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Understanding the Misunderstood: An Insight into the ESL Student

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Abstract

English is now considered a global language used for communication in diverse settings and between interlocutors with different linguistic and cultural background (Eslami, 2013). As a result, there are increasingly more culturally and linguistically diverse students learning English for social, economic, and educational purposes. This diversity can be overwhelming to teachers, particularly those that have not had meaningful interactions with people different from themselves and for those ill prepared to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLDLs) (Arias & Poyner, 2001). The lack of teacher preparation for second language student requires further investigation and examination if we are to create institutions of learning that are equitable and fair for all. This paper addresses the challenges that English as a Second Language (ESL) students face in English dominant countries such as the United States. We also provide research-based instructional suggestions for teachers to address the needs of CLDLs. To this end, the tenets of culturally responsive teaching are also discussed. The review has implications worldwide for teaching English to the culturally and linguistically diverse while validating the students' first language and culture.

Keywords: ESL; language learner; cultural linguistics; cultural diversity.

Introduction

English is the medium of global communication, especially in areas such as science and technology (Crystal, 2003). Crystal (2003) maintains that the

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“dominant view is certainly that a person is more likely to be in touch with the latest thinking and research in a subject by learning English than by learning any other language” (p. 111). Yet, one of the fastest growing underserved populations in the United States’ public school system is language-minority students. “Between 1991 and 1999, the number of language-minority school-aged children in the United States rose from 8 million to 15 million, and the number of K-12 students classified as limited-English proficient (LEP) increased from 5.3 million to 10 million” (Smith-Davis, 2004, p. 45). Today, close to 50 percent of the school populations in many North American Metropolitan areas come from non-English speaking homes (Schechter & Cummins, 2003). These drastic demographic changes are creating a new atmosphere of diversity within public schools, and yet the public school system appears remarkably unprepared to handle the challenges ahead.

According to Schechter and Cummins (2003),

while linguistic and cultural diversity defines the cultural base of a majority of North American schools, there is still little consensus about what might constitute appropriate or adequate educational policies for schools and school systems that serve large numbers of newly arrived students (p. 2).

This same notion appears to hold true for American-born ESL students. Many schools have no options for Limited English Proficient students, while others have only minimal English as a second language or bilingual programs available (Miller & Endo, 2004). Insufficient programs for ESL learners often lead to mainstreaming English language learners into the regular educational setting long before they are ready (Miller & Endo, 2004). Greater numbers of teachers “whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are different from their own,” are beginning to find themselves responsible for educating second language learners; “the current nationwide movement of school reform places classroom teachers in a position of increased accountability for the academic achievement of all students, including those with limited English proficiency” (Tindall & Nisbet, 2004, p. 171).

Recent educational policy has made efforts to bring immigrant students to proficient levels of English within three years. This policy contradicts language research that indicates students need five to seven years in language programs to reach academic proficiency (Cummins, 1981). According to Cummins (1981), ESL students require two to three years to develop proficiency in communicative language, including, simple greetings, requests for information, descriptions and expression of feelings. The development of academic language is much more demanding and can take five to seven years to achieve (Cummins, 1981). This level of academic language development enables student to compare, classify, infer, problem solve and evaluate.

Assuming students have developed academic language proficiency based on their communication abilities leads to inequitable instruction (Williams, 2003).

As discussed above there are increasingly more culturally and linguistically diverse students in public school classrooms, which is creating a significant transformation in educational system worldwide. This diversity can be overwhelming to teachers, particularly those that have not had meaningful interactions with people different from themselves and for those ill prepared to meet the needs of such learners (Arias & Poyner, 2001). The lack of teacher preparation and the discrepancies between research and practice involving second language learners require further investigation and examination if we are to create institutions of learning that are equitable and fair for all.

ESL Students and Challenges Faced

There are numerous ways to describe linguistically and culturally diverse student populations: Limited English Proficient and language minority are two common descriptions. These two particular categories, however, imply a deficit or negative representation (Williams, 2003). Therefore, the term ESL student is often used to describe the same students, realizing that English might be a third or fourth language (Williams, 2003).

As mentioned by Tindall and Nisbet (2004), second language learners are not a homogenous group. They may be immigrants, refugees, children of diplomats or executives on short term assignments, or American born children from homes where English is not the primary language. In addition to diverse language backgrounds, second language learners exhibit a mosaic of culture, bring prior experience with schooling, and possess varied perspectives on social and economic powers (Tindall & Nisbet, 2004).

The plethora of problems English-learners face as they begin their new lives in a strange land often stem from linguistic and cultural differences (Miller & Endo, 2004).

According to Clegg (1996), under current educational conditions the LEP child “must change to suit the school, not vice versa” (p. 3). He also states that, this approach to the education of language minority students has often been a diminishing experience, not only for the students themselves and for their academic and social development, but also for the way in which the educational establishment has come to conceptualize ESL learners as a whole. ESL learners do indeed suffer more from discrimination and have the double burden of learning both curricular contents and the medium of instruction (p. 3-4).

ESL students also vary in confidence and self-esteem possibly because, “they are unable, for instance, to use the language of the environment, or because the school may give no recognition to their own linguistic and cultural identity, or if they suffer from outright racist abuse” (Clegg, 1996, p. 4).

Major challenges facing second language learners, such as poor self-esteem, overcoming emotional trauma associated with leaving their native land, adjusting to a new culture and its required social skills, and developing social and academic proficiency, negatively contribute to an already challenging educational system (Tindall & Nisbet, 2004). It is necessary for educators to carry out specific tasks to make education significant for ESL learners.

What Educators Can Do

In a survey given to three million teachers by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 41 percent reported teaching limited English proficient students, while only 12.5 percent of them alluded to having received eight or more hours of specialized training (NCELA Newline Bulletin, 2002). The quality of education ESL students are receiving does not appear equitable (Clegg, 1996). Second language learners deserve as equitable and meaningful an education as native speakers. In order for this to become a reality, there are a variety of matters that must be addressed in the mainstream classroom, beginning with the methods and strategies used by classroom teachers.

While conducting this literature review, several common themes were raised as critical for success in teaching ESL learners in the regular classroom. We would like to address a few of these important ideas, including: developing an appreciation of students' cultures, creating a positive classroom climate, the importance and value of native language, and activating background knowledge. These are concepts that educators must understand and readily apply in their philosophy of teaching before even beginning to consider methods of content delivery. Without these four components already in place, instructional strategies will have already failed ESL children.

Kramersch (1998) suggests,

Our perception of someone's social identity is very much culturally determined. What we perceive about a person's culture and language is what we have been conditioned by our own culture to see, and the stereotypical models already built around our own. (p. 67)

In order to appreciate what students of other cultures bring into the classroom, teachers should closely examine the theoretical backgrounds of their own belief to determine how mainstream values affect educational opportunities for the linguistically and culturally diverse students in their classrooms. The teacher must recognize any personal biases if ESL students are going to receive equitable treatment and instruction within the classroom. The culture of ESL students often involves more than identifying with where they come from; language is also a major component of that identity. Each student brings their cultural context, background and experiences. The cultural diversity represented in today's classrooms calls for an examination of how to

better educate culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children. Without effective means of professional development, teachers will continue to contribute to the disparity in achievement between CLD students and their mainstream (Anglo-White) counterparts.

Appreciating the culture that ESL students bring to the classroom can educate teachers while enhancing instruction. Tindall & Nisbet (2004) claim that second-language learners can “open even wider spheres of learning” for educators and add richness to the classroom community (p. 170). Through a combination of formal interviews, interactions during instruction, and informal conversations (inside and out of the classroom), teachers can tap into a cascade of knowledge and understanding. Also the sharing of nursery rhymes, tall tales, and stories from their native country allows students to see the similarities and differences among the various cultures represented in the room (Tindall & Nisbet, 2004).

Important realizations can come out of such shared cultural experiences. For example, behavior that is considered unacceptable in the dominant culture might be acceptable in a student’s home culture. Some cultures place an emphasis on helping and working with others on academic assignments, because the culture values the well being of the group. This could become problematic when one student shares answers with another (Valdes, 1986). Problems may also arise with discipline. American classrooms emphasize asking the teacher for help, wherein some cultures insist that students not speak unless spoken to by the teacher. “In the past, students from marginalized social groups have seldom felt a sense of affirmation and respect for their language and culture from their teachers. Consequently, their intellectual and personal talents rarely found expression in the classroom” (Schechter & Cummins, 2003, p.10). It is essential that teachers examine the cultural values of the students in their classrooms if communication is going to be effective; these ideals must also be respected if ESL students are to feel safe and valued.

The more students learn, the more their academic self-concept grows, and the more academically engaged they become. However, if they believe that their teachers do not like them, respect them, or appreciate their experiences and talents, students will be reluctant to invest their identities in the learning process (Schechter & Cummins, 2003, p.10).

Creating a positive classroom environment closely correlates with the respect of students’ cultural identities. Many ESL students, particularly newly arrived immigrants, experience anxiety upon entering a community where he or she does not speak the dominant language. This is often referred to as “language shock” (Miller & Endo, 2004). The pressure created from language shock often results in difficulty performing well academically. For ESL students to succeed, it is essential to create an environment that reduces this stress and anxiety and increases motivation and esteem .

“Using a culturally relevant teaching approach means that students’ second languages can be viewed as an additive to the classroom environment, rather than as a deficit that needs to be remedied” (Williams, 2003). Culturally relevant teaching can be defined as:

The kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge. (Williams, 2003, p. 28)

This type of teaching will enable culturally diverse students to feel accepted and part of the classroom community.

Valdes (1986) emphasizes that,

It is the responsibility of foreign and second language teachers to recognize the trauma their students experience and to assist in bringing them through it to the point that culture becomes an aid to language learning rather than a hindrance (p. vii).

While it is common for language learners to grieve the loss of their old home, thus inhibiting their transition into the new culture and success in the classroom, in order to “accomplish the amazing task of acquiring a new language and culture, these learners need the support of culturally sensitive teachers, counselors, and administrators” (Abrams & Ferguson, 2005, p. 67).

Another way to validate these students is to use a wealth of collaborative words that suggest the classroom is a community of support. With the current emphasis on testing, it is rare that educators will consider community building worthwhile. However, the concept of learning together is extremely important for ESL students (Williams, 2003). Words such as *we*, *together*, *friends*, *teams*, *partners*, and *neighbors* imply students are equals (Williams, 2003, p. 756). Superior classrooms are those that foster a sense of community, offer respect, demonstrate politeness (by students and teachers), provide opportunities and choices for students, and show more concern with student involvement rather than evaluation. These classrooms also create an environment of shared-learning, where teachers demonstrate the receipt of knowledge from their students. Teacher behaviors that will foster the growth of ESL students in a positive classroom environment include: responding to all student comments, particularly those that are odd or wrong, to help clear up miscommunication or confusion; believing in every student’s genius; acknowledgement of student efforts of politeness; and the offering of choices and numerous opportunities for practice and interaction (Williams, 2003).

"Students work better in a warm, encouraging atmosphere, in which teachers respond to them supportively within firm pedagogical boundaries" (Clegg, 1996, p. 15). One way to achieve this is to ensure ESL students that value is placed on their native language. Although it is important to facilitate

the growth of English in these students, there are a few means of utilizing and recognizing the value of their mother tongue. Opinions on allowing ESL students to use their first language vary. After reviewing existing research, we claim that supporting ESL students in their first language is key to influencing the success of English acquisition.

Watkins-Goffman (2001) note 1997 case study research by Zentella that suggests students' comfort level speaking and communicating in their native and second language is a sign of how successful he or she will be learning in both. Furthermore, those students that move back and forth from language to language without suffering a loss of identity are more likely to be academically and socially successful. According to the authors, "denying the native language and culture can be debilitating" (Watkins-Goffman, 2001, p. 122). Denying the native language in lieu of English only impedes ESL students. Success comes from proficiency in both native and second languages.

Many immigrants associate fluency in English with becoming American, thus they desire to give up their native language. Many of them quickly learn that it is unacceptable to be different, and their native language is an obvious difference. Immigrant students also often become caught in a struggle choosing which language to speak (Cummins, 2003). Many experience being expected to speak their native language at home while feeling pressured to speak English at school (Miller & Endo, 2004). Native language can be used as strength in the classroom and it is important that educators emphasize this to students. When struggling with an assignment, particularly in reading, students should be encouraged "to substitute words from their native language for unknown English words" (Williams, 2003, p. 752). Teachers can also ask students to share various phrases in their native tongue and present projects in two languages. This establishes a safe environment that respects diversity (Williams, 2003). Schecter and Cummins (2003) confirm this notion:

When teachers incorporate students language and culture within the classroom and see proficiency in languages other than English as a significant accomplishment, they clearly are communicating a very different message regarding identity - one that says individual identities are valued" (p. 9).

Appreciating a student's native language is important because there is much value in becoming bilingual in today's global society. Also, studies have found bilingual speakers have a lower dropout rate than those who speak only English (Chamness & Endo, 2004). Schecter and Cummins (2003) reveal that, "over the past twenty years, evidence has accumulated that linguistic, cognitive, and affective advantages accrue to students who develop literacy skills in two or more languages and continue bi-literate development at least through elementary school" (p. 5). The research also shows that encouraging the native language will not hinder the development of English academic skills (Schecter & Cummins, 2003).

After ensuring that previous practices are in place, teachers can take an additional step to ensure academic success for their ESL students by building

background knowledge. While this paper does not focus on particular strategies and lessons that teachers can implement in their classroom, it does offer guidance in establishing a positive classroom environment and management system. Schecter and Cummins (2003) feel that:

Techniques and strategies will be effective only when teachers and students forge a relationship of respect and affirmation; when students feel that they are welcomed into the learning community of the classroom and supported in the immense challenges they face in catching up academically; and when students feel that their teachers believe in them and expect them to succeed in school and in life. (p. 10)

A final approach teachers can take to ensure success from their ESL students is by building background knowledge.

Activating prior knowledge aids ESL students by helping them construct new meanings and experiences with their existing knowledge. "When teachers systematically activate student's prior knowledge about a particular topic, they communicate to students that their cultural knowledge is valued and respected in the classroom" (Schecter & Cummins, 2003, p. 10). Activities can be purposefully structured to allow students to draw on previous life experiences and prior knowledge. Teachers can visit homes and neighborhoods where their students live, looking for possible connections to the curriculum. Taking photos or notes of the happenings in the neighborhood allow the teacher to center classroom discussion around the students' lives. A powerful connection between the students and the local community can be unleashed (Williams, 2003).

Appreciating students' cultures, creating a positive classroom climate, placing value on the mother tongue and activating background knowledge are four components necessary to ensure an equitable and successful education for ESL students in the mainstream classroom. With the current Pre-K-12 limited English proficiency population at more than 4.5 million in public schools (Tindall & Nisbet, 2004), it is imperative that all teachers begin to consider themselves English as a second language teachers. Many of the suggestions offered in this paper are applicable for native English speakers as well.

These proposals are not a complete list, nor are they quick fixes, but they do offer a foundation upon which teachers can build in making their classrooms more inclusive. Teachers are capable of having a tremendous impact in the lives of their students. "Nobody is more important in this process than the teacher. Teachers have the opportunity to nurture students growing understanding of who they are and who they want to be" (Schecter & Cummins, 2003, p. 10).

Implications

As educators, no matter in which context we work, we need to accept students from different cultures, socioeconomic statuses, value systems, ways

of thinking, and ways of doing things. We must foster acceptance and appreciation of different worldviews, beliefs and values in our classrooms. In order to do this, today's teachers need explicit training in cultural differences, specific traits of several different cultures, and background insight on how to utilize these things in the classroom and in the teacher-student relationship (Valdes, 1986). Ignoring factors that foster achievement is detrimental to the success of all students, but especially for language-minority students in the mainstream classroom.

The ideas presented in this paper on cultural inclusion are transmittable to any educational settings in which students come with differences in home culture and background experiences. Having schools respond positively to the home culture, facilitates the academic and social learning for a dual existence within society. Including different cultural content and perspective in the curriculum and focusing on the experiences of different students and emphasizing responsible action for eliminating inhumanity in the world are the key components of cultural inclusion. This aligns with the premise of culturally responsive teaching.

Cultural relevance and culturally responsive teaching methods move beyond a student's language and incorporate other aspects of school and student culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994). While a precise definition of CRT is difficult to attain, the numerous tenets of it are designed to yield better education for CLD students. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as:

Using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming. (p. 29)

Culturally responsive teaching is also comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory. Along with developing academic achievement, it expands social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange. It supports community building and personal connections, individual self-worth and abilities, and an ethic of caring. It is anchored on a foundation of four pillars of practice: teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies (Gay, 2000).

Ladson-Billings (1994) offers a practical model for improving teacher practice and discusses the notion of culturally relevant teaching in a meaningful manner. She professes the importance of cultural relevance and a culturally responsive pedagogy that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to input knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 18). The tenets of being a culturally relevant teacher include: having high self-esteem and a high regard for others, seeing themselves as part of a community that they give back to (and encourage their

students to as well), believing all students can succeed, helping students make connections between their community and the world, and discovering the knowledge within their students (Lasdon-Billings, 1994). Culturally responsive teaching involves creating a caring classroom community; this entails connecting with students, taking responsibility for one another and encouraging each other and closely resembles a family.

More research is needed on successful strategies for language acquisition for English language learners in order to better prepare these children. Teachers must make a conscious effort to get to know each individual student in their classroom while making note of prior experiences and knowledge within the child. With many schools not being adequately staffed or equipped to handle culturally and linguistically diverse students, it is crucial that information, such as that presented, be given to teachers and administrators. Increasing awareness of issues facing the culturally and linguistically diverse learners is the first step in implementing change.

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