Culture Differences: A Major Barrier in English Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of culture and its impact on English language teaching and learning. A classroom, in today's world, is a melting pot of students from various social, economic and cultural backgrounds. These differences influence them in everything they do and think. If this cultural difference is not studied with due respect, it could become a major impediment in their acquisition of second language. Hence, this paper observes the multiple ways in which cultural difference comes to play in the life of a language learner. It also discusses on how the problem could be tackled with the development of a cultural intelligence.

Introduction

"Without an understanding of the unique meanings existing for the individual, the problems of helping him effectively are almost insurmountable."

--Arthur Combs

In today's world, there is no need for an introduction to emphasize the necessity for communication skills. It is that which comes in the forefront of skills which all employers would seek in their potential employees. It is that most significant factor which determines whether or not a person gets employment in today's world. This underscores the need of gaining mastery over a language and not any language, but, English in particular. This is so because it dominates international business, politics and culture in a way that no other language does in human history, which by the way, is one of the reasons of why it is called a global language. This paper focuses on certain impediments in teaching English as a second language and offers some plausible solutions for the same. If it is imparted to our students in a flawless manner, it will definitely increase the chances for them to get employed.

There is a dramatic upsurge of the number and diversity of students and adults of English language learners in the present scenario. The once narrowly defined group has now become extremely diverse representing a broad variety not only in linguistic and cultural terms but in educational and socioeconomic terms as well. This means that, each student in the class who comes from different backgrounds would learn in a different way. If a common method of teaching is implemented on them all, it wouldn't help them. These intricate and subtle differences play a key role in the learning of English language. If these characteristics are overlooked, it could become a stumbling block in their language acquisition.

The problem of unity and diversity

It is by now an established fact that the student community of English language learners is not homogeneous. They come from different cultural, economic and socio-linguistic backgrounds. Despite this condition, uniformity still prevails in the teaching practices used. Students use the same text books and same methods of learning. They work on an equal pace over the same content and work through the same curriculum and schedule. Tests imparted to assess their knowledge are also the same. This homogeneity is understandable because it is always easier to cling on to uniformity than accepting differences. Moreover, most education policies are framed keeping in mind the aim of same education to all but this so called equality in education is not advisable. It is now high time that we start to rethink the way English is being taught today. It has become the need of the hour to make the necessary changes so that the current imbalance between unity and diversity is resolved before it damages more number of students and teachers.

Cultural differences can be tackled with a cultural intelligence. It does not involve a deep understanding of every culture but a flexible set of skills. One must carefully analyze and reflect on the meaning of certain behavior and must also be willing to listen and pay attention to the student. It includes one's readiness to unlearn and challenge even one's own cultural beliefs and practices.

Some of the main problems that would crop up due to cultural differences are discussed below.

a)   **Culture and Language**

English language learners come to the classroom with unique knowledge and experiences built upon their first language and culture. Some of it is very evident (food and clothing) but there is also a very subtle part to it. For instance learners from different cultures can have different views on classroom behavior such as student teacher interaction as well as different views on the value of education. It can also affect how students understand a particular content as students from different cultures needn't have the same cultural experiences

needed to comprehend a particular text. A learners native language may even impact the ways the ways in which they learn English.

It would be a big mistake to emphasize equality for students who come from different cultures which have taught them beliefs and behaviors that are different from the majority culture emphasized in schools or colleges. For instance those students whose family values give importance to collaboration are asked to be independent. Students who are praised in their family to be social are asked to work quietly and alone. This results in a cultural clash where the student is torn between two cultures, i.e. home culture and target culture. The same will cause him to struggle in school. In the other way, if his individuality is valued, respected and promoted it would increase his self confidence and would ultimately bring him success.

Students who do not learn through the current best approach are labeled disable because their way of learning does not respond to the particular method that is followed by the institution. Individual learning differences must thus be encouraged because it is futile to search for a single best way to teach and learn as there is no such one best way to an effective outcome as students belong to different moulds.

b) Age and Educational Background

Along with culture and language, age also plays a vital role in one's second language acquisition. Research indicates that children and adults learn in different ways. Learners of different ages need different methods and approaches of learning. Thus language teaching methodologies employed must be appropriate for each age group.

Many researches have been undertaken in the field of second language acquisition and some of it proves the point that a person's proficiency in the native language greatly helps in his second language acquisition. In today's world, the classrooms have become so diverse that a teacher can never assume that all the students have the same or even similar educational backgrounds. One student could be from a very rich family and the one behind him would be from a very poor background. Another one could be from an educated family where his friend's parents could be illiterate. Although they belong to the same age, their educational backgrounds and native language literacy skills could be entirely different which means no single method could be applied to all. This is a problem that any teacher, perhaps, from any part of the globe would confront every day.

c) Socioeconomic status

`Like all the other factors, the socioeconomic status of students also plays a role in English language acquisition. Some of them would come from very poor families and would be unable to support or nurture their kids at home. Such kids won't get an additional care in education from their home. In some cases, the student's both parents would be working late and hence he /she would be in charge to take care of the other siblings. Another group would be having a broken family which would leave him in a psychological trauma. This will affect not only their second language acquisition but is powerful enough to change their whole outlook towards learning.

d) Nature vs. Nurture

Every child is a product of nature and nurture. We all are born with certain predispositions for learning practices and at the same time are shaped by the external influences such as family, relatives and extended community. Myers (1990) asserts that "Type development starts at a very early age. The hypothesis is that the type is inborn, an innate predisposition like the right or left handedness, but the successful development of type can be greatly helped or hindered by environment from the beginning"

When one's culture supports his identity and uniqueness, he grows to be a very healthy and balanced individual. On the other hand, if one's culture forces one to be typical of its predilections, they start to find something wrong with themselves. They will, since then, kindle a never ending tryst with their nature and forceful 'nurture'. Gardner (1991) states that "We are as much creatures of our culture as we are creatures of our brain"(p38)

Hence, for a teacher to provide beneficial learning opportunities for everyone, it is mandatory that he or she must know the learner; their personalities and also learned cultural values.

e) Teacher's culture

Bennet (1986) said that " to the extent that teachers teach as they have been taught to learn , and to the extent that culture shapes learning style , students who share a teacher's ethnic background will be favored in the class" (p96). This becomes another serious problem in a language class. The unresolved issue even today is how teachers from a different culture would accommodate a varied and diverse population of students. If not dealt with properly, it would result in favoritism which in no way helps a healthy classroom. There could be potential successful learners who come from a different cultural background but is impeded by a teacher who believes that his /her cultural orientation is the best. Hence, they would follow only a particular method of teaching which they are accustomed with and ceases to be flexible to meet the needs of the student.

As the main impediments of cultural differences in English classes have been stated, the paper looks into the possible solutions.

a)   Respecting the 'multicultural'

To facilitate an effective learning environment for everyone, teachers much respect the diverse student community and accept their cultural identities. Every culture is unique and important in its own right. In our multicultural classrooms, students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds would assemble. Teachers must hence learn to understand, respect and celebrate their differences. It could result in a just classroom where every student gets the maximum opportunity of growth in all terms.

b)   Students are not empty vessels

There is a popular misconception that students are empty vessels to be filled. Just because they come to an institution to learn doesn't mean that they know nothing by themselves. They bring with them rich language and varied cultural experiences. This most often goes unrecognized in schools. Ethnographic research conducted in schools reveal that rich language and literary practices often go unnoticed in classrooms (Dyson, 2005; Fisher, 2003; Heath, 1983; Mahiri, 2004). It is also proven that if teachers could successfully infuse pedagogical strategies that are culturally and linguistically responsive, it would increase student efficacy, and academic innovation (Lee, 2001; Ladson Billings, 1994)

Hence teachers and teacher educators must acknowledge, celebrate and incorporate these funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, &Gonzalez, 1994) brought into the classrooms by the children.

c)   Standard English and 'the other'

The dialect of the dominant culture is often mythologized as Standard English. For an English language learner, it is an essential prerequisite that he learns this form which is widely accepted, both in spoken and written form. At the same time, the teachers should enlighten them about the importance of their native codes as well. They must emphasize that it is not so because their English is in some way inferior but as a result of certain power politics. Teachers must also help the students to critically analyze how certain codes become the mainstream ones and how their own native dialectical patterns are sometimes appropriated by the dominant culture. With the help of such discussions, we must also put an end to the ever active speculation of whether the native code or mainstream code is to be followed. Teachers must convince the students that they must master Standard English as it is the need of the hour and must also add that it doesn't question the linguistic validity of their native language.

d)   Naturalizing the disparity

No matter how hard the teachers try, the gap of cultural differences can never be completely filled. There will be a disparity between the racial, socio economic and cultural backgrounds of English educators and their students. They will have to acknowledge that such inequalities will perpetuate for sure. The educator's responsibility is to make the gap as small as possible.

The fundamental work of teacher educators will be in framing the curriculum. They will have to involve cross cultural experiences as a part of curriculum so as to study, embrace and build an understanding of the other. The knowledge thus produced can be used for the benefit of all. In short, they confront the Herculean task of exploring unity in diversity. Teachers must thus actively engage in projects that will enlighten their understanding of themselves and also that which complements their work in crossing cultural boundaries. This could involve leaning language, studying culture and much more. In short, we can't do what we have always done because we don't have the same students we've had before (Kansas National Educational Association, 2003)

e)   Teaching : Political or Apolitical

Teaching is clearly a political act. It is a very serious business which involves the carving out of future teachers and citizens and hence, it is mandatory that they must be models of equality and a just society. A teacher is powerful enough to become agents of change in a classroom, school, family and society. They have a pivotal role in seeking various forms of dominant norms and values, especially that which marginalizes some and privileges some others. Effective literacy teachers of diverse students think about their classrooms as sites of struggle and transformative action in academic literacy development and social change.

Through praxis, the combination of active reflection and reflective action (Freire, 1970) teachers and teacher educators are able to build and strengthen collective efforts towards individual and social transformation. Teachers and teacher educators must thus try to expand and enrich relevant course materials, activities, methods in serving diverse students of the 21st century in the pursuit of equality, achievement and justice.

Conclusion

In today's world, there is an abundance of opportunities for employment but only for the deserving ones. One must remember that not just the right educational qualification would fetch a job but he needs to be employable and the employability of a person depends upon soft skills too. Language is one of the most important soft skill and this paper focuses on helping a second language learner to acquire that more clearly.

The paper deals with culture differences in the classroom as a major threat to English language learners. It examines the condition and also offers some solutions for the same.

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