The Internet TESLJournal

Communicating Cross-Culturally: What Teachers Should Know

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This article looks at the need for teachers to be culturally responsive and competent as schools and classrooms become increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse. It highlights five points of cultural difference with which all teachers should be aware when teaching students of diverse backgrounds.

Introduction

English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing group of students in the United States today (Spellings, 2005). Today, one out of every nine students is learning English as a second language. That's about 5.4 million children—almost the population of Arizona, or Maryland, or Tennessee (Spellings, 2005). If this trend continues, current projections indicate that by the year 2030, 40% of all school-aged children in the United States will be speakers of a first language other than English (Duffey, 2004). Teacher demands and expectations today are far greater than they have ever been. But are classroom teachers adequately prepared to teach and interact with this culturally and linguistically diverse population? In classrooms where what is communicated, practiced, and perceived greatly affect and impact students, it is imperative that teachers learn how to effectively communicate cross-culturally in such diverse contexts.

If teachers are to become effective cross-cultural communicators, it is essential to understand the role that culture plays within the multi-cultural school setting. Lustig and Koester (2003) define culture as "a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people." Similarly, Samovar and Porter (1991) explain culture as a medium that touches and alters all aspects of human life, including personality, how people express themselves (which includes displays of emotion), the way they think, how they move, and how problems are solved. Indeed, culture goes far beyond the climate, food, and clothing of a student's native country.

Culture, undoubtedly, is complex. It is multi-layered and multifaceted. Indeed, some have likened it to an iceberg of which only the top is visible while a massive part remains unobservable below the surface of the water. Others have compared culture to an onion with its many layers (Hofstede, 1991). As one layer is peeled, another layer lies beneath, waiting to be discovered. Both metaphors powerfully address the complexity of culture. In these complexities lies the challenge that teachers of ELLs face.

Cultural Competence in the Classroom

Competence in cross-cultural communication requires diving below the surface to see the rest of the iceberg, and it involves onion peeling, too: acquiring a corpus of deeper cultural information that might affect how a teacher instructs and how a student learns. While the iceberg and onion metaphors speak to the complex nature of culture, they also evoke an array of feelings. Running into an iceberg can cause an unexpected jolt, and an onion, as it is peeled, can cause the eyes to tear; likewise--to go from metaphor to analogy--the process of becoming culturally competent also comes with new challenges and experiences that might, initially at least, surprise, shock, or even offend. In the classroom, being culturally competent also involves an understanding of how cultures differ under the surface and how cultures respond differently to similar situations.

Acquiring cultural competence is a gradual process. It is achieved only after many observations, experiences, and interactions in the classroom and playground, with parents and with peers. However, the process can begin with the knowledge and understanding of six basic cultural differences that teachers are likely to encounter in the culturally diverse classroom. Familiarity with these differences will begin to aid teachers in understanding the complexity of teaching diverse groups of students.

1. Ways of Knowing

How do cultures come to acquire information? In some cultures, information is gathered through intensive research in libraries and on the Internet--for example, in the United States. These cultures appreciate evidence that can be measured and documented through such media.

On the other hand, other cultures acquire information through "non-academic" sources--for example, through elders, nature, spirits, or symbols. Some cultures do not have the same quantity and quality of experience with books or similar forms of research. These cultures may place greater value on information and knowledge acquired through oral tradition.

2. Ways of Solving Problems

Cultures have different ways of solving problems. It is surprising that given the same set of problems and circumstances, cultures can arrive at very different solutions. Cultures reason differently and arrive at solutions based on their distinctive values, philosophy and beliefs. One example is the variety of responses that members of different cultures provide to the following question:

> Suppose you are on a boat with your mother, your spouse and your child. Suddenly, the boat begins to sink. You determine that you can only save one of the other passengers. Whom do you save?

According to survey results, 60% of Americans save their spouse, 40% save their children. The reasons typically offered run along these lines:

- Save Spouse: "My spouse is my partner for life and I can have more children.";
- Save Child: "Children represent the future, so it is vital to protect them first. Probably, my spouse would support this decision."

However, among Asian cultures, or Americans of recent Asian descent, nearly 100% of respondents state that they would save the mother. The rationale I have heard offered is this:

- Save Mother: "My mother gave me life; I owe her my life. I can marry again; I can have more children, but I cannot replace my mother or otherwise repay the debt I owe her." (Texin, 2002).

3. Ways of Communicating Non-verbally

Cultures have different ways of communicating non-verbally, and it is crucial for teachers to be aware of these differences. In a class that is culturally diverse, any or all of the following might be observed in the classroom: children who will not make direct eye contact when talking to a teacher, because to do so would show lack of respect in their culture; children who smile not because they are happy but because they are embarrassed or do not understand and are afraid to ask questions; others who rarely smile, such as students from Korea: "In Korean culture, smiling signals shallowness and thoughtlessness. The Korean attitude toward smiling is expressed in the proverb, 'the man who smiles a lot is not a real man'" (Dresser, 1996).

When teachers begin to recognize that cultures have different ways of communicating non-verbally, they will understand their ELL students better and be less likely to be offended or to misinterpret non-verbal clues to emotional, cognitive, or attitudinal states.

4. Ways of Learning

Generally speaking, different cultures also learn in different ways. In the United States students often work in groups and do collaborative activities in which they learn from one another. Classrooms in such cases can be student-centered, with the teacher as facilitator. In some cultures, however, the teacher is always the center of class activities, the sole authority figure. Sometimes, students do not even dare to ask questions, as to do so would challenge the teacher's authority. There are no collaborative activities in such classrooms, and students are required to memorize pages and pages of information that they subsequently restate on written tests.

5. Ways of Dealing with Conflict

Conflict is a fact of life. It is in observing how people deal with and react to conflicts that we see clear differences between cultures. Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the United States, conflict is not usually desirable; nonetheless, conventional wisdom in this country encourages individuals to deal directly with conflicts when they do arise. In fact, face-to-face encounters are usually suggested as the way to work through whatever problems exist.

By contrast, in many Asian countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning. As a rule, these cultures hold that differences are best worked out quietly. Thus, written exchanges might be preferred over face-to-face encounters as a means of conflict resolution (Dupraw and Axner, 1997).

6. Ways of Using Symbols

In the multicultural school setting, symbols that are unique to various cultures should be correctly understood and interpreted. Otherwise, problems can arise. One case in point occurred in an elementary school in New York City. A math teacher asked her students to embellish their math portfolios by drawing pictures to accompany them. She was incensed when she saw her young student from India drawing what she thought was a swastika. Furious, she took the student’s "artwork" and ripped it in half in front of the whole class! Subsequently, she learned from another teacher at the school, a Hindu, that what had looked to her like a swastika was actually a sacred symbol of wisdom that Hindus throughout the world have used for thousands of years!

Discussion

The changing demographics of classrooms in the United States make it incumbent upon us as teachers to know our students' cultures. In order to improve our cross-cultural interactions, teachers must learn not just the basic facts but even important nuances of their students' cultures (Hodgkinson, 1991). There are many challenges in achieving cross-cultural communication. However, the more teachers learn about their students of diverse backgrounds, the better they become as cross-cultural communicators and the more likely they will be to contribute to optimal student learning outcomes. Banks concurs: "If teachers are to increase learning opportunities for all students, they must be knowledgeable about the social and cultural contexts of teaching and learning" (Banks et al., 2001).

Yet cultural contexts are not easy to understand. In fact, such an understanding can often be reached only if teachers begin by practicing cross-cultural communication. The following are suggestions that teachers might find useful in increasing their competence in cross-cultural communication, thus allowing them to learn from culturally diverse members of the school community:

- Build relationships with students and their parents -- Relationships built on trust go a long way. Students must feel that they belong and are accepted. Politeness, friendliness, kindness, fairness, respect and empathy are important factors in establishing a sound teacher-student relationship.

- Listen empathetically -- Teachers must listen actively and carefully to their students, putting themselves in their students' places and learning to read between cultural lines. Teachers might also listen to their students' conversations with their classmates. The things they talk about and ask teachers to discuss and explain are the areas that concern them the most.
- Look for cultural interpreters in school or in the community who can serve as resources in assisting teachers to add to their cultural funds of knowledge. Teachers can ask such interpreters cultural questions and share with them their cultural concerns.
- Take advantage of available resources: books, articles, films, music, audio recordings, and a variety of material from the Internet that might aid teachers in learning more about their students' cultures.

Conclusion

In the United States, with so much cultural mixing, teachers no longer have a choice as to whether they want to interact with diversity or not. They must become cross-culturally competent. To become cross-culturally competent in the classroom teachers must understand important ways in which cultures differ and how this affects the ways in which their students behave. Through studying the cultural backgrounds of their students, teachers can learn to avoid some of the problems that surface each day.

Living in a global society, teachers are called upon to instruct and work with students with very different ethnicities and beliefs from those to which they have been accustomed. Therefore, it is vital that teachers continuously educate themselves, discovering all that they can about their students and their backgrounds. In the process of developing their cultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills, the five cross-cultural points of comparison and the techniques for expanding cultural knowledge discussed above can provide important guidelines for teachers. Ultimately, such an approach should help teachers to understand and respect diverse students and to guide these students more effectively toward academic and personal success and fulfillment.

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XII, No. 2, February 2006
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