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Persistence in English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs: Research Using the Method of Natural Variations

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Testing hypotheses derived from theory using experimental research designs with random assignment are extremely difficult to implement in operational settings such as adult literacy education programs. It may also be prohibitively expensive to conduct this sort of "gold standard" research.

For these reasons colleagues and I explored a different approach when we set out to test hypotheses from Functional Context Education theory in an operational context. In this case we followed a method used in sciences such as astronomy and biology and set out to test a hypotheses from FCE theory using the method of examining naturally occurring variations in adult literacy programs.

Some Concepts From Functional Context Education Theory

A basic tenet of Functional Context Education (FCE) theory is that adult literacy education ought to be based on what is relevant to the contexts of adults' lives. Three FCE principles derived from research on adult education and training are:

Explain what the students are to learn and why in such a way that they can always understand both the immediate and long term usefulness of the course content (facilitates entry into and persistence in the course; motivates learning).

Derive objectives from careful analysis of the explicit and tacit knowledge and skill needed in the home, community, academic, technical training, or employment context for which the learner is preparing (facilitates motivation, persistence, transfer).

Use, to the extent possible, learning contexts, tasks, materials, and procedures taken from the future situation in which the learner will be functioning (facilitates transfer).

The Importance of "Focus" to Persistence in ESL

In research on the persistence of adults in English as a Second programs, colleagues and I considered the foregoing basic tenet and principles and hypothesized that the reasons why adults frequently enroll in a course of study and then quickly drop out might have something to do with mismatches between what the adults want to learn and what programs actually offer.

We developed this concept of "focus" by considering that both adults and institutions can sometimes have very global, generalized purposes for education. In this case, adults may wish to attend educational programs just to improve themselves or to further their general education. In response, institutions may develop general education programs that have no particular focus but aim to provide adults an opportunity to develop their cognitive skills and broaden their knowledge.

On the other hand, there are some adults who have very specific goals in mind, such as getting a job in the electronics field. In this case, their focus is on getting a particular kind of job. If the institution can then offer them education and/or job training that they see is directly related to their goal, it is possible that they may be more motivated to complete such a focused course than a course in "general development."

The Study of Natural Variations in Adult ESL Programs

To explore the concept of "focus" on the part of adults and education programs, we took a two-pronged approach. First, we looked at the reasons that adult students gave for why they were attending English as a second language (ESL) education and the types of programs they were attending. We wanted to see, for instance, whether adults who were attending ESL programs having a particular focus, such as being vocationally-oriented, are more likely to give job-related reasons for attending ESL instruction than are adults enrolled in other types of courses, such as family-literacy oriented, or general academic or life oriented. Data from surveys of naturally occurring programs in the San Diego Community College District having these different foci indicated that this was indeed the case. The types of programs that adults were enrolled in reflected the major reason they had for enrolling in ESL classes.

In a second approach to try to better understand the role of focus in persistence, we looked at the course completion rates of adult students in three on-going vocationally oriented ESL (VESL) programs that differed with regard to the specificity of the vocational training component of the ESL instruction. Here we were interested in whether the extent to which a VESL course focused on actual job training and job placement, which was the major goal for adults taking the VESL courses, increased the likelihood that adults would persist in and complete the program, as hypothesized from FCE theory.

To find out if the relationship between the focus for taking an ESL course and the closeness of fit of the course to this focus might have some affect on course persistence and completion, we looked at three different naturally occurring VESL classes in the Continuing Education Division of the San Diego Community College District. One VESL program was a 10 week, six hour a day program for Electronics Assembly that offered electronics-related English as a second language instruction for three hours in the morning and electronics assembly training for three hours in the afternoon. The program electronics instructor maintained close relationships to the electronics industry and was very strong in placing people in jobs at the end of the course. The other two VESL programs were full semester, 18 week programs, in which adults attended class for three hours a day. One of the VESL programs was solely focused on Office Technology but was of a general nature, not focused on any particular office in a real business and not aimed specifically at job placement. The other VESL program was a more general pre-vocational orientation to different job fields such as Office Technology, Automotive Trades, etc. It focused more on job readiness training, how to do a job interview, proper dressing for work, resume preparation, and so forth. Neither of these semester long programs had close links to job placement.

Data on persistence showed that , in general, the closer the match between the reasons of the adult students for taking the VESL course, in this case to get a job, and the focus of the program, in this case focusing directly on vocational training and finding jobs for students, the more likely the students were to complete the course. This was clearest for the VESL program that was six hours a day but only 10 weeks in duration. Almost 60 percent of the students who enrolled in week one of the 10 week course completed all ten weeks, and over 80 percent completed nine weeks (90 percent of the course), by which time many of them already had a job in electronics assembly.

In contrast, for the other two courses, both of which were three hours a day and 18 weeks long, the course with the focus on a particular job field (Office Technology) but not on actual job placement had a rate of persistence of about 70 percent at the nine week point (50 percent of course) compared to over 80 percent retention in nine weeks for the high focus course, and fewer than 40 percent completed the full 18 week semester. The general pre-employment type course with the least focus on specific jobs had a nine week retention rate of less than 60 percent and a course completion rate of just over 30 percent.

The foregoing data offer support for the hypothesis derived from the FCE principles that persistence will be greater in adult literacy programs when the program more closely matches the

interests of the adults taking it. Also, there is reason to suggest that courses that are brief as well as strongly focused might help increase completion rates. This is suggested by the fact that in all three courses completion rates were higher the fewer the number of weeks that the course went on. In the two 18 week, semester long courses, retention rates half way through the courses, at the end of nine weeks, were considerably higher than they were at the end of 18 weeks.

The Method of Natural Variations

The method of studying naturally occurring variations in adult literacy programs is considerably less expensive and more feasible to implement than experimental designs. Though not as rigorous as true experiments, it can be used in testing hypotheses derived from adult literacy theory. The paucity of such research may result at least in part from the lack of adult literacy theory that has been formulated explicitly enough to derive hypotheses that are testable.

Theory of this sort is crucial for the development of validated knowledge for the general advance of adult literacy education because it provides guidance beyond the specifics of particular books, technologies, management practices and other operational details of programs. The latter are too numerous and change too often to make it practicable to conduct experimental tests of the relative effectiveness of programs comprised of combinations of such particulars.

As Kurt Lewin said, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

Reference

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