

NURTURING CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF EFL TEACHERS AS STUDENTS' ADVOCATES IN THE ESL SETTING

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One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child. Carl Jung

Non-English speaking students often have many challenges to overcome and very little linguistic, academic, and cultural support when they first arrive in American schools. Teachers work hard to provide them with the tools to improve their Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), but a nurturing, culturally safe environment is frequently overlooked as a requirement for their success. However, by understanding their own attitude towards different cultures and languages, exercising empathy, exploring and sharing the stages of culture shock, learning a foreign language, and having high expectations of the English Language Learning (ELL) newcomers, teachers can best fulfill their students cultural and affective needs.

Many assumptions about English Language Learners are based not on language alone but also on nationality, gender, and physical appearance. Underlying stereotypes can eventually affect the outcome of the teaching and learning process. Deep awareness of the teacher's own perspectives and attitude towards people from other countries, and willingness to accept other cultural values, helps the students be more open and tolerant themselves. Empathy, then, plays a crucial role in educating newcomers. A great percentage of people who immigrates to the United States have gone through extenuating economic hardships. Most of the ELL's in American schools do not have a strong academic background in their own language, let alone in English, nor do they have meaningful parental support. Understanding where the students come from, and how their life experiences have shaped their rate of learning provides a better view of what students need.

Being aware of the different stages of culture shock is another way to relate better to the ELL's learning experience. The concept of culture shock might be foreign to many teachers. However, moving to another country has a great impact on a person's physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities. The newcomers have to reorganize and sometimes eliminate their cultural principles in order to incorporate new ones. Teachers and students have to realize that this process takes time and affects the students' performance in the classroom. As it can be seen, learning a language and migrating to another country are unique experiences that not many people can relate to unless they have gone through those experiences themselves. Teachers who work with ELLs, will be more likely to care genuinely for a student, if they are familiar with those experiences. Although this is not a requirement for good teaching, knowing another language or having lived in another country provides teachers with sufficient background knowledge to deal with ELL's more effectively.

Nurturing does not mean condescending. Teachers should have high, realistic, expectations of ELL newcomers. It is in these stages that students learn habits and routines that can help them cope with the academic load and social demands they will encounter. A meaningful, caring relationship with each student will provide the tools to know how hard to push a student and avoid frustration in the classroom. Teaching content and academic skills is important, but there is much more to the teaching of ELL students; it requires deep awareness of one's attitude towards different cultures, profound knowledge of the process of acculturation, empathy, dedication, and patience, and most of all, high expectations of the students. All of these together, create a bond between teacher and student, lower students' affective filter, and provide the conditions for meaningful and long lasting learning.

What can teachers do when nineteen out of twenty-five students in their class do not speak the teachers' language? How can they teach the students mathematics, social studies, or science? Worse yet, what can teachers do if all nineteen students speak nineteen different native languages? This complex situation is not hypothetical; it is a reality in many schools in the

United States, where immigration patterns have changed drastically. In recent years, the number of “non-English speaking” students in the U.S. has increased in some states by two hundred percent. Lilburn Elementary School (LES), in Georgia, is an example of such change. Seventy-seven percent of the one thousand three hundred ninety three students at LES speak one of thirty-four different languages. Spanish, Vietnamese and Arabic are among the most common languages spoken in this school (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2007). In fact, the United States Census Bureau projects that by the year 2030, forty percent of the children enrolled in kindergarten, elementary, and middle school in the US will not speak English as their native language (Herrera & Murry, 2005, p.5). That means around one hundred and twenty million people out of three hundred million people, almost half of the population, will speak a language other than English as their native language.

Educating such a large number of children when they do not speak the language of the majority is a significant challenge for both the educational authorities in the United States and the children. However, the difficulties students with a first language other than English face cannot be narrowed to language alone. Many of those children arrive to the United States from war-torn countries; others reside in the U.S. under “dubious” immigration status. In either case, students have usually missed months or even years of schooling. Having left all they owned back in their home country, they are raised in poverty with little or no access to books, computers, or tutors. Not only that, they also carry with them a big load of emotional baggage. Sadly, students of English as a second, third, or fourth language in the United States, or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students (Herrera & Murry, 2005, p.8), often have many challenges to overcome and very little linguistic, academic, and cultural support when they first arrive in American schools. Their unique circumstances require also unique teaching methods that can address their individual affective needs.

Teachers in American schools do work hard to provide CLD students with the tools to improve their Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Unfortunately, they frequently overlook creating a nurturing and culturally safe environment that ensures students’ success. Because of this, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers must be aware of their role as cultural ambassadors, students’ advocates, and staff development speakers. It is their responsibility to motivate other teachers with little knowledge of students’ language, cultural differences and life circumstances to understand the implications of going to school under such strenuous circumstances. It is imperative that teachers of CLD students are motivated to practice Humanistic principles in their teaching. Understanding their own attitude towards different cultures and languages, exercising empathy, exploring the stages of culture shock, and having high expectations of the CLD students are key elements to fulfill students cultural and affective needs.

Educational Background

Humanism and Constructivism

In the 1950's, psychologists Erikson, Maslow, and Rogers among others gave birth to psychology's Humanism. Humanists highlighted the importance of social interaction, human needs, and meaningful learning. This school of psychology "emphasized the importance of the inner world of the human being and places the individual's thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human developments" (Wang, 2005). Before then, students' feelings were rarely taken into account in language teaching because the emphasis had been placed mostly on the subject matter.

In the 1970's, the influence of Humanism in language teaching gave its first fruits: the Humanistic Approach. The Humanistic Approach focused "less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (Stevick, 1980, as cited in Wang, 2005). Three main methods, The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Community Language Learning arose from it. These methods placed emphasis on increasing student involvement, creating an anxiety-free teaching environment, and carrying out collaborative learning-teaching activities (Wang, 2005). By that time, Constructivist thinkers such as Dewey, Ausubel, Vygotsky and Piaget had also highlighted the importance of the social and cognitive contexts in the teaching-learning process. They perceived learning as the active construction of knowledge by the learner, who incorporates new information to previous knowledge (Huitt, 2003).

Both, Humanism and Constructivism views prompted a change in the way language teaching was delivered. The language classroom experienced a shift in power. The teacher's role had become that of a counselor, guide or facilitator, letting students take center stage.

Teaching and Testing Policies Overview

While most scholars, educational authorities, and teachers in the United States agree that educators should tailor instructional methods and techniques to fulfill students' needs, reality does not always portray so. Contradictory as it seems, current teaching and testing policies make very difficult for educators to invest time providing students with cultural and individualized support. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education act, passed in 2001, demands accountability for all students' scores in standardized tests. The NCLB act also outlines drastic consequences for the schools that fail to comply with the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) mark it specifies. CLD students whose English and academic language skills are often low and who are also facing

culture shock, are expected to achieve the same standards as native speakers of the language. As a result, school systems have rearranged their priorities and stopped focusing on the student in order to focus on the subject matter.

Traditionally, CLD students had been denied access to the content area curriculum because of their limited English proficiency. They were usually pulled out of their classroom to an English as a Second Language class in which the learning of the English language was the main objective; thus, missing mathematics, science and social studies instruction. The NCLB act provided an opportunity for CLD students to finally be considered as active participants in their classrooms. Nevertheless, it also created “a predictable tendency among educational practitioners, whose performance evaluations and employment may depend on student standardized test scores, to “teach to the test” (Earl & LeMahieu, 1997; McNeil, 2000b, as cited in Herrera & Murry, 2005, p 47).

Moreover, standardized tests in English are administered to CLD students to measure AYP. Besides the anxiety and stress this causes to students, high stakes decisions based on students’ test results are made in regards to their education. These decisions do not only affect students’ high school graduation but also influence their higher education and job opportunities in the future. Although, Humanist and Constructivist principles are widely accepted and supported by the educational community in the United States and all over the world, the educational system in the United States, as in many other countries, favors such principles in theory but discourages a humanist and constructivist view of teaching and learning in the practice.

Current Teaching Methods

Because of the requirement imposed on CLD students by the NCLB act, the educational emphasis has switched from communicative English to Content-Based Instruction. Current research has demonstrated that CLD students can and should develop both, the oral skills that will lead to survival in social contexts and the content-area skills that will help them in the academic context (Echeverria, J., Vogt, M., & Short, D.,2004; Chamot, A.U., & O’Malley, J. M.,1994). Cummins calls those survival skills Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) while he refers to the academic skills as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2007). As a result of this, a multiplicity of methods has emerged in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), and the Integrated Content Based Approach (ICB) are among the approaches that look to develop content area specific vocabulary and skills while teaching English to CLD students. These approaches stress the use of language learning strategies, cognitive principles, and content-area grade level materials.

Once again, affective needs remain at the margin. Current teaching and testing policies leave very little time for teachers to get to know their CLD students better. Still, teachers stay vigilant in the hope that this wave of contemporary language teaching methods can fulfill CLD students' needs and federal and state testing expectations as well. Far from that, CLD students struggle to overcome the pressure imposed on them by the school system.

EFL teachers: Students' Advocates

As it can be seen, being a CLD student in the United States is not an easy task. Academic and cognitive skills alone do not do much for students if they are afflicted, fearful, lonely or hungry. Still, many educators might not relate to students' experiences and difficulty to adapt to the new country. For this reason, it is imperative that EFL teachers working in ESL settings make other educators aware of four important aspects: cultural attitude, culture shock, empathy and educational expectations.

Cultural Attitude

Many assumptions about Culturally and Linguistic Diverse students are based not on language alone but also on nationality, physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Underlying stereotypes of these traits might lead to prejudice and discrimination in the classroom, affecting the outcome of the teaching and learning process. As Ovando, Combs & Collier (2006) state, "the positive or negative perceptions of the mainstream population towards the minority population can affect the academic performance of language minority students as they internalize these perceptions" (p.18).

The terms used to refer to CLD students in school systems through out the country, such as LMS, Language Minority Students, ELL, English Language Learner, and NEP, Non English Proficient, exemplify the way assumptions about CLD students are created and spread unconsciously. These acronyms focus on students "lack" of something and implies the fact that students are seen as a burden on the educational system, instead of focusing on their cultural assets. In the words of Herrera and Murry, 2005, p. 10,

This perspective holds that CLD students are language (presumably English) deficient and culture and home deficient and, as a result, at risk of academic failure. In one sense, the prevalence of this liability or deficit perspective is not surprising given the fact that the United States is one of the few countries in the world that does not value either bilingualism or multilingualism (Crawford, 2000).

CLD students do have culture, home, and valuable life experiences; they just cannot always communicate them effectively. Teachers who, without noticing, expose their students to biased information, activities, or behaviors, may be damaging the perspective students have of themselves and of others permanently. In order to avoid doing that, all teachers of CLD students should take the time to research students' countries and their history as well as the kind of language they speak and how different it is from English. An old proverb, "la ignorancia es la madre de todos los males", literally meaning "ignorance is the mother of all evil", highlights the importance of knowing about the culture and language of CLD students. Making inaccurate judgments about CLD students linguistic, social and academic skills is less likely to happen if teachers have background information about the students' country and language. Because a person's culture usually influences the way they perceive others' actions, inviting teachers to first reflect on their own beliefs and attitude towards their culture and towards their students' cultures is a relevant step in promoting tolerance in the classroom.

Culture Shock

Other element teachers should take into account when working with CLD students is culture shock. This term was first coined by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in the 1960's (Irwin, 2007). Oberg, described culture shock as a "malady...precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1954). When students move to the United States they do not only have to learn a new language, they also have to deal with strong emotions of grief: they have left relatives, friends, and places that embedded their cultural identity, the core of who they are.

Usually, idealized, the United States represents a safe heaven for many CLD students. Hence, the first stage is characterized by excitement and curiosity. In the second stage; however, reality strikes. In the new culture, everything looks different. Extensive amounts of energy are used to do tasks that back in their native country required little or no effort. The solely act of navigating through the school halls without getting lost generates a great deal of anxiety for CLD students. People in the new environment also act differently. New sets of procedures, rules and social codes must be learned in order to succeed. What students knew back home might or might not be useful in the new context. During the third stage, children start to feel comfortable in the new environment and starting to develop a new cultural identity. It is in this stage that the children assimilate, replacing their native culture with that of the United States, or acculturate, integrating cultural patterns of both cultures (Igoa, 2005). In the fourth stage students would have overcome the initial uneasiness, isolation, and confusion. Instead, they would have developed the necessary skills to not only survive but also enjoy living in the United States (Irwin, 2007).

Finally, if students go back to their home country, the experience of culture shock will possibly repeat itself (http://www.geneva.edu/object/crossroads_ct_reentryshock_page).

Not all cultural transitions are successful or as smooth as it is described above. Still after living in the United States for a long period of time, CLD students might still be struggling with mixed feelings about their origins and their place in their new home, even if they do not show it. Culture shock is especially problematic for CLD students because of the social and economic hardships they go through; however, its impact on students remains foreign to many teachers, especially those who had never lived abroad. Therefore, when CLD students show poor academic performance, tiredness, behavior problems, adaptation issues and mood changes, educators blame the children's cultural background. Unaware of the process students are going through, teachers sometimes will make ill remarks such as "No wonder he is so lazy, he is Hispanic." Because of this, teachers should be made aware of the effects that moving to another country has on a person's physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities.

Likewise, teachers and students have to realize that the process of acculturation takes time and affects the students' performance in the classroom in unpredicted ways. There is not an "easy fix" for the emotions and behaviors that arise during culture shock. However, Igoa, 2005, p.40, shares,

In the transplant, it is customary for the gardener to take as many of the plants roots as possible to the new ground. In the uprooting experience, the child's family must do the same. Teachers as "gardeners" of these seedlings need to understand the importance of cultural roots.

Validating students' culture while introducing the new culture will help them develop a sense of worth of who they are at the time they explore who they can be. Knowing what culture shock is and the different stages it encompasses helps teachers guide students in transitioning to their new surroundings. CLD students find comfort in the knowledge that what they are going through stages and that they will eventually lead to wonderful transformations. Like the caterpillar who turns into a butterfly, with support from the teacher, CLD students will come out of their chrysalis when they are ready.

Empathy

There is no better way to understand what CLD students go through than by actually going through the same experiences: immigration, war, extenuating economic hardships, interrupted schooling and second language acquisition. Since that is not likely to happen, empathy plays a crucial role in educating CLD students. Understanding where the students come from and how their life experiences have shaped their rate of learning provides a better view of what students need.

Learning a language and migrating to another country are unique experiences that not many people can relate to unless they have gone through those experiences themselves. Teachers who work with CLDs are more likely to care genuinely for a student, if they are familiar with those experiences. Teachers who know another language or have lived in another country are better equipped to help CLD students. They can draw from their own experience to support students emotionally and identify with them. By doing this, they enhance the teacher-student bond.

High Expectations

Finally, a “nurturing approach” does not imply a reductionistic approach. Although “often educators associate a limited ability to speak the language with an ability to perform academic tasks at grade level” (Herrera & Murry, 2005), CLD students must be challenged. They need level appropriate highly demanding tasks; tasks that motivate them to use their prior knowledge. Feelings of success help shape their self-image in a positive way and allow for confidence in their abilities to develop.

As Igoa states, “nurturance is what they need, but not the kind of nurturance that weakens them or fosters dependence on the teacher.” Teachers should have high, realistic, expectations of CLD newcomers. It is in these stages that students learn habits and routines that can help them cope with the academic load and social demands they will encounter. A meaningful, caring relationship with each student will provide the tools to know how hard to push a student and avoid frustration in the classroom. CLD students’ self concept needs to be reinforced.

Concluding Remarks

Carl Jung’s quote at the beginning of this paper reveals that teaching content and academic skills is important, but that there is much more to the teaching of CLD students. Such an endeavor requires deep awareness of one’s attitude towards different cultures, profound knowledge of the process of acculturation, insightful understanding of students’ life experiences and feelings and true, high expectations of the students. All of these together, create a strong bond between teacher and student. Such bond lowers students’ affective filter and provides the conditions for meaningful and long lasting learning. Igoa points out that teachers need to be “educational parents” (1995, p.103). Being an educational parent becomes more difficult to achieve when there are cultural and linguistic barriers in the classroom. Therefore it is the EFL teacher job to encourage other educators to debunk stereotypes, open their minds, and experience culture in a way that helps develop nurturing relationships with their students: the kind of relationships in which “the teacher [is the] person whom the student admires and emulates and with whom he or she can share deep feelings-a trusted adult” (Igoa, 1995, p.104).

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