

THE CHOICE IS YOURS: EXPLORING CHOICE THEORY IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article explores the Five Principles of William Glasser's Choice Theory and its impact on young adult English language learners (ELLs) in an Intensive English course at Southern New Hampshire University. The exploration focuses on how applicable Choice Theory is to second language education, what components of Choice Theory most influence second language learners, how Choice Theory applies to second language learners, and the theory's impact on the learning experience of second language students.

Introduction

In the field of Second Language pedagogy and acquisition, numerous research studies have investigated language learning methods and the best practices for meeting the holistic needs of the language learner (Dörnyei, Henry, Muir, 2016; Marzano, 2019; Stevick, 1996). The purpose of this article is to describe the ways in which Glasser's Choice Theory can be adapted to meet not only the language learning needs of individuals from many cultures but also the holistic needs of these individuals. Hence, bring to light ways to optimize language acquisition.

Glasser's Choice Theory

Teachers of English as a Second Language continuously strive to best meet the needs of their second language students. This "striving" takes various forms: observations, discussions, reflections, research, and ultimately, action. It was during a moment of research in which Professor Naughton encountered William Glasser's Choice Theory as a way of managing the classroom learning environment by meeting the holistic needs of the second language (L2) learner. Glasser, an American psychiatrist and educational theorist, created Choice Theory, Reality Theory and is the founder of the Quality School Initiative (Glasser, 2001). Glasser's Choice Theory consists of 10 Axioms:

1. The only person whose behavior we can control is our own.
2. All we can give another person is information.
3. All long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems.
4. The problem relationship is always part of our present life.
5. What happened in the past has everything to do with what we are today, but we can only satisfy our basic needs right now and plan to continue satisfying them in the future.
6. We can only satisfy our needs by satisfying the pictures in our Quality World.
7. All we do is behave.

8. All behavior is Total Behavior and is made up of four components: acting, thinking, feeling and physiology.
9. All Total Behavior is chosen, but we only have direct control over the acting and thinking components. We can only control our feeling and physiology indirectly through how we choose to act and think.
10. All Total Behavior is designated by verbs and named by the part that is the most recognizable (Glasser 2017, pp. 332-336).

These ten axioms are the guiding principles for Choice Theory. This theory of personal choice has been applied to public education as a means of contributing to classroom management and has given students the opportunity to take responsibility for their personal choices (Glasser & Glasser, 2001).

Choice Theory in the Education

The success of Glasser's Choice Theory in public education for Professor Naughton, an ESL educator in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at Southern New Hampshire University, has prompted the following questions. How applicable is Choice Theory to second language education? Are there components of Choice Theory in second language education? Are there components of Choice Theory that would not apply or function well with second language learners? Would applying Choice Theory to second language education enhance the learning experience of second language students? This paper aims to provide answers to these questions. Focus will be on Glasser's Choice Theory and its applicability and implications in second language education. Axiom #5 ("What happened in the past has everything to do with what we are today, but we can only satisfy our basic needs right now and plan to continue satisfying them in the future") has been chosen to thoroughly explore Choice Theory with the IEP (Intensive English Program) students throughout a semester of instruction. The following are the results of Professor Naughton's observations and explorations.

Choice Theory in the Intensive English Language Program

Professor Naughton has had the privilege of teaching in the Intensive English Program where she and her fellow colleagues teach young adult learners from various parts of the world. The majority of their students come from China, Africa, the Middle East and South Asian countries. Often times, there are a handful of different languages and cultures in each classroom in the IEP program. As noted in their handbook, "Their educational backgrounds, learning styles, individual interests, and personalities are as diverse as their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (Institute for Language Education: Faculty Handbook, 2017). Therefore, being able to successfully manage their students and create high quality learning experiences is their highest priorities. Furthermore, the IEP instructors aim to provide opportunities for their students to take more responsibility for their learning and academic goals. The eight students who participated in the following activities were enrolled in a high-intermediate level English Literacy course. They were from China, Thailand, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. There were three females and five males (1 Male- Saudi Arabia, 1 Male- Jordan, 3 Males- China, 2 Females- China, and 1 Female- Thailand).

Glasser's Choice theory was applied in an Intensive English Program's Core Literacy classroom through introspective "activities." Naughton uses this term to describe the tools she used to assess her students' awareness and use of Choice Theory. These activities are as follows: journal writing, student

conferences, a Quality of Education Questionnaire and observations of the students' behaviors as they relate to Choice Theory. These activities occurred throughout the semester.

Choice Theory Activities

Journal writing is a routine assignment in the literacy course in which Naughton teaches, and its aim is to aid in written language fluency and reveal the students' thoughts and perspectives. A sample of the prompts are listed below. The prompt which addresses Glasser's five basic human needs was presented after a class discussion on this topic. The five basic human needs are derived from Glasser's ten axioms and will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

A Sample of Journal Entry Prompts:

- Describe the perfect job for you.
- Tell me about an event that changed your life.
- What do you need for a happy life?
- What is the most memorable gift you have ever been given?
- What is the best gift you have ever received?
- What do you think of Glasser's five basic human needs?

Conferencing with students is also a routine activity in the classroom and it occurs informally after L2's have submitted written material. The Quality of Education Questionnaire, which is based on the Teacher Reference Questions: a Choice Theory questionnaire administered to public school students (Hoglund, 2012) asks students questions regarding personal choice and education. These questions appear below.

The Student Quality of Education Questionnaire:

1. What do you want?
2. What don't you want?
3. How do you want school (class) to be?
4. What kind of student do you want to be?
5. What are your goals?
6. What do you want to achieve?
7. What do you want to learn?
8. What does a great day at school look like?
9. If you could change one thing what would it be?
10. How do you want to be treated?

In regard to Naughton's practices with her students, the last activity is observations. Observations are continuous in the literacy classroom since students' progress is routinely checked. These activities were applied because they either related to Choice Theory or were able to reveal whether or not Choice Theory was applicable in the ESL classroom.

Choice Theory's Five Basic Human Needs

Professor Naughton focused on Choice Theory's five basic human needs principle: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. These needs are the general motivation for "everything we do" (Glasser, 2001, p. 3). According to Glasser (1999), understanding Choice Theory's Five Basic Human Needs enables educators to create a positive classroom environment where students' basic needs can be met, and learning can thrive. Nourishing these five basic needs motivates students to act appropriately and positively in the classroom. If the student's basic needs are not met, this can lead to disinterest, disinvolvement, and behaving in inappropriate ways. What follows is a detailed explanation of each of the five basic needs and Naughton's students' thoughts and feelings on the five basic needs. The students' words presented are unedited.

Survival – The need for food, shelter, and safety

The first basic need is survival. This need is the first and most essential need. If a student's need for shelter, food, protection and nurturing is not being met, the student will not function well in a learning environment. It is critical that the teacher has a sense of whether or not her students' basic needs are being met; if they are not, immediate help needs to be sought. At Southern New Hampshire University, it is crucial that all students have the need of survival met; we have programs such as the food pantry, advising, counseling and the wellness center to aid and support students. Survival in the IEP is a necessary need for Naughton's students as noted here in one of the student's journal entries.

"In my opinion, the most important one is this 5 need is survival, because everyone should keep survival. First to do other. Second one I believe is freedom, that makes me can work as myself and be willing. The third should be love and belonging, so I will not just work for myself but also for other. Fourth is fun, the interest can be the reason I keep doing it. And the least I think is power. After I get have survived, freedom belong and interest, I will seeking for power." (Chinese male).

Additionally, these ESL students want to survive academically. Many of them have restrictions on how long they can be abroad. For them, being successful in the IEP program means they can move swiftly into their undergraduate program. A question in their Quality of Education Questionnaire asked what they want; they expressed the following: "Pass the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] to join major class" (Male- Chinese student); "Now I want to pass TOEFL. I want to finish my study recently" (Male- Chinese student); "I just want to pass TOEFL and study undergraduate degree" (Female- Chinese student). Passing the standardized TOEFL test, which is administered twice in one semester, is necessary for these students to meet their educational goals and earn their degrees. Not passing the TOEFL on the first try, has caused them to feel insecure in their present situation. It also means another term or two in the IEP, further delaying their academic plans.

Love and Belonging – The need for relationships, social connection, to give and receive affection as part of a group

As stated by Glasser, love and belonging are "the most important need ... as closeness and connectedness with the people we care about is a requisite for satisfying all of the needs" (Choice Theory, 2017). All human beings need to be valued, acknowledged and loved. In an ESL classroom

environment, it is important that the students feel that they are a valued part of the class culture and are wanted and accepted by all the members of the class and their teacher. Such recognition is a necessary element in second language education and is part of recommended practices of the six principles of exemplary teaching: “Teachers promote an emotionally positive and organized classroom with attention to reducing student anxiety and developing trust” (Short et. al. 2018, p. 36). What is more, an environment of acceptance, attentiveness, and trust is especially vital for international students who are apart from their families and need to create a place of belonging away from home (Alsubaie 2015). Fulfilling this need often times is a bit of a challenge for the IEP students since many of them are apart from their families for the first time. They come to the United States to study and have no friends or family waiting for them when they arrive. They find themselves in situations where they feel their language is inadequate and their needs are not met; they hunger for connectedness, understanding and friendship, and often times, the only place they can satisfy that need is in the language classroom.

One way to create an environment of love and belonging in the classroom is to have opportunities for interaction among the students. Assisting the students to meet their needs for belonging is a fundamental principle in the ESL classroom. To assist the students in meeting this need, Naughton makes sure that they have opportunities to interact with one another and make friends both in and out of the classroom. Group work and pair activities is one way in which students are able to cultivate friendships with peers and feel a sense of acceptance and belonging. Group and pair work have always been a part of instruction in the IEP. The students are also presented opportunities to integrate with domestic students through collaborative or community projects. They meet with undergraduate and graduate classes to share their cultures and are involved in community volunteer work in food banks and nursing homes. The IEP students are also provided with opportunities to be conversation partners with domestic students who care to learn about other cultures, languages and customs. In the IEP program, teachers may be the only ones that can facilitate, create and grow these situations in which international learners feel a sense of care and belonging in a new place with new people. Rapport and acknowledgment in the classroom are vital for learning and personal growth to occur. Moreover, journal writing, and conferencing opportunities have permitted the students to voice their opinions regarding their need to belong. In the following unedited journal entry, one of Naughton’s students shared his feelings on necessary needs.

“Definitely, humans need food and water because it is people’s energy, like car needs gas and engine, oil. Furthermore, people need love and a sense of belonging. For example, there are many people who come from other areas, working in city. These people is not local people, so there is a gap between local people and non-local people. They are hard to make friend with local people. They lack a sense of belonging and love, so they are loneliness.” (Chinese male)

The Chinese student who wrote the entry expressed the basic needs of survival as well as the need and consequence of seeking a friend in a new place. Furthermore, “human relationships are empowering. They are liberating. They are fun. They are life sustaining. Human relationships that are gratifying and pleasing provide the royal road to mental health and self-actualization” (Wubbolding, 2005, p. 43).

Power– The need to be powerful is to achieve to be competent, to be skilled to be recognized for our achievements and skill, to be listened to and have a sense of self-esteem

Power or the feeling of being empowered is natural human desire, and in the language classroom, teachers need to give opportunities for empowerment. Students will feel empowered if they have a voice in decision making and if their input in the classroom makes a difference. With power comes control, and learners would rather have some control over their learning rather than be controlled by their learning environment or learning situation. They, at different levels, want to be the leaders of their own futures and vocations. In regard to the IEP students, they may want power but not know how to seek it or feel that they do not have the language resources to do so, in some cases their language skills limit their ability to be leaders of their immediate futures. For many of them moving out of the IEP program will give them a sense of power and freedom which they greatly desire. Often power struggles can be unhelpful and even disruptive in a learning environment. Glasser believed that when student misbehave, it is important to sit down with students and ask what you the teacher can do to help (1999, p.107-112). Making students part of the decision-making will give them a sense of power. In a journal entry, one of my students had the following to say about power. To this student, power is also connected to freedom and love and belonging.

“There was an important event for me that I went out my country studying in America. When I stayed in China. I had my business, but I thought I need to learn more knowledge to manage my business, and to know what is happened in other country. As we know, the American is a developed country, some business is experience. So, I begin my study period in the USA. This is a big event that changed my life. I found new thing, and met some interesting friends and I like this change.” (Chinese male)

In the IEP, the faculty strives to assist our students in helping them reach their goals and feel a sense of power. Power in the IEP is connected to passing the Test of English as a Foreign Language standardized test. Those that pass are pleased with their program and their accomplishments. Those that do not pass may become depressed and resentful due to a lack of power and freedom. For some, power is a difficult need to meet in the IEP. The freedom to seek power is also a challenge for our students to meet.

Freedom – The need for independence, self-rule, to have choices and to be able to take control of the direction of one’s life

Like the previous needs, human beings need freedom; specifically, they need freedom in the form of choice: having a say in decisions and having the freedom to take responsibility for their actions and choices is vital for positive learning and behaviors. Students need to find their choices valuable and their opportunities achievable. In varying degrees, students want the freedom to use their voices, to offer feedback, to choose assignments, and work out situations. Taking responsibility for actions and pursuing freedom of choice is desirable for second language learners, yet they may not have the means to exercise this need until other needs are met. This is exemplified in my student’s journal response: “In my opinion, the most important one ... is survival, because everyone should keep survival first to do others. Second one I believe is freedom, that make me can work as myself and willing” –Chinese male. As noted here and from my observations of my students, a need for freedom does apply to international students; in most cases, L2 learner are not ready to exercise their need for freedom until their needs for

survival and love and belonging are fulfilled. Furthermore, the freedom to voice one's opinion in the classroom may not be part of the students' culture. A Chinese student is likely to fear "criticism and giving the wrong answers in class because the direct questioning approach in education [in the US is] unfamiliar in his culture" (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 87). Also, one of my Chinese female students asked for more "solo work" and less group work when answering the questionnaire. Thus, recognizing and meeting the students' needs is an important job of the English language teacher. Adapting a lesson and adjusting instruction to ensure that the students' needs are met is not only a teaching concept that Glasser's theory supports, but it is also an important principle of exemplary teaching (Short, 2018). Furthermore, the students' need for freedom is connected to leaving the IEP and earning their degrees.

Fun – The need to find pleasure, to play and to laugh

The final basic need is fun. Learning should have elements of fun and as human beings, we crave fun, creativity and excitement. Fun needs to appear from time to time in the classroom. L2 learners appreciate laughs and nuances in the classroom. Including activities and games is not only fun for the students, but they are also memorable events in a healthy learning environment. In the student questionnaires, students expressed a need for fun when asked what a great day at school [would] look like:

"No need to wake up early, funny class, no homework." –Chinese male.

"My great day at school is happy to learn with teacher." –Chinese male.

"Everyone has a relaxing time and participate all the class happy with teacher and classmate"
–Thai female.

Thus, if fun does not play a role in the students' needs for happy and enjoyable learning experiences, the absence of fun may result in an apathetic, dissatisfied and disruptive classroom. The following is another student's perspective on "fun":

"The important need for me is fun. It is more important than freedom, power, love and belonging, even survival. If someday I would die, I w[i]sh I can remain my happiness. In my life. I think that humans haven't sheer freedom; we live in earth a limited space, and we talking need to look for our friends feelings. And the power just supports the life that fun make me fun, consistently, love and belonging." (Chinese male)

Understanding and addressing the five basic needs of the students will facilitate classroom management and create a positive classroom culture. The best way for a teacher to apply Choice Theory is to be cognizant of the five basic needs of the student, to not try to control the student or punish the student, but rather to explore what need is not being met through questioning and to allow the student to self-evaluate the behavior and recognize what is needed for a particular need to be met. This would curb misbehavior and create an introspective learning opportunity for the L2 learners. Such assistance from the L2 teacher needs to be dealt with delicately and respectfully. Ideally before or after a learning situation and in a non-threatening manner. ("Glasser's Theory: Address Student Needs: Teachings in Education"). Furthermore, Robert E. Wubbolding, Senior Faculty, William Glasser International made the powerful statement that, "when it all comes down to it, use your ears and your mouth in the proportion in which God gave them to you. Chances are you're going to be okay. There's no guarantee but you're certainly going to be a lot better off than if you run your mouth continually. You are never too far wrong if you listen respectfully" (Zalaquett, 2016, p. 42).

In exploring the five basic needs identified by Glasser, Naughton has shown how Glasser's theory functioned in her classroom and impacted her students. The application of these activities and the investigation of the five human needs has also revealed that components of Choice Theory are applicable in the English Language Classroom. English language learners do need a learning environment in which they feel love and belonging. In respect to fulfilling the needs of freedom and power, these needs can be met by increasing knowledge and proficiency of the English language and culture. Students who participate in activities and succeed in their English studies feel a greater sense of power and freedom. These needs may take longer to meet for ESL students who struggle with the language and cultural integration. In respect to the need for survival, it certainly exists in the ESL classroom, for many of Naughton's students view it as the foundational need for all the other four needs: love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. My hope is that these findings will shed further light in the field of classroom management and quality L2 language teaching. ■

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