressing through the 10 TL stages appear to decrease step by step. One of several factors that may contribute to this is the fear of negative evaluations caused by peers' negative judgments about the learners themselves. Such a fear has the potential to lead learners to adopt avoidance strategies (Capan & Harun, 2012). Two other factors were the disturbances created by the mismatch with current beliefs and the formidable challenges that accompanied certain stages. It is critical for educators to be aware of such inhibitors so that they will not give up hope and keep encouraging their learners by providing a more supportive atmosphere. Herber & Mullins (2009), however, warn that not all learning experiences have to bring about dramatic changes; some can enjoy a better understanding of self, others and the world, which seems to support the findings of the current study regarding language learners' tendency to benefit from even a limited amount of TL experience.

The results of this study lend credence to the view that there may be more than one catalyst for TL at a time (Swimme, 2003). Although the respondents of the study expected some of the changes to take place, they did not seem to be fully ready to face more than one, which was found to make the process more challenging for some. There were, however, some who took the challenges with more ease.

The participants' involvement in an EFL programme appeared to have a determining effect on certain TL patterns. Firstly, the students did experience a disorienting dilemma created by their language learning experience. This was mainly caused by their previous experiences of rote-learning without much success. Another reason was the more science-oriented university entrance exams they had been preparing for, which discouraged them from having English as a priority. Taken together, the students' previous experiences seemed to reduce their self-confidence as language learners. Despite this, their engagement in classroom activities seemed to increase their desire for learning English and equipped them with language learning skills that empowered

them. King (2005) also found that the adult ESL learners started thinking that language learning was more fun and easier. Despite this, some learners were found to develop negative feelings about their native language. It is suspected that this occurred because of their feeling of limitedness when they spoke only Turkish. However, this could also be seen as a symptom of empowerment due to improved skills in a foreign language. These learners might need their instructors' guidance on how to think positively of being able to speak their mother tongue together with a new language.

The findings of earlier research (King, 2005; Peiying, 2012; Beaupre, 2012) concerning language learners' increased feelings of personal development were also apparent in this study. Some students were found to develop of critical thinking skills. A small number thought reflective writing tasks they were asked to perform helped them to become more tolerant towards nonconformist views. Hubbs & Brand (2005) note that reflective writing assignments also encourage students to be engaged in critical thinking and let them personalize the information from their readings. Magro (2003) also found that writing assignments in the form of personal narratives and creative writing helped ESL learners relate content to their life experiences, and therefore learning English was made more relevant. It is also true that when language learners use the target language to create meaningful responses, learning becomes more relevant. The role of reflective writing in assisting learners' transformative learning is clear in the literature. However, the low number of respondents in this study who referred to their reflective writing experience is important to note. This may be due to individual teachers' preferences of instructional activities. Also, writing in a foreign language may have been a challenging activity for some learners who might have opted for other forms of reflection. Their fear of grades from writing assignments may have also prevented some from developing positive feelings towards writing.

Some learners in this current study were found to acquire independent learning skills through assigned tasks. They also appeared to assume more civic responsibilities as a result of their increased awareness of environmental issues. This may lead one to consider that TL can benefit society through changes at an individual level.

An important facilitator of the language learners' TL experience was found to be their teachers, who encouraged them to raise their awareness of meaning schemes and to take actions to change them if needed. This appears to be in line with the principles of TL theory suggesting that teachers need to work with students and encourage them to have an open mind, seek information and construct personalized meanings (Schwartz, 2013). Similarly, King (2005) and Tahiri (2010) found that instructors played a key role in language learners' adaptation to TL experiences. In her support for language teachers' responsibilities for their students' transformation, Magro (2003) refers to Gee's view that "[language teachers] can accept their roles as persons who socialize learners into a world view that must be looked at critically, comparatively, and with a constant sense of the possibilities for change" (p. 23). However, Taylor (cited in Magro, 2003) warns that teachers' willingness to engage their students in TL experience may be hampered by their institutions' and students' lack of interest in TL.

Another facilitator that appeared to work well for some language learners in this study was content-based course-books used in the programme. The Beyond the Boundaries course-book series used in the institution cover themes from fields such as

Psychology, History, Science and Art, and aims to equip students with the language and background knowledge critical thinking skills in addition to language required for a successful academic life. Brown (2007) states that such an approach to language teaching increases intrinsic motivation and allows students to feel empowered simply because learners use a foreign language to deal with subjects that are important to their lives.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that language learners are likely to experience some sort of TL by being exposed to certain types of disorienting dilemmas which lead them to examine themselves, assess their beliefs and assumptions. It is also important to note that some might experience the full cycle of TL and come away with new perspectives, while some may not complete the full process. In both cases, learners may not make a conscious decision. Their subconscious mind can be affected by several factors such as their previous success, failures, relationships and cultures. This determines how they react in the face of challenges resulting from their involvement in TL experience. These challenges cannot be tackled haphazardly. However, the complexities of TL would make it difficult for educators to devise a plan to follow with a group of learners with different meaning schemes. This requires them to approach TL on a case-by-case basis.

In the case of language learning in a university preparatory programme, this poses challenges for instructors and educational planners as well as the learners themselves. Learners' journeys of transformation need to be recognized and supported with the use of carefully chosen content matter. Therefore, language schools cannot only aim at furnishing their learners with linguistic skills. It is a common practice to teach linguistic skills by using a combination of the four skills, namely reading, speaking, writing and listening. This offers the potential to tap into students' critical thinking skills. Based on the results of this study, it is proposed that curriculum of English language schools be composed of content matter that furnishes their students with skills to cope with transformation. They should include purposefully chosen topics and experiences that encourage students to question their assumptions and seek alternative actions.

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