

## Fostering Transformative Learning through EFL Learners' Real-Life Experiences: Associating Words to the World

<sup>1</sup>Esmaeel Ali Salimi\*

<sup>2</sup>Maryam Hadaeghi Azad

Research Paper

IJEAP- 2312-2014

Received: 2023-10-01

Accepted: 2023-12-28

Published: 2023-12-31

**Abstract:** Transformative learning is a process of revision in the way learners make sense of their experiences. This qualitative study seeks to investigate how EFL learners' life experiences prompt them to engage in transformative learning and to explore the learners' account of willingness or resistance to perspective changes. To this end, 126 Iranian EFL learners were recruited through purposive sampling. Two instruments, including narrative writing and a distance semi-structured interview, were used for data collection. Thematic analysis of the learners' narrative writings revealed that the learners experienced TL through having good or bad experiences, unexpected events, moving to a new place, relationships and support of others, contemplating, examining, and searching for the truth of the notions in the world. Moreover, both learners' own experiences and those of others facilitated the development of awareness, confidence, and the capability to create a new meaning from an experience, which in turn enhanced the potential for transformative learning. Thematic analysis of interviews with 20 students demonstrated 'convincing with valid evidence' as the most critical factor behind perspective change. Factors that accounted for EFL learners' resistance to perspective change included fear, pride, experience, and the character of the person, the event, and the context.

**Keywords:** Critical reflection, Desire for change, Fostering transformative learning, Real-life experiences, Transformative learning theory

### Introduction

Over the last decades, the field of English language teaching and learning has undergone enormous changes and movements. It has moved from a transmissional (teacher-centered approach) and transactional (collaborative approach) to a transformative orientation which intends to prepare students to find their own inner voices and powers, discover others' perspectives, and reflect on one's own perspective to make meaning (McGregor, 2008). In this approach, learners, in order to learn, need to experience and realize that the new information differs from their existing knowledge of the world.

Transformation phenomenon is an attractive topic of many disciplines, such as psychology, education, and religious studies (Hoggan, 2015). Transformative learning is a process of revision in the way learners make sense of their experiences (Hoggan, 2016). Transformative learning is defined as "a change in ourselves, our emotions, our thoughts, our worldviews, and our relationships to others toward a more just society" (Mezirow & Taylor 2009, p. 35). It is a way of changing an individual's perspective, character, or behavior that encourages a deeper understanding through an ongoing process of critically and creatively questioning and reflecting on one's own assumptions and the norm of perception or action (Cranton 2006). It is a process that describes the learners' transformation of habits of mind through examination of their assumptions or process for problem solving (Mezirow,

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate professor of applied linguistics (corresponding author), easalimi@atu.ac.ir; English Language and Literature Department, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> PhD candidate of TEFL, maryamhadaeghi@yahoo.com; English Language and Literature Department Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

2012). Transformative learning, a way of reforming or revising how one learns, is particularly related to adult learning (Mezirow, 1997). As adults experience various ways of learning, they may develop their habits of mind—the ways of thinking or behaving they are habituated to—in times of change (Reinsfield, 2018).

Mezirow (2000) defined learning as a process through which adult learners make new interpretations on the basis of meaning gained from their experiences. As the new experience is adapted into frames, it either strengthens the perspective or gradually weakens it, depending on the degree of congruency (Mezirow, 1997, 2003). This can be done through reflection, and particularly critical reflection, to look back on experiences in a way that people learn from them. Any experience has the potential to transform individuals, their old beliefs and values, their assumptions, and the way they view themselves and the world. In other words, any experience is “potentially a trigger or catalyst for change” (Jost, 2018, p. 3) and can facilitate the process of transformative learning.

In spite of growing recognition of the significance of experience in (Hiratsuka, 2022; Hoggan, 2016; Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Mezirow, 1997; Taylor & Cranton, 2013), scant research attention has been paid to the learners’ real-life experiences in EFL contexts. It is vital to shed light on the experiences of EFL learners because transformative literature demonstrates that transformative learning can occur in the classroom (Badara, 2011; Brock & Abel, 2012), and the classroom can potentially provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their past experiences and to change their viewpoints toward themselves and the world. Allowing students to be together in the world of the classroom and providing a safe environment for them to share their alternative opinions with each other creates relationships and connections among them that facilitate an immersion in lives different from their own, which is a prerequisite of significant learning (Pham et al., 2021; Sohn, 2021). Similarly, through reflection, which is an essential element of TL, students can expand what they have already learned to improve their learning (Deti et al., 2023). Reflection on values, attitudes, and emotions allows students to renew their appreciation of the notions of the world, to construct their own knowledge or conceptions, to explore experiences, and to develop their understanding (Hyeler, 2015).

In fact, in the classroom and beyond, learners have innumerable experiences, which may provide opportunities to scrutinize new answers and perspectives and offer the potential to lead to transformative learning (King, 2009). Besides, one of the significant tasks of educators in adult learning contexts is to create situations that engage learners and “ease the transition of adults’ meaning structures” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 2). Therefore, to prevent resistance and obstacles to transformative learning, educators need to enhance learners’ willingness to change.

However, while for most adult educators, challenging learners’ prior assumptions and encouraging students to critically assess their prior experiences are valuable and crucial in the process of transformative learning, the results of the EFL courses for most learners, as they go about learning, will be the prescribed materials of the course. Likewise, in the Iranian EFL context, English language teaching and learning are restricted in which the teaching methods are often based on the ‘transmissional approach’ and ‘banking model of education’ in which students are silent and passive in the process of learning. Under the circumstances, higher thinking, critical reflection, and assessment of learners’ assumptions and expectations, necessary in the transformative approach, are scarcely taken into consideration. In fact, working with macro-Learning skills in the EFL classrooms remains no opportunity for extra-activities. In response to this concern and the noteworthiness of deeper understanding of the learners’ real experiences to foster transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997, 2000; Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Cranton, 2013), this study aims at investigating the role of two central constructs of transformative learning, including experience and the desire to change. The way learners’ real-life experiences assist them in developing transformative learning and understanding the reasons for learners’ inclination or disinclination toward perspective transformation, what brings them to the gap between a critical reflection and a perspective change or the edge of the transformation.

The findings of this study may be insightful for educators interested in transformative teaching and significant learning and for guiding them to challenge students’ past assumptions within

a supportive, encouraging, risk-free, safe, and sound learning environment while operationalizing the key elements of transformative learning.

## Literature Review

### Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory, first introduced by Mezirow (1978), is established by its practical liability to adult learners' growth and social development (Fleming, 2022). Mezirow (1978) defined transformative learning as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (p. 58-59). He identifies ten steps for transformative learning. The first step towards transformation is experiencing a disorienting dilemma that begins with awareness and proceeds to an action in which an individual first thinks of his or her old assumptions, then moves through a process of seeing things from a new perspective, and finally acts in novel ways (Schnepfleitner & Ferreira, 2021). While Mezirow (1997) considered a disorienting dilemma as the catalyst for potential change, Tisdell (2012) described the disorienting dilemma as an experience that provokes individuals to question their existing frames of reference.

In recent research, Fleming (2022) argued that life events may impel adults to question what has been taken for granted, including what individuals acquire from both their life histories and from society and culture. These events may aid adults in accumulating novel and worthy meaning by expanding, improving, or transferring the existing meaning or frame of reference. Mezirow (1997) recommends teachers provide opportunities for learners to participate effectively in classroom discourse, which is needed to validate what and how one understands or arrives at the best judgment related to a belief that is the ideal condition of education.

In this sense, learning is a social process, and discourse becomes central to making meaning. Effective discourse depends on how well the educator can create a situation in which those participating ... to be free from coercion; ... to become critically reflective of assumptions; to be empathic and open to other perspectives; to be willing to listen and to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view; and to be able to make a tentative best judgment to guide action (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). In this quote, Mezirow emphasizes that the critical elements of significant learning include discourse, critical reflection, experience, empathy, a safe environment, and a desire for change. The focus of the present study is on two pivotal components: experience and the desire for change, as they are the most imperative components in transformative learning which have not yet been thoroughly explored (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Kroth & Cranton, 2014).

### *Experience*

Experience is the most significant concept in transformative learning and adult education. Experiences, including past experiences, cultural experiences, and contextual experiences, are the primary means of transformation because the essence of learning involves the revision of experience's meaning (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Mezirow (1987) referred to the experiences that trigger and lead to transformation as disorienting dilemmas. Taylor & Cranton (2013) also define experience as "everything that has happened to a learner between birth and death" (p. 36) and the prerequisite and basic component for understanding transformative learning. They also suggest that researchers need to consider transformative experiences in context in order to prospect the mediating aspects of narrated transformative experiences. According to Mezirow (1997), experience forms the basis for habitual expectations (ideologies, beliefs, and values) and creates the lens through which learners perceive, interpret and make meaning of their world. Nerstrom (2014) expounds on experience as everything that occurs in an individual's lifetime. "It is the impetus of our learning and belief patterns", the result of the interaction between individuals and the environment, "from which learning- such as

knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights” emerges (p. 328). Based on their experiences, individuals construct assumptions that embrace their beliefs and values and shape their worldview. In the process of transformative learning, individuals first make meaning of their experiences and amend that meaning on the basis of their new experiences that are different from their prior experiences. In fact, transformative learning is a critical way in which learners consciously make meaning of their life experiences.

### *Desire to Change*

Learners’ willingness or desire to change refers to the steps and willingness of people to move from reflection to transformation, which assists them to be open and engaged in such learning experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Actually, people’s assumptions cannot be transformed by coercion, but they need to be involved in situations that induce them to alter their perspectives. Challenges and critical reflection can help learners question their primary beliefs and assumptions about the world and consider new perspectives. According to Mezirow (2012), adult education aims at helping adults find their potential for changing into learners who are more responsible, liberated, and self-directed.

### **Fostering Transformative Learning**

Fostering transformative learning refers to creating opportunities for learners to engage in alternative perspectives freely, to perceive contextual impacts, and to probe more precise and valid information about the notions at hand. For Mezirow, “a central activity of adult education is the fostering of transformative learning” (Taylor, 2000, p.5) and individuals’ experiences are pivotal to facilitating transformative learning (Taylor, 2009). Similarly, Kroth and Cranton (2014) proposed that the core concept of transformative learning is that “individuals make meaning of their experiences and revise that meaning based on new experiences that are discrepant with their previous points of view” (p. 27). They stressed the intersection between transformative learning and storytelling and contended that as people make sense of their life stories, the stories can either strengthen their current beliefs or provide disorienting dilemmas that “have the potential to become transformative” (p. 27)

To foster transformative learning, Cranton (2016) also proposes suggestions for educators to show their concerns and support to students, such as sharing personal stories and experiences and encouraging them to do the same. She claims that demonstrating interest in students’ life stories can encourage transformative learning. In addition, teachers can use the shared stories and narratives with the students because it can create trust and mutual understanding that provide a positive relationship between teachers and students (Farsad & Modarresi, 2023). A positive teacher-learner relationship create an advantageous source of support and prompts L2 learners’ motivation to demonstrate some needed interpersonal skills (Amini et al., 2019). Keen and Woods (2016) argue that having a respectful relationship with students can aid the transformative learning process.

Kroth and Cranton (2014) argued that when students with different perspectives engage in learning processes based on their personal life stories and learning, they appreciate when their own transformative learning occurs, which in turn helps them to take the necessary steps to be responsible for their learning. They also emphasized the powerful potential of transformative learning stories in adult educators’ practice to involve learners in their personal transformation. “Through writing stories about their own experiences, learners express their views, which are often followed by a far deeper sharing than might be found in “face-to-face interactions” (p. 103).

A number of research studies have been conducted either on transformative learning or fostering transformative learning. For instance, Brock and Abel (2012) conducted a study in which 256 undergraduate business students described incidences of transformative learning. Accordingly, among factors considered as fostering transformative learning, writing and talking about concerns, deep concentrated thinking, personal journaling, internships, and self-evaluation were significant. Besides, teacher challenge was reported as a critical factor in providing a high-level learning condition.

Kloubert (2020) explored the prerequisites and obstacles of perspective transformation in Eastern European societies. The study demonstrated that certain manifestations of cognitive development and autonomous thinking are indispensable for being engaged in critical reflection and rational discourse for perspective change.

Sohn (2021) developed a phenomenological case study of a graduate seminar and examined the details of in-class relationships between students, who varied in terms of gender, age, race, religion, and field of study, over the course of a semester. Such relationships were revealed to be valuable to fostering transformative learning as they enhanced teacher-student relationships. One instance of a transformative learning study in the Iranian context is Zarbafian et al.'s (2020), which explored the Iranian EFL students and their teachers' views on the factors related to the implementation of Transformative Education (TE). The feasibility of the integration of TE with Dynamic Assessment (DA) in the Iranian EFL setting was also investigated. 105 Iranian university students majoring in the English language participated in this study. Students reported that perspective of transformation happened in the classrooms through the students' support, challenges from the teacher, classroom discussion and dialogue, and class projects.

A gap in the literature lies in understanding how learners' real-life experiences foster the process of transformative learning. To describe the way learners usually engage in the process of transformative learning, this study aims at scrutinizing the unnoticed matter, exploring the reasons for learners' perspective transformation—the desire to change—examining the factors accountable for individuals to revise their perspectives, and identifying whether it is because of the characteristic of an event, the characteristic of a person, or the situation in which a person is in his or her life (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Therefore, this study aims at examining the factors associated with an individual's transformative learning experiences. What do people experience that leads them to question their existing frames of reference? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to probe the following questions:

**Research Question One:** How can EFL learners' life experiences lead them to transformative learning?

**Research Question Two:** Why do some EFL learners tend to revise their previous perspectives, but some others tend not to?

## Methodology

### Design of the Study

In conjunction with the set-up research questions and goals, a phenomenological qualitative research design (Creswell, 2012) was deemed the most suitable for the current study because it allowed the researchers to be aware of the participants' frames of reference, to find out their new ideas, concepts, and interpretations, and to appreciate the meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Besides, the qualitative data collected via interviews can probe the perspectives, stories, experiences, feelings, and behaviors of participants, which provides a deeper and more detailed understanding of the participants' perspectives.

### Participants

The participants of the present study were 126 Iranian male (N= 66) and female (N= 60) students, ranging in age from 19 to 24. They were selected through purposive sampling from the population of University of Guilan, Iran. The participants were the students who enrolled in a general English course that was taught by one of the researchers for 16 sessions, 150 minutes each session. They were undergraduate students majoring in sociology, geography, accounting, and agricultural engineering. The rationale for selecting this group was that the transformative approach can be introduced into the university curriculum without arousing too much resistance, and it is possible and effective to include students from a variety of disciplines in such a process (Jackson, 2008).

## Instruments

The instruments used in the present study included narrative writing and interviews. As data collection through written narratives seems to be time-saving for gathering a considerable amount of data simultaneously (Nugrahenny, 2016), the focus of the current study was on the written form of narratives. The rationale for selecting this instrument was that the real story is a “portal to understanding transformative learning and understanding ourselves and others (Kroth & Cranton, 2014, p. 107). Adult learners’ real-life stories can act as a more powerful tool for learning than only “teaching the principles, concepts, and research around a topic” (Kroth & Cranton, 2014, p. 32). Interview was another instrument used in this study as it is a fruitful source of data collection that offers valuable insights and understandings into the depth of many research questions (Roulston, 2019). First, a set of interview questions was created by the researchers, and then, to ensure that the content appropriately covered the purpose of the research, the items of the interviews were reexamined by nine language experts in terms of appropriateness of the language, content relevance, and content coverage.

## Research Procedures

In the present study, during the semester, to enrich students’ learning experiences, a low-anxiety learning environment was created in which students could freely articulate their stories and experiences without worrying about writing exams. Besides, prior to data collection, the students were informed about the aims of the research. Moreover, a consent form was given to the participants to ensure that they were voluntarily involved in the study. They were assured that their participation would remain confidential, and the study just sought their opinions concerning the purpose of the study, and their stories would be used in the research report anonymously.

To elicit learners’ real-life stories and to appreciate how learners’ real-life experiences assist them in experiencing transformative learning, a real-life story was first introduced to the students. It was the real story of one of the best physicians in the world, who wrote about his childhood in his autobiography to thank the teacher who changed the course of his life with a clever action. It was about a student who was always humiliated by his teacher and classmates, but amazingly, he was encouraged by a smart substitute teacher who made him progress and succeed by strengthening his self-confidence. Then, the students were required to express their viewpoints about the teacher, the impact of his behavior on the student, and to write (in English) and share their own or others’ real-life stories that they had experienced in their lives and to explain if something had changed the course of their lives, their perspectives, or their previous assumptions toward the word. However, due to ethical issues, they did not have to share their experiences; only those who desired to do so handed in their life-stories to the researcher. Learners were required to reflect and express their opinions toward stories that were presented in the classroom. Furthermore, during the course, as students shared their experiences or viewpoints with their peers, they were dealt with in a way that indicated that what they experienced was valid and meaningful.

At the end of the course, 20 students who experienced transformative learning (according to their narrative writings) and were willing to attend the distance semi-structured interviews were recruited as interview subjects. As a distance interview did not necessarily require face-to-face interaction and was very affordable in terms of logistics and budget, it took place one interviewee at a time via WhatsApp. The interviews took about 15- 30 minutes on average. With the interviewees’ permission, the interviews were recorded by a digital voice recorder for transcription and analysis. The data was collected until it reached saturation, and this is one of the reasons why twenty participants were considered sufficient for the interview.

## Data Analyses

To analyze the data, the students' writings were arranged around descriptions of themes and patterns that were common across individuals' stories. In this process, patterns of repetition or a single case of a participant's account of an event, memory, or experience were collected as transformative learning. According to Creswell (2012), thematic analysis is the method of data analysis used by the researchers for the required data to be extracted from the interviews. The researchers followed Creswell's six interrelated steps to analyze and interpret the collected data. The data were first organized, transcribed, and coded through identifying text segments to assign code labels to the segments based on the related meaning. Then, these codes were used to describe the central phenomenon and to set broader themes as the main findings of the study. Finally, the themes were discerned using the frequency count.

## Results

### Results of the First Research Question

#### *Findings of Learners' Real-Life Experiences*

To illustrate the details of the findings, some students' stories are presented below: (The capital letters stand for the first letter of the students' names). Student H narrated the story of her friend, considered to be the best friend she had ever had, but after a while she realized that she was very jealous and a tale-bearer who told her secrets to others. "At that point, I realized that ... I needed to be more careful in choosing a friend, and I ought not to share my secrets with anyone." Having a bad experience induced H to be wiser and more vigilant when choosing a friend.

Student S narrated a story from her childhood and explained that she could not get good grades and was not interested in school, but her teacher's support, kindness, attention, and assistance helped her to be a top and outstanding student in the school, and as a result, she became more interested in school and education.

For student G, something that affected her life for a while was the pandemic. She and her family were infected with the virus (COVID-19) and had a hard time because of that. It took them two months to recover, and she got depressed after the disease. "This pandemic and the damn virus have changed the lives of many people! Now, I'm stressed that something bad will happen! I had never thought a virus would affect my life."

Student A narrated the story that changed her life- a disease that led to the death of her father. For student A, her father was a man she loved deeply and admired extremely. The death of her father caused a drastic change in her thinking about the world and her personality. First, it made her a depressed girl, but after a while, it made her a strong person with determination and self-confidence. In fact, what made the girl free from despair was her love for her mother and fulfilling her father's wishes and desires.

Student D narrated his story of an experience that made him change his beliefs regarding motorcycling: I always adored motorcycling... I usually rode a motorcycle with a friend who was my neighbor, but one day my friend had a terrible accident while riding a motorcycle, and he died. From that day on, I was really scared.... After that, not only did I stop riding a motorcycle, but I hated doing that.

Student P also narrated a story in which the death of her young brother made her change her viewpoints toward life and the world. "After my brother's death, I realized that life was too short, and death does not come only to the elderly. It made me appreciate my life, my possessions, my

acquaintances, and the opportunities in my life more.” The reason that the students D and P changed their perspectives toward the world was the death of someone they loved.

Student H explained how he became more aware of his surroundings in a more mindful way and how he changed his outlook toward the world: When I was 17 years old, I experienced strange days on which I was very sad and hopeless. I had no specific goals. Later, I met Dr. X on social media. He helped me to change my life-style totally. Then I decided to exercise and swim regularly. I wanted to change my beliefs, thoughts, and lifestyle and so on. After that, I started to learn: 1. To be kind, 2. Love myself, 3. Not to judge others, 4. Not to be jealous, 5. To believe in God, and..... 6. I started to pray. ... I understood if I trust myself, the best will happen to me!

Although student H did not explain the dilemma that had depressed him, he mentioned that he had experienced strange and bad days when he was only 17 years old. With the help of contemplative processes suggested by a doctor, student H reached a state of mindfulness where he enhanced his awareness of his thoughts, feelings, and understanding.

Student O described that when he was a teenager, he was very stubborn and obstinate. But then he understood that he had destroyed friendships and lost many of his friends because of his behavior. So, he figured that he had to change his behavior if he wanted to keep his friends.

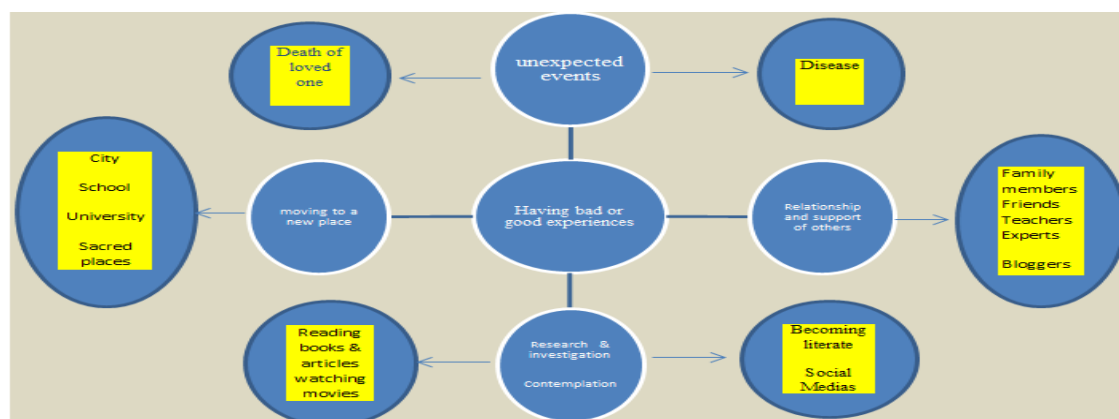
Student F explained how she was impressed by her mother’s thoughts: “She always told me that women were not as valuable as men. ... Women must be obedient to men. .... Woman's life without marriage is worthless.” She pointed out, by probing and researching and becoming literate, her mother's ideas were no longer acceptable to her, and she changed her opinions and perspectives thoroughly.

Student B described her trip to one of the holy cities and how that trip changed her beliefs. After that trip, she decided to pray and wear a veil (Chador), though this caused her to be ridiculed by some of her friends and acquaintances.

The major findings of the students’ real-life stories showed that some of them experienced TL through in various ways including good or bad experiences, unexpected events (death of a beloved one, disease), moving to a new place (school, university, city, a sacred place), relationships and support of others (family members, friends, teachers, experts), contemplation, and probing and searching for the truth of the notions in the world (through reading books and articles, watching movies, following social media and bloggers). Figure 1 represents the synopsis of circumstances that contributed to the learners’ transformative experiences.

**Figure1**

*Circumstances Contributed to Learners’ Transformative Experiences*





*Findings of the interviews*

As the aim of this study was to probe how EFL real-life stories lead them to transformative learning, a set of interview questions was arranged to examine the interviewees' responses, which involved the formation of an opinion, people and events that shaped their past assumptions, people and events and experiences that triggered a change, what supported them in the processes of changing an idea, and the role of experience in this regard. All interviewees were unanimous that during childhood, parents and family members, the society and culture they were born and raised in, had the most significant role, but in the period of adolescence and youth, friends and peers, had the most effective role in shaping or even changing their assumptions. They also mentioned the positions of experience, perusing books, magazines, and articles, watching movies, following social media, advertising, and interaction with bloggers, experts, and celebrities to form or alter their assumptions. For instance, student K described factors that shaped his ideas: "In forming our assumptions, our families, societies, conventions, and historical background have effective roles, but in adolescence and youth, people may seek to discover the facts, and of course, friends play an important role in this period." Student M also explained that from childhood, her mother taught her that humans are descendants of Adam and Eve, and she had always thought so, but when she entered the university, the professor of anthropology introduced Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to them. "He presented evidence that made me realize that what I had always thought about the creation of man was wrong ...." She was affected by her professor and believed that he was an expert and that his statements were based on a lot of evidence derived from credible and valid books. As a result, unlike her mother, her professor convinced her with valid reasons, proofs, and evidence.

All interviewees asserted that the experiences they had undergone in their lives or the experiences of other people were effective in changing their perspective toward the notions of the world. For instance, student F declared that "our assumptions may not be based on facts; .... So, based on our new experiences, our assumptions develop and we make decisions accordingly." Student H claimed that, as we go through life, we experience different things, and we learn more about ourselves and others: "Experience helps me to understand my strengths, weaknesses, abilities..., and this understanding will help me to become a better person and to be more successful in my life." He also declared that new experiences may change past assumptions based on past experiences or old, stale ideas. He believed that people need to reflect, rethink, and challenge their past assumptions because they can stop them from progressing toward their goals. Student R believed that people need to change their past perspectives and assumptions if they want to grow because "Our personal experiences may provide us opportunities for learning and growth, and can teach us lessons and equip us to deal with problems in the future." Similarly, student S believed that both good and bad experiences can open our eyes to new challenges, help us "see the various notions in the world with a new lens," and train us "to be a better person in the society." Student Z said, "To change my perspective, I have to reach a stage where I am absolutely convinced." Student M acknowledged other factors that persuaded him to undergo perspective transformation, such as investigation and contemplation. He explained that "we need time and experience to change our assumptions. I had a lot of philosophical investigations .... I read a lot of books..., I searched on the internet and realized that nothing is absolute in the world."

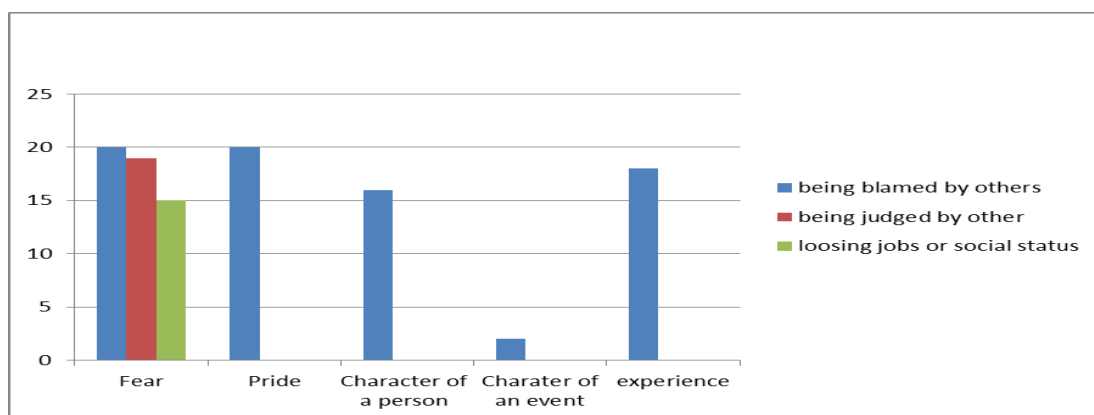
All in all, the interviewees pointed out that perspective change may not occur unless they are convinced with valid evidence and adequate reasons. To answer the first research question, the findings of the interview demonstrated that both the students' own experiences and the experiences of other people (whether bad or good) help them to see the notions of the world from a new angle and to challenge and reflect on their old and stale assumptions. Experiences also equip them to deal with problems and help them to learn and be wiser, to be aware, to grow, and to be a better person.

## Results of Second Research Question

The second question of the study aimed at investigating the reasons for EFL learners' willingness or resistance to perspective change and examining their feelings after a perspective change. All interviewees proposed that the most significant factor in perspective change is being convinced by valid evidence. However, sometimes some people resist changing their previous beliefs for various reasons. Factors that the students accounted for learners' resistance to change their past beliefs included fear (i.e., fear of being blamed by others, fear of being judged by others, fear of losing a job or social status), pride and selfishness, lack of sufficient experiences and knowledge, characteristics of a person (one's personality and character), and characteristics of an event or condition. Figure 2 represents the frequency of factors associated with individuals' disinclination to perspective change, as mentioned by the interviewees.

**Figure 2**

*Factors Associated with Individuals' Disinclination to Perspective Change*



Some students' ideas are presented below. Student S: They do not want to admit that the path they have taken so far was wrong, but for me, if I change my incorrect ideas, I will be surprised by how I have not thought about this so far! Then, I will feel good, and I will also try to inform others.

Student M claimed, "They are afraid of being judged by the others. They may be so arrogant." Student S stated, "Some people are overconfident or timid. They are afraid of change because a part of their lives comes into question." Student L argued, "Due to a lack of experience and knowledge, they resist accepting new ideas." Student F exclaimed, "They are afraid of losing their family members, friends, or social positions, especially when those issues are related to their religions, ... For me, fear is the main reason." Student N noted, "Changing my perspectives, sometimes I feel alienated from my family." Student B talked about her trip to a holy city and said that after the trip, she decided to wear a veil, but her family and friends apposed her and tried to dissuade her. After a while, she lost some of her friends. However, she was happy and satisfied. She also remarked that if she found the correct and right response to her unknown or little-known queries, she would certainly say, "I wish I had understood these issues earlier, and I will try to convince others to change their viewpoints." Student P also believed that changing the wrong beliefs is a great opportunity for us. Student Z maintained that the societies in which a person grows, as well as the historical background of a society, and the superstitions of people are all influential in forming or changing a person's beliefs. "Some societies are too restricting to allow people to change their ideas," he stated.

All interviewees claimed that they would be satisfied and would have a pleasant feeling if they changed their past wrong assumptions, except three students who believed that changing past

ideas might cause fear and hesitation for at least a while. For instance, student Y stated, “Sometimes a hasty decision to change a mindset can have a bad effect; it may cause regret or a sense of hopelessness, but I think it will be a temporary feeling.” Student S said, “Sometimes a person may be mistreated or expelled from the community, which can cause the person to be hesitant about changing his or her views.” Student K asserted that he would be confused or hesitant for a while due to his perspective change. However, they were all unanimous that the feeling was temporary and would not last forever.

### Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to unfold how learners’ real-life experiences induced them to engage in transformative learning. Findings of this study revealed that learners experience perspective change and transformative learning in various ways, including relationships and support of others such as teachers, experts, family, and friends, etc., occurrence of unexpected events such as a disease or the death of a loved one; and probing and investigating the notions of the world. Analyzing the learners’ life experiences (narrative writings) and interviews showed that for most learners, their experiences caused them to question their past assumptions about the quality of life and the world. For instance, when the learners experienced events that were in contrast with what they had experienced before or when they faced ideas that failed to adjust their previous beliefs, attitudes, or habits, they tried to find out new ways of dealing with the concept. The findings of this study show that narrating students’ real-life stories helped them reflect on their previous experiences and, in turn, fostered the capacity for transformative learning. One factor mentioned as a transformative learning catalyst was the relationship and the support of other people. This confirms Mezirow’s statement that dialogue fosters transformative learning. Mezirow (1997) propounded that the interaction of people in a safe, sound, and risk-free environment facilitates and fosters transformative learning. Therefore, the context of learning and teaching needs more teacher-student mutual trust and appreciation, respect, truthfulness, positive interpersonal relationships, and affection (Estaji et al., 2023).

As the findings of this study uncovered, all interviewees emphasized the impressiveness of their life experiences to induce a change in their assumptions. They also mentioned the importance of perusing books and articles, watching movies, and following social media that catalyze transformative learning processes. Therefore, individuals receive uncritical convictions, information, and assumptions around “themselves and the world at an early age” from parents, friends, “community members”, instructors, and other significant people in their lives. They usually “think and do things” they have purposefully or inadvertently acclimatized in proportion to their setting or culture. As individuals augment their experiences, they try to evolve their presuppositions, biases, and behaviors, which lead them to approach new ideas and perspectives and “alternative ways of thinking” (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 65).

This study also shows that transformative learning may derive from unexpected events such as a disease or the death of a loved one. For instance, the current COVID-19 pandemic was taken by some students as an example of transformative learning in which the pandemic suddenly impelled them to change their life styles, outlooks of the world, and those of others (Chiroci, 2022; Marmarosh et al., 2020; Vos, 2021). As for student G, who was worried that something bad would happen in her life again. For some students, the death of a loved one changed their outlook toward the world. Lundgren and Poell (2016) considered changes in the way people see the world as a perspective change. It also changed their personalities and made them more confident and determined. For most students who were happy with their perspective change, it was pleasant as it opened their eyes and helped them to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, to grow, and to be a better person in the world. This finding supports a study by Kartika et al. (2022) that found perspective change is associated with self-awareness. Furthermore, self-awareness heightened the learners’ confidence. Hoggan (2016) also claimed that the change is not only associated with becoming different but also with becoming better. Pomeroy and Oliver (2021) claim that perspective change is associated with changes in the way we see or think about ourselves. It also helps individuals to alter the way they

usually treat others, as in the case of student H, who decided to change her behavior toward others and be more mindful and attentive to trusting someone.

Another way of transformative learning, as mentioned by some students, was probing and being more literate. This finding confirmed Mezirow's "aha moment" when a new meaning is conveyed to a prior experience or when an old meaning is reinterpreted due to disorientation. However, sometimes a disorienting dilemma does not justify the perspective transformation. The seeds of new adaptation may be planted in childhood, and the new orientation develops gradually and bit by bit until a full transformation occurs (Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Nohl, 2015). As in the case of student Y, whose grandfather was a genuine and loving man that their family and friends always respected and reminded him of. Student Y, who loved his grandfather, decided to be loved by people just like him. Therefore, transformative learning may occur either consciously or unconsciously without a disorienting dilemma "when a new practice is added to old habits" (Nohl, 2015, p. 45).

Concerning the second research question related to the reasons for learners' resistance to perspective change, the following elements were considered significant: fear, pride, sufficiency or lack of experience, the personality or character of an individual who is basically not willing to admit that one part of their life path was wrong, and the character of an event or context.

The major source from which the learners accounted for resistance to perspective change was fear. In fact, fear was known as the main cause for adults' struggle to proceed on to the phase of standing outside oneself and to think or act differently from other people because people are usually afraid of being considered "odd, awkward", or mad and subsequently "losing others' respect". As a result, adults often prefer to be silent or not change their viewpoints. Additionally, change often offers "a deviation from the past," and people may be unwilling to change their minds when the given ideas or second assumptions are "new, unknown," unfamiliar, or undetermined (Jackson, 2008, p. 41). Thus, it is not surprising that those who are associated with the last version of an idea are probably defensive about it to protect their previous beliefs. Additionally, sometimes individuals choose a bad condition rather than a pleasant one because they do not like to step into an unknown situation. Although Gough (2003) propounds that people cannot get outside their social architecture in order to delineate or analyze it objectively, Jackson (2008) argues that it is possible with both individuals and with groups pursuing transformative learning (cited in Jackson, 2008). He also emphasized, it depends on an individual's previous "experience of handling cognitive dissonance." If someone reflects and raises a doubt about their prior assumptions and accepts that they are only assumptions rather than facts, they will stand outside. However, it is not simple, and it may need the help of others (p. 42). Likewise, the findings of this study affirm that sometimes it is uneasy for adults to change their prior assumptions; however, it depends upon the individuals and their experiences of dealing with the dissonances. As the three interviewees asserted, they might feel doubt and confusion when changing their assumptions.

Another matter mentioned by most interviewees was that adults resist changing because of what they may lose. For instance, they may be afraid of losing jobs or positions in workplaces or even among their family members and friends. Especially when change requires a big shift of assumptions, people are often afraid that the new thoughts and beliefs are contrary to the wishes of family, friends, or their workplaces. This problem is mostly concerned with religious and political issues. Thus, it is reasonable that some learners resist undertaking perspective change. Besides, some interviewees mentioned that older people who are more experienced are usually more cautious and less pliable to change, while others considered lack of experience and knowledge as critical factors for resistance to change. Accordingly, learners' experiences can be a significant element in persuading learners to perspective change.

Another significant issue stressed by the students was the learner's character and personality. Some people strongly tend to hold on to their pre-existing assumptions and opinions, which link them to the world. If they are exposed to contentious issues, changing their outlook on the world may require them to sustain a high personal loss. In addition, some researchers who examine the ways people solve cognitive dissonance (the feeling of holding inconsistent ideas) realized that most of

them often reject or depreciate new and disagreeable information rather than to revise their worldviews or adjust them (Svoboda, 2017).

Pride, which pertains to the individual character, was also mentioned as a disincentive for individuals to look at the world with a different lens. Adult learners and adolescents cannot usually embrace the idea that what they had always thought was wrong because they have to accept that the path they have taken so far has been wrong as well. Mezirow (1987) considers the emancipatory interests of people accountable for helping them to be free from forces that restrict their perspectives and limit their lives. The findings of the current study indicated that the characteristics of a person, as well as those of an event, the conditions, and the culture in which individuals live, were impressive enough to motivate and persuade them to re-examine their past perspectives. This finding also confirms Kloubert's (2020) claim that social heterogeneity and plurality are critical conditions for perspective transformations. Some societies (e.g., totalitarian societies) strive to create a homogenized community that inhibits people from being exposed to alternative concepts or to be allowed to expand their perspectives.

Another critical matter declared by interviewees was their feelings and satisfaction after changing their viewpoints. Despite the students' assertions, looking at their own new choices with an optimistic view as a reasonable way to be happy and satisfied may distort their perceptions, as dissimilarities and variation can be disturbing and confusing. Some of the learners warned that it is necessary that learners reconsider their viewpoints constantly, and if individuals decide to change their perspectives, they should be aware that such a decision is only the starting point.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the research findings, five conclusions were drawn. First, as the objective of the present study was to foster transformative learning through EFL learners' real-life experiences, it was revealed that learners' real-life experiences were helpful in encouraging them to think and reflect on their past perspective. Second, experience, which is a significant and valuable element of adult learning, facilitated reflection and assisted learners to think about their lives, about themselves, and about others, and to develop an understanding, hindsight, and appreciation for other people and their assumptions. Additionally, adult students' reflection on previous experiences developed a new sense of confidence and capability for them, which in turn promoted the capacity for transformative learning. Third, transformative learning may occur either consciously or unconsciously, either as a reaction to disorientation or gradually until it reaches a full transformation. Fourth, the key factor for perspective change was reported as the need to convince an individual of credible evidence before accepting an idea. Fifth, among the reasons that hindered the learners from changing perspectives, fear, pride, the character of the person, the event and context, and the individual's experiences were momentous. Fear of losing family members, friends, jobs, and social positions may impede learners from revising their perspectives, especially in totalitarian societies.

The findings of the present study are crucial for adult educators and can assist them to appreciate that EFL learners should not be restricted to solely language learning skills. They also allow educators to explore other areas that EFL learners need to be aware of. Therefore, educators can foster the potential for TL by associating classroom learning with the students' real-life experiences, i.e., the association of words with the world.

### Acknowledgment

We would like to gratefully acknowledge and appreciate all students for their beneficial cooperation.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### References

- Amini, A., Pishghadam, R., & Saboori, F. (2019). On the role of language learners' psychological reactance, teacher stroke, and teacher success in the Iranian context. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 25-44. <https://doi.org/10.22055/RALS.2019.14716>
- Badara, I. A. (2011, May). *Using transformative learning theory to investigate ways to enrich university teaching: Focus on the implementation of student-centered teaching in large introductory science courses* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Tennessee] Knoxville. [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_graddiss/945](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/945)
- Brock, S. E., & Abel, A. L. (2012). Creating a learning climate for the 21st century: Applying transformative learning to teaching methods in business schools. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 5(3), 1-16. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2724147>
- Chirico, A., Pizzolante, M., Kitson, A., Gianotti, E., Riecke, B. E., & Gaggioli, A. (2022). Defining transformative experiences: A conceptual analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(790300), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.790300>
- Cranton, P. (2006). Fostering authentic relationships in the transformative classroom. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2006(109), 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.203>
- Cranton, P. (2016). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide to theory and practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research, planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (4th Ed.) Pearson Education, Inc..
- Deti, T., Ferde, T. & Tiruneh, D. (2023). The effect of reflection supported learning of writing on students' writing attitude and writing achievement goal orientations. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 8 (29). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-023-002028>
- Estaji, M., Zhaleh, K., & Berti, C. (2023). Developing and validating a teacher classroom justice scale for the Iranian EFL context. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 14(1), 18-40. <https://doi.org/10.22055/RALS.2023.18066>
- Farsad, L., & Modarresi, G. (2023). EFL learners' construction of L2 ego and its relationship with emotional intelligence. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 14(1), 124-139. <https://doi.org/10.22055/RALS.2023.18072>
- Fleming, T. (2022). Transformative learning and critical theory: Making connections with Habermas, Honneth, and Negt. In: A. Nicolaidis, S. Eschenbacher, P.T. Buergelt, Y. Gilpin-Jackson, M. Welch & M. Misawa (Eds). *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84694-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84694-7_2)
- Helyer, R. (2015). Learning through reflection: the critical role of reflection in work-based learning (WBL). *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, 7(1), 15-27. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-10-2015-003>

- Hiratsuka, T. (2022). Transformational experience during study abroad: The case of a Japanese pre-service Teacher. *MEXTESOL*, 46(4), 1-9. [https://www.mextesol.net/journal/index.php?page=journal&id\\_article=46378](https://www.mextesol.net/journal/index.php?page=journal&id_article=46378)
- Hoggan, C. (2015). Transformative learning as a metatheory: Definition, criteria, and typology. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 66(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713615611216>
- Hoggan, C. (2016). A typology of transformation: Reviewing the transformative learning literature. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 48(1), 65-82. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2016.1155849>
- Jackson, M. G. (2008). *Transformative learning for a new worldview learning: To think differently*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jost, M. (2018). *Transformation and study change among hospitality and Tourism Students*. [Doctoral thesis]. Queen Margaret University. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161924589.pdf>
- Kartika, L., Backer, F., Joson, A. N., & Lombaerts, K. (2022). Pre-service teachers' changes in perspective: A transformative learning experience during teaching practice in remote areas. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 0(0), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446221133817>
- Keen, C. H., & Woods, R. (2016). Creating activating events for transformative learning in a prison classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 14(1), 15-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344615602342>
- King, K. P. (2009). *The handbook of the evolving research of transformative learning based on the learning activities survey*. Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Kloubert, T. (2020). Promoting perspective transformation in post-totalitarian societies. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 18(1) 8-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619876274>
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F. III, & Swanson, R. A. (2011). *The adult learner* (7th ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429299612>
- Kroth, M., & Cranton, P. (2014). *Stories of transformative learning*. Sense Publishers.
- Lundgren, H., Poell, R. F. (2016). On critical reflection: A review of Mezirow's theory and its operationalization. *Human Resource Development Review*, 15(1), 3-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484315622735>
- Marmarosh, C. L., Forsyth, D. R., Strauss, B., & Burlingame, G. M. (2020). The psychology of the COVID-19 pandemic: A group-level perspective. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 24(3), 122-138. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000142>
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2008). Transformative education grief and growth. In M. Gardner & U. Kelly (2008). *Narrative transformative learning in education* (pp. 51-73). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230610576\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230610576_4)
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass. [https://books.google.com/books?id=tvFICrgcuSIC&sitesec=buy&source=gsb\\_atb](https://books.google.com/books?id=tvFICrgcuSIC&sitesec=buy&source=gsb_atb)
- Mezirow, J. (1978b). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult. Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation. Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-33). Jossey-Bass.

- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172>
- Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 73–96). Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J., Taylor, E. W. and Associates. (2009). *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace and higher education*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Nerstrom, N. (2014). *An Emerging Model for Transformative Learning*. Adult Education Research Conference. Kansas State University Libraries. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/55>
- Nohl, A. M. (2015). Typical phases of transformative learning: A practice-based model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 65(1), 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713614558582>
- Nugrahenny, T. Z. (2016). Narrative data and analysis in second language teaching and learning Indonesian. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 11(2), 101-116. <https://doi.org/10.25170/ijelt.v11i2.1492>
- Pham, A. T. V., Kieu, N.V., Tran, H. M. (2021, August). *Student Readiness for Transformative Learning: A Case Study in a Vocational College* [Conference Paper]. 5th International Conference on E-Society, E-Education and E-Technology. (pp. 107–112). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3485768.3485811>
- Pomeroy, E., & Oliver, K. (2021). Action confidence as an indicator of transformative change. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 19(1), 68-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344620940815>
- Reinsfield, E. (2018). *The potential for a future-focused curriculum in New Zealand: The perceptions and practice of six secondary school technology teachers* [Doctoral thesis, The University of Waikato] Hamilton, New Zealand. <https://hdl.handle.net/10289/11939>
- Roulston, K. (Ed.). (2019). *Interactional studies of qualitative research interviews*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/z.220>
- Schnepfleitner, F. M., & Ferreira, M. P. (2021). Transformative learning theory – Is it time to add a fourth core element? *Journal of Educational Studies and Multidisciplinary Approaches*, 1(1), 40-49. <https://doi.org/10.51383/jesma.2021.9>
- Sohn, B. K. (2021). Coming to appreciate diversity: Ontological change through student–student relationships. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 19(1), 50-67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344620940811>
- Svoboda, E. (2017, June 27). Why Is It So Hard to Change People’s Minds? *Greater Good Magazine: Science-based insights for meaningful life*. [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_is\\_it\\_so\\_hard\\_to\\_change\\_peoples\\_minds](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_is_it_so_hard_to_change_peoples_minds)
- Taylor, E. W. (2000). Fostering Mezirow’s transformative learning theory in the adult education classroom: A critical review. *Canadian Journal of the Study of Adult Education*, 14, 1–28. [file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/ojs\\_admin,+Journal+manager,+cjsae\\_14-2\\_art\\_1.pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/ojs_admin,+Journal+manager,+cjsae_14-2_art_1.pdf)
- Taylor, E. W. (2009). Fostering transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & E. W. Taylor (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education*. Jossey-Bass. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:142432681>
- Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2013). A theory in progress? Issues in transformative learning theory. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 4(1), 33-47. <https://doi:10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela5000>



Tisdell, E. (2012). Themes and variations in transformative learning: Interdisciplinary perspectives on forms that transform. In E. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning* (pp. 21– 36). Wiley.

<https://www.wiley.com/enus/The+Handbook+of+Transformative+Learning%3A+Theory%2C+Research%2C+and+Practice-p-9780470590720>

Vos, J. (2021). *The Psychology of Covid-19* (1–192). London: Metanoia Institute.  
<https://uk.sagepub.com/.../the-psychology-of.../book275869>

Wang, v. & Torrisi-Steele, G. & Reinsfield, E. (2020). Transformative learning, epistemology and technology in adult education. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 0(0) 1–17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971420918602>

Zarbfian, A. et.al. (2020). On the feasibility of DA-supported transformative education in Iranian EFL setting, *Cogent Education*, 7(1), 288-292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1832177>