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# Cross-Cultural Considerations: Raising Language Teachers Awareness About the Importance of Multiculturalism

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**Cover Page Footnote**
Appreciate considering this simple and important ideas.

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**Abstract**

With the worldwide use of English as a second language (ESL) and globalization, teachers are expected to understand, acknowledge and interact with culturally and linguistically diverse students and integrate their linguistic and multicultural backgrounds in classroom settings. Teachers need to be multicultural to be able to successfully impact their students to be multicultural. This paper provides English language teachers with valuable recommendations based on cross-cultural studies and my experience, as an ESL teacher, on how to be responsive to students from different cultures to empower and enhance their language proficiency skills.

## 1. Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the percentage of international students who are learning English as a foreign language in U.S. schools has increased significantly in the last two decades. For instance, "the data story shows nearly every state has at least one school district where the EL population has increased by more than 50% since the 2010 school year" (2018). These students are coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which make the adjustment process to a new environment challenging. Being a non-native English teacher who has experienced the challenges of learning a new language, adopting a new culture, and accepting new learning strategies has made it easier for me to empathize with my students and feel the frustrations that many of them could experience.

This paper provides English language teachers with valuable recommendations based on cross-cultural studies and my experience in empowering and enhancing the language proficiency skills of one of my Vietnamese students at a U.S. language center.

Based on her coursework grades, my colleagues and I made a false assumption that she might have a learning deficiency. The student was socially and academically weak in comparison to her classmates who came from different backgrounds leading my colleagues and I to ignore the impact of culture in impeding my student's language learning. For instance, Powell & Anderson (1994) support this claim saying "culture provides us with a heritage and a set of expectations about educational settings" (p. 322). The paper concludes with valuable recommendations and practices for ESL teachers that positively enhanced my Vietnamese student's language proficiency.

## 2. Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics refers to the effects of language use on society including cultural norms, beliefs, and context where language can be used (Crystal, 1987). It is also about revealing why speakers make this conscious or that unconscious linguistic choice during communications and "how these choices are constrained, and how certain 'types' of people end up making similar and different choices" (Kiesling, 2016, p. 2). With that being said, communication between two different individuals is not always easy, what if it is between two individuals from a completely different culture and linguistic background? In this context, I refer to English language teachers and ESL students who are from a completely different culture and linguistic schemes. A crucial knowledge that any foreign language teachers should master to bridge the gap between them and their international students is sociolinguistics and cross-cultural studies knowledge. When language teachers teach the target language to students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they need to master more than pedagogy. In fact, they need to know how sociolinguistics function and how to bring its meaning into reality.

Many researchers such as (Bonvillain, 2019; Lado, ) argue that both language and culture are inseparable parts of the intellectual scheme of every human being. This means that when a student enters to class to learn a foreign language, the student comes with a set of package around which his/her life was evolved. This set of package includes the student's culture (norms, values, taboos, behavior, etc.) and first language (mother tongue). This set of package from the first language will definitely transfer with the student when learning a foreign language. Therefore, teaching English to students from a different culture and linguistic background requires teachers to be aware that within the process of teaching and learning, there are many aspects they need to be aware of through understanding some sociolinguistics that Crystal (1987) describes it as a branch of linguistic that considers the relationship between language, culture and society.

**3. Cross-Cultural differences among language learners**

Literature review of the cross-cultural transfer on learning a foreign language started with the work of some American pioneers in the field of linguistic such as Fries' Teaching and learning English as a foreign language 1945, Lado' *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). For instance, Lado (1957) claimed that learning a foreign language is a completely different process from learning the first language. He also argued that structural differences and similarities between the first language and the target language influence learning of the target language with either ease or difficulties. In other words, learners would encounter less difficulty in learning the target language if it s similar to their first language or another language that they are already familiar with its syntax and structure.

Moreover, Odlin (1997) argues that first language influence on learning the target

language seems to be "an important characteristic of second language learner" (p. 3). This influence is known as first language interference where the learner applies the knowledge of their native language to try to understand the second language. This might lead to different structure and meaning of the target language. This language interference results from forms of differences and similarities between the learner's first language and the target language.

Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzanyan (2001) made a comparison of the philosophical orientation between ancient Chinese and Greece and other societies that had been impacted by either of the civilizations' thoughts. They discovered that both societies had completely different systems "socially and cognitively" (p.292).  Such differences reflected on the European and post-Columbian American that have been impacted by the Greece and on East and Southeast Asia that have been impacted by the Chinese civilization. This is why those who were nurtured in America are culturally and intellectually different from those who were nurtured in Asia.

Similarly, Hinkel (1994) found out that the writing differences between Chinese learners of English as a foreign language and Americans has its root to the Confucian verses the Aristotelian traditions in both civilizations. In another study, Al-Zumor (2011) compared the different rues of appropriateness such as apology used in different social situations among different social groups.  The study involved a comparison between Arab learners of English and their counterparts Indian speakers of English, American and British English speakers.  Results showed that "religious beliefs, concepts and values are responsible for many deviations in the Arab learners' language from that of the native speakers" (p. 19).  Moreover, findings revealed similarities in the apology arrangements

between the Arabs and Indians. The researcher attributed that to some cultural similarities.

Therefore, for teachers to effectively teach their students who are coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they are expected to adopt different teaching approaches. Warschauer (2000) indicated, "there is no single formula for how to handle issues of culture in teaching. Teachers will need to vary their approach depending on the particular audiences being taught and their purposes in learning English" (p.514).

## 4. Culture and Education

Foreign language teachers are obliged to know that language "is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking" (Deng & Liu, 1995, p. 3). Such introduction to language highlights important facets of it represented in culture.  So what is culture? Culture is a learned set of beliefs, values and attitudes, norms and habits among members of a social community (Greey, 1994). Culture can widely impact the learners' language and behavior. Therefore, cultural knowledge is important for learners when they learn a new language and for teachers when they teach the new language. The National Standards for Foreign Language Education project (NSFLE) (1996), for example, claimed that learners cannot learn a new language until they learn the cultural context of that language. That was determined by the five goals or the five C's developed by the NSFLE . These Five C's include: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities. The fourth C focuses on the importance of developing insights into the nature of language and culture rationale for students to become "aware of the similarities

and differences between their first and second languages, they also learn to look at their own language and culture from a new perspective" (Nebraska Department of Education 1996, p. 5)

People in general are sensitive to issues related to their culture, therefore, teachers' perception of their students' culture could have a positive or negative impact on their learning progress of a new language (Stevick, 1982). To clarify, Zhang, Ollila and Harvey (1998) believe that considering the learner's cultural background, as represented in their identity, is important. For instance, the culture of a specific society would definitely impact the education system and the values of that society and help shapes it. This means teachers of a foreign language might have students who are from a completely different culture and thus their education system of that culture is usually inconsistent with that of the target language and culture. Thus, the foreign language teacher expectation and their foreign students' class behaviors and education values might seem so different.

**5. Reflection of my experience with a student from a different culture**

I and some other colleagues who are second language teachers experienced such an issue of misevaluating the language proficiency of one of our ESL students. That was due to our ignorance of her culture and its education values and norms. In the following section I will report my experience in empowering and enhancing the language proficiency skills, mainly speaking and listening, of one of my Vietnamese students at a U.S. language center.

Based on my student's coursework grades, my colleagues and I made a false assumption that she might have a learning deficiency. The student was weak in comparison

to her classmates who came from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds such as China, South Korea, Vietnam, Columbia and the Middle East. We ignored that "culture provides us with a heritage and a set of expectations about educational settings" (Powell & Andersen, 1994, 322). Fortunately, when she repeated the semester, she and I were lucky to have only three other students in that class, which provided me with the opportunity to approach her closely and figure out how to better help her. Surprisingly, I noticed how smart she was when she thinks in her language and expresses her ideas in her shy broken English. With little research, I figured out some cultural and linguistic aspects that impact learners learning a new language that a non-native English teacher might unconsciously know, still ignoring them by ESL teachers could negatively impact their students' learning outcomes. Ambrosio (2003) stresses the importance of cross-cultural education for teachers claiming:

> Teaching is learning—a process of slowly integrating knowledge into practice…. The most important aspect of teaching is developing the mental habit of reflecting on your instructional practice and of altering your practice according to what you discover about how students learn best. Knowledge of multicultural theory and practice will give you the reflective space, the necessary reservoir of cultural insight, to intelligently address pedagogical issues as they arise in your everyday practice (p. 37).

In support of my student, I used the interactive technology software English Central to help improve her listening and speaking skills. I monitored her closely, demonstrating for her how to use the software effectively proving to my student that I believed in her learning skills. Also, I encouraged her not to be afraid to ask us, her teachers, for

support and assistance, and not to feel ashamed to say "I do not understand, teacher. Would you say it again, please?". You cannot imagine how this student's language proficiency skills and self-efficacy enhanced gradually and steadily.

**6. Preparing teachers for a multicultural classroom environment**

This section includes recommendations that helped me empowering my international students and enhanced their language proficiency skills. The reader will notice that most of the reflections are concerning students from North Africa, Middle East (MENA) and Asia. The rational behind choosing these regions in particular is two folds: First, I was born and raised at one of the North African countries, Libya and I am very familiar with the culture of the rest. Second, the majority of my ESL students were either from these regions. They all came from conservative cultural backgrounds.

1. The cultural and the education values of some Asian, and MENA students are different from what the English native speakers can consider as cultural norms. For instance, international students might perceive the language and content of Western jokes, a source of entertainment and education, as embarrassing and violating the rules of appropriateness.

2. Considering their diverse linguistic backgrounds, international students would feel more comfortable and at ease when their teachers use a simpler and clearer language when speaking or explaining a lesson to them.

3. Unlike MENA students, one of the very common problems Asian students encounter in learning English is the difficulty to pronounce some consonants and consonant clusters. Teachers need to be little patient and help them pronounce the letters correctly and articulate stress patterns.

4. Differences in education between international students and main stream students reflect the unique characteristics of Asian and MENA students' cultural concepts of learning. For instance, Asians and MENA students are more familiar with teacher-centered classrooms in their home country than with student- centered classrooms. And trying to immerse them immediately in modern classroom activities might lead the learners to feel overwhelmed or disengaged and cause teachers to judge their behavior as a sign of learning deficiency. Therefore:

**7. Recommendations for teachers**

1. Teachers are highly recommended to use differentiation classroom strategies and avoid one size fits all strategy.

2. Teachers are required to provide their students with ample and clear instructions when using various learning strategies. For instance, with my Vietnamese student, I showed her how to effectively use the technology software English Central as a tool to enhance her listening and speaking skills, while with the other three students we went for a completely different teaching strategy.

3. Unlike MENA students who usually tend to speak out loud, Asian students tend to be mostly quiet. Teachers need to realize that this is part of their culture, and educational norms. This is not a sign of unpreparedness. According to my experience, however, Asian students tend to develop quicker good writing skills than MENA students.

4. Teachers would notice that some student would answer a question in short utterances. They do so for different reasons. Sometimes, they try to avoid making grammatical mistakes and in others, they feel embarrassed. Teachers are expected to encourage them and avoid correcting their mistakes or giving constant corrective feedback while speaking or

reading in front of the class. When students are comfortable enough a change in feedback strategy can be adopted.

5. Teachers need to know that both MENA and Asian students are influenced by their conservative cultures and education values; therefore, teachers need not to misinterpret students' behavior when they avoid looking at her/his eyes when they are talking or asking a question. Such a behavior is a sign of respect. However, as soon as they get used to you and to the new system, they will take the initiative to greet you with "Hi teacher".

6. Teachers are capable to facilitate their students' smooth transition to the mainstream culture through providing them with informational background about special occasions such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, New year eve and it would be wonderful if you give them the opportunity to have them experience the events themselves. For instance, you would take them to a farm to pick pumpkins and show them how to curve them in creative shapes for the Halloween.

7. Teachers are expected to relate most of class curriculum to students' past experiences and culture. Teachers can do so by asking a simple question such as Do you celebrate Halloween in your home country? If the answer is "No", ask if they celebrate any fun occasion or holiday similar to Halloween.

8. Teachers need to know a crucial difference between MENA and Asian students. Some MENA students would volunteer to answer a question if they know its answer, however, it is not the case for most Asian students. Teachers need to call them by name to participate.

9. Teachers need to know that both MENA and Asian students are used to copy down most of the teachers' notes from the blackboard, therefore, teachers are expected to write at least the main points of the lesson on board.

10. Teachers can know more about their students during class hours or break times. They can approach them asking personal questions. Personal questions related to marriage status, age, weight, hobbies, religion are usually normal in both MENA and Asian cultures.

11. Teachers need to encourage students to avoid speaking in their first language during class time. If they could not follow the rule, pair each with a student from a different linguistic background.

12. Teachers should be cautious not to embarrass their international students. Losing face for any incident might discourage them from studying and coming to school.

13. Teachers are recommended to design practical activities that engage and motivate students' learning and class collaboration. Within such activities, teachers can hear Asian students' voices very often.

14. Teachers need to empower their students by valuing their linguistic and cultural differences. By doing so they will be encouraged to succeed (El Shaban, Raddawi & Tanner, 2017).

15. Last but not least, get to know your students teachers and by that I mean getting to know them on personal level. In this paper I will share with you a model that following it will help you build a more solid and trustworthy relationship with your students whether they were ESL or mainstream students. I shared this model with more than 60 teachers who attended my dialogue presentation at TESOL 2017. Some of them contacted me after the

conference and thanked me for sharing it as it made theirs and their students' learning experiences greater.

## N-K-K-L Chart

**Q- How well do you think that you know your students?**

This is one among many strategies that any teacher can use to get to know his/her students and to build positive relationships with them.

Instructions:

1. In the first left column, under "**Name**" write your students' names in the order in which you remember them.

    1.1. While you are writing your students' names, pose and think of the following two questions:

    ➤ Who do you remember first?

    ➤ Who do you struggle to remember?

2. In the middle column, under "**What I Know**", write down one special positive thing about each one of your students. Make sure that this one thing has nothing to do with school

3. In the third column, under "**What They Know That I Know**", write a check mark ✓ if you have talked with THAT student about this piece of knowledge.

4. For the students you struggled to remember, and for the ones you did not know any positive thing about, put a mark and make sure to connect with them in the following days.

**N-K-K-L Chart**

| Name | What I KNOW: One Positive thing | What They Know That I Know | What I LEARNED |
|------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
|      |                                |                            |                |

Figure 1. N-K-K-L Chart

For teachers, to rap up this section, I would like to finish it with Ginott (1995) powerful quote:

> I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to   make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized. (p.302)

## 8. Conclusion and institutional implications

There is an urgent need for ESL native teachers to educate themselves about different cultural and linguistic aspects that ignoring them could negatively influence their students' self-efficacy and learning outcomes. Within learners from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds that increase in the Unites States, teachers are expected to professionally interact on daily basis with students who differ from their mainstream ones. Therefore, teachers must be culturally and linguistically competent to avoid misinterpreting their students' behaviors and misevaluating their learning proficiency.  Gay (2003), for instance, emphasized that "teachers must be multicultural themselves before they can effectively and authentically teach students to be multicultural" (p. 4) and predicted that "culturally responsive teachers … [can] validate, facilitate, liberate and empower ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success" (Gay, 2000, pp. 43–44). Further, teachers continuous cross-culture education would increase their self-efficacy. This will help them understand

and meet heir students' needs and thus, empowering them both academically and person-ally (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2016).

Additionally, expanding the number of linguistically and culturally diverse teach-ers in workforce can ensure equity in education and be authentic and accessible source to other teachers. This is one of the successful strategies that two of the university language centers I worked for are following. This, for instance, empowered my students and had them take the initiative to ask questions and share concerns that they were hesitant share with my coworkers.

Moreover, on going university and college faculty professional development (PD) awareness on multiculturalism related topics is necessary. The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE, 2002), emphasized the need for faculty profes-sional development focusing on culture, diversity and linguistic topics. As a result O'Hara and Pritchard (2008) conducted a study about a program that was designed to provide cultural diversity professional development for teacher education faculty members at a California State University campus. Reports showed increased understanding of diversity among faculty members. Such PD equipped faculty members with the necessary tools to develop some of the best pre-service teachers training programs. Similarly, providing school districts with ongoing PD workshops especially with the ongoing demographic and diversity changes that schools are witnessing every year. This will help teachers to effectively meet the needs of their students diverse by providing them with the best peda-gogical approaches that some standards failed to address (Hope and Naff, 2016).

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