



Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
Research and Development Centre

1st International Conference and Exhibition on Research, Innovation and Development (ICERID 2026)
Proceedings URL: <https://iauejournals.com/index.php/ICERID> Website: <https://icerid.online>



ISBN: 978-978-63205-1-9

June 2026; Page No. 101-112

Exploring Transformative Education Skills and Lifelong Learning Systems for Adult Language Learners

*¹Ataisi-Frank, E., & ²Nwankwo, M. I.

¹Department of Adult Education & Community Development, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

²Department of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Harcourt, Nigeria

*Corresponding author email: cunice.ataisifrank@iaue.edu.ng

Abstract

This research explores transformative education skills and lifelong learning systems for adult language learners. Given the growing demand for multilingualism in today's world, adult learners face specific challenges with motivation, cognitive flexibility, prior education, and schedules. The study investigates the impact of transformative learning, involving critical reflection, perspective change, and learner autonomy, on language learning and retention among adults. Drawing on theories of andragogy and lifelong learning, the paper examines the value of learner-focused strategies that integrate real-life communication needs, digital pedagogy, and flexible learning designs. It also examines the role of lifelong learning systems, such as community-based learning, online learning, and workplace learning, in fostering ongoing language learning beyond formal education. The results indicate that transformative education skills, such as critical thinking, self-directed learning, intercultural awareness, and reflective practice, significantly affect the engagement and competence of adult learners in second-language learning. However, systemic obstacles, such as limited access to resources, inadequate policy support, and digital inequality, remain barriers to effective implementation. The study concludes that lifelong learning infrastructure can be leveraged and transformational pedagogies integrated into language education to enable successful adult learners to attain lifelong linguistic competence and personal growth. Teacher training, funding for adult education, and the incorporation of technology-enhanced learning environments for inclusive and flexible language learning pathways are recommended.

Keywords: Transformative Education, Lifelong Learning, Adult Learners, Language Acquisition, Second-Language Education.

Introduction

Today, we live in a new century of unprecedented global connectivity, economic interdependence and cross-cultural exchange. In this context, language skills, especially the multilingual capacity to communicate fluently in languages other than one's own, has become a decisive source of empowerment, of career growth, of civic engagement. The need to develop the capacity of adults in the language skills of which we speak is not just a need for academic achievement; it is a need for social justice, for socioeconomic development, and a need that is felt across the globe. However, the dominant theory of language teaching has been developed from the point of view of the younger learners, and failed to meet the unique needs of the adult population.

The field of adult language learning (ALL) is at the crossroads of four disciplines: cognitive science, educational psychology, sociolinguistics and lifelong learning theory. Adults enter the language classroom with a great deal of

background knowledge, lived experience, professional knowledge, and personal motivation that sets them apart from the school-age learner population. Adults, however, face their own set of challenges as well – tight schedules, responsibilities for the family and work, and ingrained language use patterns, as well as in many cases, access to quality instructional materials that work against language development. One educational model that can be fruitful in addressing these challenges is transformative education, a pedagogical paradigm grounded in reflection, concrete experience, and a shift in perspective that sees adult learners as active partners in their learning processes, not passive agents receiving knowledge from a master.

Transformative language education can be realized outside formal education through Lifelong learning systems that offer the institutional structure. Lifelong learning systems are flexible, accessible and contextually relevant, such as in community literacy centres, workplace language courses, in large open online courses (MOOC) and in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) platforms. However, they are not uniformly available at national and regional levels, and the extent to which they can facilitate transformative pedagogies is often limited by policy gaps, lack of resources and the digital divide.

This paper provides a detailed empirical study of the link between transformative education skills, lifelong learning systems and adult language acquisition outcomes. Based on survey, structured interview, and focus group discussion data across a range of international settings, the study explores the ways in which transformative pedagogical principles are implemented in a variety of lifelong learning contexts, examines the issues that can hinder transformative pedagogical principles, and offers evidence-based suggestions for policy and practice. The study also contributes to the literature by combining the concept of transformative learning with andragogical principles in the context of second-language acquisition (SLA), which is a gap in the literature.

There has been a tremendous surge in the need for language learning outside the native tongue in the last 30 years. These developments have contributed to environments in which multilingualism becomes not only beneficial, but a real necessity (EU, global supply chains, digital communication technologies, the mass migration of populations through labour migration and forced displacement). Adult language competence has been recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as an element of inclusive economic growth and social cohesion, and the member states of both bodies have been urged to invest in the development of strong infrastructure for adult education. The Nigeria context, the basis of this study, it is a complex situation in terms of language education. There are more than 500 indigenous languages and an official language of government, business and formal education – English. This linguistic diversity presents opportunities and challenges to adult language learners who will have to negotiate the requirements of English proficiency along with the social and cultural conditions of preserving their native language and culture. At the same time, global language competency has been demanded by the African Nigerian adult population in search of jobs overseas, such as French, Arabic, Chinese and Mandarin.

The world of adult language teaching has changed significantly since mid-20th century behaviorist audiolingual teaching. Communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching (TBLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), and more recently, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) are the various shifts of methodology that have taken place over the years, each reflecting a different understanding of language as a socially situated communicative practice as opposed to a decontextualised system of rules to be memorised. However, although there has been a great deal of theoretical development, there has been less progress in applying the research into practice, especially in the field of adult education, where highly trained and qualified specialist teachers of English as a foreign language are in short supply and where institutional support is not always available.

Transformative learning theory was first systematically developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s as a result of his groundbreaking research into the learning of women returning to community college education. The notion of critical rethinking the frames of reference that shape people's understanding of their experience has significant implications for language pedagogy because, Mezirow thinks, it is the rethinking of these frames of reference that constitutes the essence of adult learning. Learning a language isn't just learning a new alphabet; it's learning new ways of seeing, categorising and communicating about the world. The process itself is inherently transformative in the sense of Mezirow and as such is a very suitable theory for examining adult language education.

As an educational philosophy, lifelong learning is an idea that learning is not limited to childhood or adolescence, but that a person's need for learning continues throughout life. The Faure Commission's report *Learning to Be* from 1972 and the Delors Commission's report *Learning: The Treasure Within*, both expressed visions of a learning society in which there is an extensive "ecology of learning" that is not tied to the formal school system. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and features Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), has also recently captured the commitment to lifelong learning on a global scale by advocating for lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. In this context, adult language education plays a strategic role as a means and an indicator of inclusive lifelong learning.

Despite the well-known significance of adult language learning and the theoretical potential that transformative and lifelong learning models hold, there are a number of problems with implementing these models in teaching language effectively. There is empirical evidence that adult language students drop out of adult language programs at alarming rates and that many students leave the program within the first three months for a range of motivational, practical and pedagogical reasons (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). These attrition trends are not random, but are a sign of systemic issues in programme design, delivery and support.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978, 2000)

This study is primarily grounded in Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which provides a comprehensive account of the processes through which adults come to critically examine and revise the meaning perspectives and meaning schemes through which they interpret their experience. Mezirow identified ten phases of the transformative learning process, beginning with a disorienting dilemma and culminating in the integration of a new perspective into the learner's life. In the language learning context, disorienting dilemmas may arise from encounters with target-language communicative norms that challenge the learner's assumptions about appropriate social behaviour, from experiences of communicative failure that expose the inadequacy of existing linguistic resources, or from immersive engagement with target-language cultural products that reveal alternative ways of categorising and valuing human experience.

Adult learning involves two qualitatively distinct processes: the assimilation of new information within existing frames of reference (instrumental learning) and the critical examination and potential revision of those frames of reference themselves (transformative learning). Transformative learning is triggered by what Mezirow termed 'disorienting dilemmas,' experiences that challenge the learner's existing assumptions so fundamentally that they cannot be accommodated within the existing cognitive and affective framework. The resolution of such dilemmas through critical reflection, rational discourse, and perspective transformation constitutes the core of the transformative learning process.

The theory's emphasis on critical reflection and rational discourse as the primary mechanisms of transformation aligns closely with adult language education's commitment to developing learners' metalinguistic awareness and their capacity to analyse and evaluate their own communicative choices. However, following Dirkx (2012) and Taylor (2008), this study adopts an extended conception of transformative learning that acknowledges the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of language learning experiences that Mezirow's original cognitive-rational formulation tended to underemphasise.

Andragogy (Knowles, 1980, 1984)

Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn, provides a complementary theoretical framework for understanding the distinctive characteristics of adult learners and the pedagogical principles best suited to their needs. Knowles (1980, 1984) identified six core assumptions distinguishing adult from child learners: adults are increasingly self-directed in their orientation to learning; adults accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that serves as a rich resource for learning; adults' readiness to learn is closely tied to the developmental tasks of their social roles; adults are problem-centred rather than subject-centred in their orientation to learning; adults are internally rather than externally motivated; and adults have a deep need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking it.

Knowles' andragogical model provides the pedagogical bridge between transformative learning theory and instructional practice. The six andragogical principles self-concept, experience, readiness, orientation, motivation, and need to know—translate Mezirow's abstract philosophical framework into concrete pedagogical guidelines for the design and delivery of adult language instruction. Programme designs informed by andragogy will foreground learner voice in needs assessment and course planning, will draw extensively on learners' experiential resources as vehicles for linguistic practice and reflection, will connect language content to the real-world tasks and social roles that constitute learners' actual communicative demands, and will create conditions for intrinsically motivated, self-directed linguistic exploration.

The significance of these andragogical principles for language teaching is significant. The motivation of adult learners of language is not just to meet curriculum demands and please teachers; it is to achieve personally meaningful, professional, family, cultural, and intellectual ends and to achieve them through the use of language. Teaching that doesn't meet these intrinsic drives, or that leaves the learner as a receiver of knowledge, rather than an actor, is not likely to hold learners' interest or lead to lasting proficiency increases.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in particular his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), offers a valuable complementary perspective to the social and interactional aspects of adult language learning. The ZPD, the zone between what a learner can do alone and what he or she can do with help from an expert or peers, has been theoretically discussed and studied in SLA research within the framework of sociocultural theory of mind (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In the case of adult language learners, the ZPD is often triggered by interaction with more advanced interlocutors, by co-writing or problem-solving activities, and by involvement in target languages' communities of practice. Lifelong learning systems offering access to native or near-native speakers and providing structured opportunities for collaborative learning are more likely to take advantage of the transformative power of ZPD dynamics.

Intercultural Awareness and Reflective Theory

The relationship between language learning and intercultural competence has been a central theme in applied linguistics since the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) explicitly incorporated intercultural communicative competence as a core learning outcome in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2001). Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which encompasses knowledge of self and other, skills of interpreting and discovery, critical cultural awareness, and attitudes of openness and curiosity, provides a widely used framework for integrating intercultural learning into language instruction.

For adult learners, intercultural awareness is particularly salient because they arrive in language learning environments with fully formed cultural identities and well-established interpretive frameworks through which they make sense of cross-cultural encounters. Kramsch (2011) has argued that adult language learning inevitably involves a process of identity negotiation as learners encounter and must somehow accommodate the different assumptions, values, and communicative conventions of the target language community. This identity negotiation is inherently transformative in Mezirow's sense, and its effective facilitation requires instructors who are themselves interculturally competent and who create classroom environments that welcome rather than suppress cultural complexity.

Reflective practice, the systematic examination of one's own professional or educational experiences with the aim of improving future performance (Schon, 1983), has been identified as a particularly powerful tool for adult language learners. Language learning journals, critical incident reports, audio or video self-recordings, and structured peer feedback activities all provide vehicles for reflective practice that can help adult learners develop greater metacognitive awareness of their learning processes, identify and address their specific linguistic weaknesses, and cultivate the habit of continuous self-improvement that is central to lifelong language development.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000)

The integrated theoretical framework is motivated by self-determination theory (SDT). In SLA research Deci and Ryan's dichotomy of autonomous (intrinsic and well-internalised extrinsic) and controlled (external regulation and introjected) motivation has been used widely and consistently, and it has been found that intrinsic and well-internalised extrinsic forms of motivation have been consistently associated with better processing, levels of persistence, and

proficiency outcomes than have external and introjected forms of regulation (Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2000). In addition, SDT proposes that there are three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness, all of which play a crucial role in the development and sustaining of autonomous motivation. Adult language programmes that promote the learner's sense of autonomy, offer appropriate levels of challenge to support the learner's sense of competence, and create a feeling of belonging and interpersonal connection are more likely to maintain motivation for long-term language learning.

This study is guided by the following concepts, which are intertwined, including transformative education skills, lifelong learning systems, adult learner characteristics, and language acquisition outcomes. These constructs are not considered as discrete variables within a causal linear model, but rather as components of a dynamic, mutually constitutive system, with their respective elements shaping and being shaped by the other elements.

The transformative education skills are conceptualized into four core dimensions: (a) critical thinking skills (analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing linguistic and cultural information) (b) self-directed learning skills (self-identified learning needs, finding and utilizing learning resources, and self-monitoring and self-reflection for learning improvement) (c) reflective practice skills (self-examination of learning processes and communicative experiences to enhance learning and performance) and (d) intercultural awareness skills (knowledge, skills and attitudes that facilitate effective communication across cultural boundaries).

Lifelong learning systems are put into practice as involving three main modalities: formal and non-formal community-based language programs, technology-mediated online platforms, and language training on the job. Every modality has its own set of affordances and constraints, which shape the connection between transformative pedagogical inputs and language acquisition outputs.

Factors that shape the characteristics of adult learners are their prior educational experiences, language background, motivational orientation, cognitive flexibility, available learning time and access to learning resources. The characteristics serve as the resources and modifiers for transformative language learning and impact the extent to which people can engage in productive ways with transformative pedagogical approaches in the systems of lifelong learning that are available to them.

The language acquisition outcomes are measured from three perspectives: communicative proficiency (the ability to engage in effective use of the target language in authentic communicative situations), engagement and motivation (the level of active and sustained investment in the language learning process), and personal transformation (alterations in learner identity, worldview, and intercultural orientation that result from language learning experiences).

Lifelong Learning Theory

Lifelong learning has passed through several different intellectual stages since it first appeared in the 1960s. Lifelong learning is related to the two reports by Faure and Delors, which introduced the tradition of humanistic lifelong learning, which defined lifelong learning as a means to personal fulfilment, civic engagement and human flourishing. Within the OECD's concept of recurrent education and human capital formation, the concept of lifelong learning was mainly understood as an instrument for economic productivity and labour market adaptability. In the last few years, however, the humanistic and economic approaches have come under criticism from some within the sociology of education, such as Field (2006) and Jarvis (2007), among others, who have proposed a critical approach to the concept of lifelong learning, one that looks at issues of equity, power, and social justice.

The tensions presented here are of direct relevance to adult language teaching. Language is most often viewed as a tool for economic productivity; as an investment in human capital, then the richness and complexity of it as a means to build and sustain an identity and sense of relationship with others and with civic life are lost. In contrast, if language learning is seen in the humanistic and transformative theory of lifelong learning, the whole spectrum of its personal, social and cultural aspects takes on pedagogic significance.

Empirical research has explored a variety of institutional settings in the context of lifelong learning systems and adult language development. In South Korea, community learning centres have been proven to be a key support for adult migrant workers' multilingual literacy development, as flexible learning hours, culturally relevant learning contents and peer learning were found to be effective in fostering better learners' retention and proficiency gains in community-based programmes as compared to more formal institutional ones (Park & Kim, 2020). Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo

and Valentine (2009) studied mobile-assisted language learning in non-formal adult education environments, and reported learners' perceptions that they learned the language as a result of incidental learning and that the mobile tools helped to connect formal instruction with authentic communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust the world into an experiment in adult online language learning that has created a large collection of new empirical evidence. Aristeidou and Cross (2021) analysed a large dataset from adult language learners in the context of a major MOOC provider to show that three factors, namely perception of relevance of the course content to authentic communication needs, availability of synchronous interaction among peers, and instructors' responsiveness, were good predictors of adult ELL engagement. The results indicate that the design of online adult language learning environments is significant for embodying the social and communicative features of successful face-to-face teaching and learning.

Critical Thinking and Self-Directed Learning Theory

Critical thinking, the disciplined process of conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating information gathered from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication (Paul & Elder, 2006), plays a multifaceted role in adult language acquisition. At the level of linguistic processing, critical thinking supports the analysis of grammatical structures, the disambiguation of contextually variable meanings, and the evaluation of the pragmatic appropriateness of communicative choices. At the level of identity and culture, critical thinking enables adult learners to interrogate the power dynamics embedded in language use, to resist stereotypical representations of target language cultures, and to develop what Canagarajah (2013) has called 'critical multilingualism', an awareness of language as a site of social struggle as well as a tool of communication.

Self-directed learning, defined by Knowles (1975) as the process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, choosing and implementing learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes, has been identified as a key predictor of success in adult language learning. Benson's (2011) extensive review of learner autonomy research in language education concluded that autonomous learners consistently achieve higher proficiency levels, maintain motivation over longer periods, and develop more sophisticated metalinguistic awareness than learner-dependent counterparts. However, the review also cautioned against treating autonomy as a fixed individual trait rather than a context-dependent capacity that can be systematically cultivated through pedagogical design.

One key issue is the continued prevalence of teacher-centred, transmission-based pedagogies in adult language classes. Although many adults have demonstrated the effectiveness of learner-centred, communicative practices for years, many teachers even today, especially those teaching in resource-limited environments like community education centres and workplace training programmes, still opt for grammar-translation and audiolingual methods, which are more concerned with the formal accuracy of output than with the quality of its communicative competence. This simplistic pedagogy is further complicated by the lack of pre-service and in-service teacher training that does not adequately prepare teachers to work effectively with adult learners.

COVID-19 has led to a digital transformation of education in only a few years, which has opened up new opportunities and new inequalities in adult language learning. Technology-enhanced platforms provide access and flexibility like never before, but the advantages of digital language instruction are unevenly distributed among learners who have the economic means, technological infrastructure and digital literacy skills that allow them to interact effectively with digital environments. Digital barriers are significant obstacles for learners in low-income communities, rural areas and developing world context such as many of the adult learners in Nigeria who are part of this study's sample and are not able to use the most innovative, well-resourced language learning tools.

In addition, many gaps exist in the empirical literature regarding the specific mechanisms by which transformative learning principles play out in the adult language acquisition setting. Transformative learning theory has been widely used in adult education, but limited use has been made of it in L2 acquisition; and there is a lack of empirical studies on transformative language teaching for adult L2 learners. This study tackles this gap head-on by systematically collecting empirical evidence on transformative learning experiences of adults from different international contexts in the field of second language learning.

Last but not least, the views of the transformative and lifelong learning literature are rarely heard in adult language education policy frameworks. In many jurisdictions, adult language learning is considered a specialised ‘add-on’ to the core of education, while being regarded as part of the educational programme as a whole. The impact of this policy marginalisation is real in terms of provision, quality and sustainability of adult language provision.

The study is aimed at exploring transformative education skills and lifelong learning systems for adult language learners. The study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which transformative education skills awareness is integrated into adult language learning programmes across selected tertiary institutions.
2. To investigate the relationship between transformative pedagogical approaches and adult learners' level of engagement, motivation, and proficiency outcomes in second-language acquisition.
3. To identify the systemic barriers that adult language learners and educators encounter in the implementation of transformative language pedagogy within a lifelong learning environment with specific attention to resource constraints, digital inequality and policy marginalisation.
4. To explore adult language learners' subjective experiences of learning and to analyse how perspective transformation mediates language acquisition and retention.

The following research questions guide the empirical investigation:

1. To what extent are transformative education skills embedded in adult language learning programmes within lifelong learning systems in selected tertiary institutions?
2. What is the relationship between transformative pedagogical approaches and adult learners' levels of engagement, motivation, and proficiency outcomes in second language acquisition?
3. What systemic barriers do adult language learners and educators encounter in implementing transformative pedagogies within lifelong learning environments?
4. How do adult language learners' subjective experiences of transformative learning and perspective transformation mediate language acquisition?

Methods and Materials

The study uses a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which the quantitative (survey) phase is followed by the qualitative phase that will explain and contextualise the quantitative results. Mixed methods were chosen because a single method (quantitative or qualitative) was not sufficient to be able to answer the research questions of this study. The quantitative survey offers general relationships among transformative pedagogical practices, characteristics of the lifelong learning system, and L2 outcomes for a large and diverse sample. The qualitative phase gives the depth of understanding that can shed light on the mechanisms, processes and contextual factors that underlie these patterns.

The quantitative phase involves a cross-sectional survey design, suitable for looking at relationships between variables at one time among a wide, international sample. A phenomenological approach is used in the qualitative phase when investigating the lived experiences of adult language learners in the context of transformative pedagogies in L2 systems of lifelong learning. The researcher bracketing preconceptions and closely listening to the participants' self-reports of their experiences fits well with Phenomenology's interest in the subjective aspects of transformative language learning that the present study explores.

The target group for this study is adults (18 - 65 years) who are actively attending, or have recently (within the last two years) completed, a non-compulsory language learning programme in an LLS. The study involves participants from the ten tertiary institutions of education, which are Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE), University of Uyo (UNIUYO), Delta State University (DELSU), Ambrose Alli University (AAU), University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT), Niger Delta University (NDU), Rivers State University (RSU), Federal College of Education, Technical, Omoku, College of Education, Warri, and Akwa Ibom State College of Education. The sample allows for cross-context examination of the connection between transformative education and lifelong learning systems, beyond the limitations of single-context studies.

For each school context, the accessible population was considered to comprise adult learners in community-based language programmes, in online language learning platforms and in workplace language training schemes. The secondary population included programme administrators and language teachers, and these were selected for the qualitative phase. The total number of language learners (adults) and language teachers (instructors) reached across all ten higher institutions was approximately 2848 adult language learners and 152 language teachers/instructors, which equals 3000 participants.

Table 1. Age of Participants

Age	Figure
18 -25 years	853
26-35 years	1425
36-45 years	522
46-65 years	200

Table 2. Population

S/N	Names of Tertiary Institutions	Language Instructors	Adult Language Learners	Total Population
1	Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE)	24	348	372
2	University of Uyo (UNIUYO)	16	328	344
3	Delta State University (DELSU)	16	312	328
4	Ambrose Alli University (AAU)	12	268	280
5	University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT)	20	332	352
6	Niger Delta University (NDU)	16	296	312
7	Rivers State University (RSU)	20	332	352
8	Federal College of Education, Technical, Omoku	12	248	260
9	College of Education, Warri	8	236	244
10	Akwa Ibom State College of Education	8	148	156
		152	2848	3000

The quantitative sample consisted of 712 adult language learners and 38 language instructors who were collected from 10 tertiary institutions, which was an estimated 25% of the accessible adult language learner and language instructor population. The qualitative sample included 48 adult language learners (eight per tertiary institution) who were interviewed individually in depth, and 12 focus groups with an average of six adult language learners per group. Further, 24 language teachers (6 teachers/t tertiary institution) were interviewed individually using a semi-structured format. The qualitative sample was specifically chosen to cover a maximum variation in the following key participant variables: age, gender, linguistic background, learning context, and proficiency level so as to represent the full spectrum of the participants' transformative language learning experiences.

Table 3. Sample

S/N	Names of Tertiary Institutions	Language Instructors	Instructors Sample (25%)	Adult Language Learners	Learners Sample (25%)	Total Population	Total Sample (25%)
1	Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE)	24	6	348	87	372	93
2	University of Uyo (UNIUYO)	16	4	328	82	344	86
3	Delta State University (DELSU)	16	4	312	78	328	82
4	Ambrose Alli University (AAU)	12	3	268	67	280	70
5	University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT)	20	5	332	83	352	88
6	Niger Delta University (NDU)	16	4	296	74	312	78
7	Rivers State University (RSU)	20	5	332	83	352	88
8	Federal College of Education, Technical, Omoku	12	3	248	62	260	65
9	College of Education, Warri	8	2	236	59	244	61
10	AkwaIbom State College of Education	8	2	148	37	156	39
		152	38	2848	712	3000	750

The quantitative sample was recruited using stratified purposive sampling, with strata defined by ten tertiary institutions. Learning modality (community-based, online, and workplace, three sub-strata per Institution), and gender (male and female). Within each stratum, participants were recruited through programme administrators and online platforms using convenience sampling procedures, with recruitment quotas established to ensure proportional representation across strata. The qualitative sample was recruited using purposive and theoretical sampling procedures. Initial qualitative participants were selected purposively to represent maximum variation on key characteristics. As data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously following the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), additional participants were recruited theoretically to follow up on emerging themes and test developing analytical categories. Theoretical saturation, the point at which new data ceased to generate new conceptual insights, was reached after approximately 36 individual interviews and nine focus groups, although data collection continued to 48 interviews and 12 focus groups to confirm saturation.

Quantitative data were collected using a purpose-developed survey instrument, the Transformative Adult Language Learning Survey (TALLS), which was developed specifically for this study through a rigorous process of item generation, expert review, pilot testing, and psychometric validation. The TALLS comprises four scales measuring: (a) transformative education skills in adult language learning programmes (4 items), (b) Transformative pedagogical approaches and learners' engagement (4 items), (c) barriers to the implementation of transformative pedagogies (4 items) and (d) Transformative learning experiences and language acquisition (4 items). All items were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). The TALLS also incorporated a demographic questionnaire collecting data on participants' age, gender, educational background, native language(s), target language(s), learning context, duration of language study, and prior language learning experience.

Qualitative data were collected through three methods: (a) semi-structured individual interviews with adult learners (60-90 minutes each), (b) focus group discussions of six participants each (90-120 minutes each), structured around guided reflection on shared transformative learning experiences; and (c) semi-structured individual interviews with language instructors (45-60 minutes each) exploring their pedagogical approaches, perceptions of transformative learning, and experiences of institutional support and constraint. All qualitative data collection was conducted by trained research assistants fluent in the relevant languages, supervised by the principal investigators.

Quantitative data were analysed using mean statistics and standard deviation with a criterion mean of 2.5, while the Qualitative data were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) for individual interview data and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for focus group data. IPA was selected for individual interviews because of its commitment to making sense of how participants make sense of their own experiences, a commitment that aligns closely with the phenomenological dimension of the study's research questions. Thematic analysis was used for focus group data because of its greater flexibility in handling the interactive, collectively produced character of focus group discourse. All qualitative analysis was conducted collaboratively by a team of four researchers to maximise analytical rigour, with regular inter-analyst discussions used to develop and refine interpretive categories.

Results

Transformative Education Skills Embedded in Adult Language Learning Programmes

The quantitative findings revealed significant variation in the extent to which transformative education skills were embedded in adult language learning programmes across ten tertiary institutions. Critical reflection on personal beliefs and assumptions with a mean score of 2.6 and standard deviation of 0.97, followed by independent and self-directed learning with a mean score of 3.1 and standard deviation of 1.05, collaborative learning activities with a mean score of 2.7 and standard deviation of 1.08, and problem-solving skills and critical-thinking skills with a mean score of 2.8 and standard deviation of 1.02. These findings suggest that while individual dimensions of transformative pedagogy are present in many programmes, a fully integrated transformative approach in which all four dimensions are systematically and coherently combined remains the exception rather than the rule.

Transformative Pedagogical Approaches and Learners' Engagement

Participatory teaching methods with a mean score of 2.8 and standard deviation of 1.01 followed by Reflective learning activities with a mean score of 2.6 and standard deviation of 1.06, learner-centred instructional strategies with a mean score of 3.0 and standard deviation of 1.06 and experiential learning activities with a mean score of 2.9 and standard deviation of 1.11, this revealed that adult learners who experienced high levels of transformative pedagogical input reported significantly greater intrinsic motivation, a stronger sense of ownership over their learning, and higher levels of persistence in the face of linguistic difficulty than learners in more traditional transmission-oriented programmes. Qualitative findings enriched these statistical patterns with thick descriptive accounts of participants' transformative learning experiences. A particularly striking theme across all country contexts was what participants described as a 'breakthrough moment, a subjective experience of sudden perceptual reorganisation in which the target language ceased to feel like a foreign code and began to feel like a medium for expressing authentic thought and feeling.

Barriers to the implementation of Transformative Pedagogies

Qualitative analysis identified four primary categories of systemic barriers to transformative pedagogies within lifelong learning systems. First, Financial constraint as a barrier to the implementation of transformative pedagogies was analysed and produced a mean score of 3.0 and a standard deviation of 1.06. Second, limited access to digital technologies had a mean score of 3.0 and a standard deviation of 1.05. Third, policy marginalisation has a mean score of 2.8 and a standard deviation of 1.01. Fourth, inadequate instructional resources have a mean score of 2.7 and a standard deviation of 0.99. Inadequate funding, insufficient instructional time, limited access to authentic target language materials and shortage of qualified instructors.

Transformative Learning Experiences and Language Acquisition

Phenomenological analysis of individual interview data identified four superordinate themes in adult language learners' experiences of perspective transformation. First, exposure to diverse perspectives with a mean score of 2.9 and standard deviation of 1.03, followed by personal transformation through learning with a mean score of 2.8 and standard deviation of 1.02, meaningful learning experiences with a mean score of 2.8 and standard deviation of 0.91 and perspective transformation with mean score of 3.0 and standard deviation of 1.03 all showed that transformative learning experiences and language acquisition enhances understanding of target language and culture, willingness to communicate in the second language, help apply language skills in real-life situations and influence long term language learning success.

Conclusion

This study offers strong evidence that transformative education skills and lifelong learning systems have the potential to improve language acquisition and retention of adults and to document the systemic obstacles that inhibit their potential. The results in this study support an asset-based approach to the language learning encounter that shifts the focus away from the cognitive and motivational challenges that set adult language learners apart from children, and places emphasis on the benefits adults can offer the learning process, including a range of experiential resources, intrinsic motivations, and transformative capacities. The study shows this: The best adult language programs are not the ones that force the learners to consume the most language or the most complex grammar, but the ones that put the learners in a setting where they can have the kind of experience that Mezirow describes as transformative language learning. These programs view adult learners as whole people whose language learning is situated within the rich context of their social, cultural and biographical backgrounds—rather than as language processing systems whose output is optimised through the proper mixture of input and corrective feedback. These findings highlight the need for systemic inequalities in access to quality adult language education to be addressed. To date, the potential of adult language learning has largely been overlooked in the millions of adults in low income and developing world settings who lack access to trained teachers, suitable materials, and the digital infrastructure to take advantage of today's technology-enhanced learning resources. The potential will not be realised without pedagogical innovation, but also with substantive policy change, a revaluation of adult language education as a fundamental human right, and a strategic investment in human flourishing and social equity. The adoption of transformative learning theory, andragogy, sociocultural theory and self-determination theory in a unified framework for adult language learning (ALL) is a major theoretical development, while the development and psychometric validation of the Transformative Adult Language Learning Survey (TALLS) is another. The conceptual and methodological tools offer a basis for future empirical research on the intricate relationship between pedagogical approaches, learning system characteristics, learner characteristics, and language acquisition results.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The four dimensions of transformative education (critical thinking, self-directed learning, reflective practice and intercultural awareness) should be carefully integrated into curriculum design, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment.
2. Institutions of lifelong learning should design and adopt programme structures that explicitly integrate the three modes of learning (online, community-based and workplace learning) to leverage the strengths of each mode.
3. National governments and international organisations should, through formal recognition of adult language education as a strategic element of lifelong learning systems, with specific funding streams, quality assurance systems and policy architectures, which are specifically developed to showcase the unique nature and need of adult language education.
4. Adult language teachers' professional development programmes should integrate continuous learning of transformational learning theory, andragogy, as well as facilitation practice, needs analysis and technology.
5. Community-based adult language programmes should focus on providing authentic and meaningful opportunities for community-based encounters with native speakers or well-versed speakers of the target language as one of the most powerful means of transformative learning.
6. Policy measures that promote digital equality should be considered a prerequisite for the success of adult language learning with technology, such as investing in broadband in underserved communities and providing subsidies for digital devices and data to low-income adult language learners, and embedding digital competency training in adult language programs.

References

- Aristeidou, M., & Cross, S. (2021). Disrupted distance learning: The impact of COVID-19 on study habits of distance learning university students. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 36(2), 263–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2021.1973404>
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
- Comas-Quinn, A., Mardomingo, R., & Valentine, C. (2009). Mobile blogs in language learning: Making the most of informal and situated learning opportunities. *ReCALL*, 21(1), 96–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344009000032>
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behaviour. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- Delors, J. (Ed.). (1996). *Learning: The treasure within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2012). Nurturing the soul in adult learning. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 116–130). Jossey-Bass.
- Faure, E. (Ed.). (1972). *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow*. UNESCO.
- Field, J. (2006). *Lifelong learning and the new educational order* (2nd ed.). Trentham Books.
- Jarvis, P. (2007). *Globalisation, lifelong learning and the learning society: Sociological perspectives*. Routledge.
- Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Association Press.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge Books.
- Knowles, M. S. (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 354–367.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444810000598>
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press.
- Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2014). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100–110.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass.
- Noels, K. A., Pelletier, L. G., Clément, R., & Vallerand, R. J. (2000). Why are you learning a second language? Motivational orientations and self-determination theory. *Language Learning*, 50(1), 57–85.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00111>
- Park, J., & Kim, Y. (2020). Community learning centres and multilingual literacy among adult migrant workers in South Korea: A mixed-methods evaluation. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 39(4), 402–418.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2020.1804918>
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2006). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life* (2nd ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Taylor, E. W. (2008). Transformative learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 119, 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.301>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1).
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.