Cultural and Linguistic Obstacles for English Language Learners

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to assess which aspects of learning a second language English language, learners find challenging and to uncover the role that culture plays in learning a second languages as observed by the students themselves. Students were asked to make note of how cultural differences, assumptions, and biases have either enhanced or hindered the teaching and learning process. It was found that students experienced a sort of indirect marginalization or cultural "othering". Integration into the mainstream population of society, of the community, or even of the school was described as a major challenge for this particular group of students. Consequently, students had much difficulty achieving a comprehensive understanding of the language and surrounding culture.

Keywords**:** ESL, Higher Education, Culture, Identity, Teaching English, SLA

Introduction

As educators in a pluralistic and culturally diverse society, it is important to understand the diverse ethnic and cultural environments that are our classrooms. If teachers and administrators want to truly be committed to the learning of *all* students, then they must first understand and attempt to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Culture is an important concept for educators to recognize because it influences how a person perceives others, how that person is motivated, and the extent to which they will value the educational process. Teachers are not required to be experts in every single cultural tradition, but they must have some knowledge of the culture and ethnic background of the students in their schools and surrounding communities in order to understand the perspective from which students approach learning. When educators understand the beliefs, biases, and behaviors of their students, they can make culturally specific and informed decisions about how to make teaching and learning most effective.

Review of literature

Defining culture

Culture is very difficult to operationalize because it comprises ways of living, beliefs systems, rules, norms, rituals, rites of passage, types of clothing, food, artifacts, personal and societal realities, and many other items that define a group of individuals. “Culture, like any other social or biological organism, is multidimensional and continually changing. It must be so to remain vital and functional for those who create it and for those it serves” (Gay, 2000, p. 10). In order to define culture, it is necessary to explore the beliefs and assumptions that make up everyday realities and consider the consequences of those characteristics. Culture specifically involves rules of interaction and implications for the individual and for society (O’Brien, 2006).

The problem faced when attempting to clearly define and understand culture is that it requires one to identify those areas of life that are generally taken for granted and then make them explicitly recognizable. In essence, culture ultimately regulates how individuals react and interact with each other within specific contexts (Farr, Seloni & Song, 2010). Furthermore, individuals assign meaning to those interactions according to shared cultural understandings and motivations (O'Brien, 2006). Thus, humans are social beings who manifest individualized patterns of biological, social, and psychological traits as well as the customs and patterns of organization defined by their ethnic histories, heritages, and cultural experiences (Gay, 1994).

Culture can be problematic in education when schooling occurs ethnocentrically, or "operates on one cultural model to the exclusion of others, or when culturally different students are asked to set aside all their cultural habits as a condition for succeeding in school" (Gay, 1994, p. 7). Cultures is an essential concept for educators to understand because the misconceptions and preconceptions towards certain cultures can potentially lead to marginality, isolation, or alienation of a student, and consequently, prevent academic and personal success (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Disagreements or disparities in behaviors, values and cultural understandings can be obstacles for learning because they have the potential to directly influence teaching practices (Gay, 2013). Unintended cultural discontinuities "occur when people behave naturally, because their behavior is strongly conditioned by cultural conditioning" (Gay, 1994, p. 7). Cultural 'othering' is a form of social representation that is closely related to stereotyping and can easily be expressed unconsciously in the classroom (Salmi & Dervin, 2009). Othering involves the process of objectifying a person or group while ignoring the subjectivity and complexity of the individual (Salmi & Dervin, 2009). Othering allows for the

construction of not only what the individual is, but also what s/he is not. This means that educators must make decisions within the context of a pluralistic society and must also be "conscious of how culture shapes their own and their students' attitudes, values, and behaviors" (Gay, 1994, p. 7-8).

The role of language in learning

Language is what gives humans the capacity to participate in culture; it is the primary method by which humans exchange and communicate meaning; it is a symbolic and abstract form of communication (O'Brien, 2006). The idea that language gives meaning to cultural experiences is essential to understanding the relationship between language and culture. Since language guides the meaning of experiences, language acquisition must play an important role in learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The context in which a language is learned is a significant factor in achieving proficiency (Farr, Seloni & Song, 2010). Individuals are typically exposed to a first language from family members (parents, siblings) in informal settings and thus acquire some language before entering formal schooling settings (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). A second language learner is quite different from a first language learner in terms of learner characteristics and the environment in which learning takes place (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Second languages are often learned in artificial settings (a classroom) in which exposure to native speakers is often limited. Consider the difference between an adolescent learning a foreign language in a high school setting (in their own country) versus a newly immigrated adult with limited education learning English as a second language. Differences can be noted in a number of characteristics and conditions that include but are not limited to cognitive maturity, metalinguistic awareness, world knowledge, anxiety about speaking, motivation for learning, corrective feedback, and cultural understandings and interpretations of language (Lightbown &

Spada, 2006). Something that all second language learners share in common, however, is that they have some knowledge of at least one primary language (the first/native language). Knowledge of a first language can be a benefit to the second language learner because it should give the individual a sense of how language operates. However, this knowledge can also lead learners to make incorrect assumptions about grammar and syntax in the second language, especially when the two languages do not share common roots (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Language affects culture

Language is formed to express and present the ideas of a given culture (O'Brien, 2006). Whenever language grows and new words are created, the culture of a particular society changes (Kuo & Lai, 2006). A modern example of language expansion is the vocabulary of technology. Fifteen years ago or so, the word 'iPod' had no real meaning in any society, but today, this word is widely used to describe a device that plays digital music files. Words can also change meaning or have additional meanings attached. A 'mouse' at one point in time simply referred to a small rodent, but today, a mouse can also be a device used to navigate a computer screen. These examples show that language is evolutionary as it changes in response to its historical and social context (Kuo & Lai, 2006). The culture of the United States is constantly being changed and formed by other cultures and languages (O'Brien, 2006). Each of these foreign languages impacts American culture by adding new words and concepts to the standardized American English. The word 'sushi', for example, is not (originally) a word of the English language; it is simply accepted and borrowed for the purpose of assigning a symbolic label to fish wrapped in rice and seaweed. Language speakers accept this borrowing of language as part of the standard cultural practice.

Culture affects language

Cultural knowledge is necessary for achieving linguistic proficiency (Kuo & Lai, 2006). Learned systems of values, norms, mores, and beliefs form the vocabulary, and therefore, the meaning of words in a given language (Farr, Seloni & Song, 2010). Cultures can be changed depending on the language that is used by members of the society (Hornberger & McKay, 2010). The elements of the culture are named using language; each of those names assigns meaning to the object, artifact, idea, or concept. New language cannot be mastered until students have understood the cultural context in which the new language occurs (Kuo & Lai, 2006). Therefore, "understanding a new culture is an important element in achieving success in second language acquisition" (Kuo & Lai, 2006, p. 6).

Improving learning for culturally diverse students

Improving learning for English language learners (ELLs) requires a systematic method of prevention designed to implement early interventions strategies. According to Ortiz (1997), English language learners require two important elements in order to be successful learners. Firstly, educators must provide a learning environment that supports the students' needs. Secondly, the teachers must utilize strategies that are proven to be effective with English language learners (Ortiz, 1997). A positive school environment is one in which the student-teacher relationship is mutually supportive and is also characterized by strong leadership, high achievement expectations, and appropriate curricula and instructional strategies (Ortiz, 2011). Furthermore, teachers, administrators, and school specialists must establish effective and communicative relationships with guardians and parents. The student's native language cannot be ignored in this process. Educators must integrate the teaching of academic skills with

instruction of higher order thinking skills in the student's first and second languages (Ortiz, 2011).

Lamorey (2002) suggests that educators need to examine the ways in which culture affects assessment, interventional goals, child development, learning theory, and the preparation of personnel. An effective and responsive ESL program makes considerations for both the student's second language acquisition skills (motivation, personality, learning style) and those aspects of the child's specific needs (attitude, cognitive functioning, behaviors). When designing an ESL program, the educators involved must also consider the learner's current stage of proficiency; the particular strengths and weaknesses in listening, speaking, reading, and writing; the degree of the disability; the learner's age, maturity, and interests; the student's communication needs; the level of integration the child experiences in the school environment and surrounding community; and language learning styles (Garcia & Tyler, 2010). Other authors, such as Reyes and Vallone (2008), highlight that quality learning programs for English language learners must also be based on a meaningful second language pedagogy and curriculum. In order to provide equitable programming, they suggest that students must be able to maintain their own cultural and linguistic heritage and experiences while also giving the student the opportunity to explore and gain an understanding of the 'new' culture associated with the second language (Reyes & Vallone, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In general, a program that is designed to meet the specific needs of the English language learner will produce a greater chance of language improvement and academic success for the student (Spolsky, 1988).

Statement of the problem and research questions

This research study investigates the cultural and linguistic obstacles that act as barriers to learning for culturally diverse students attempting to learn English as a second language. The

study also identifies how culturally responsive teaching practices can be improved to support learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. The researcher asks three main questions:

a) What cultural obstacles and differences exist in the English as a second language classroom for international students?
b) How do those obstacles hinder the learning of a second language?
c) Which teaching strategies do students find to be most and least effective for supporting their learning?

The ultimate goal of this study is to make recommendations for teaching practices that will improve the learning process of English language learners.

Methods

Research was conducted through structured interviews with English Language Learners (ELLs) in preparatory English as a Second Language (ESL) program at the university level. Students were asked questions relevant to their study of English as a second language. A 50-minute interview was conducted with each student. The interview was designed to assess which aspects of learning a second language the student finds easy or difficult and to uncover the role that culture plays in learning a second languages as observed by the students themselves. In essence, students were asked to make note of how cultural differences, assumptions, and biases have either enhanced or hindered the teaching and learning process.

It is necessary for each student to assess his/her learning through the lens of his/her own cultural background. Individualized responses and perceptions were important to this study as an investigation of cultural and linguistic obstacles. Since the students are the “experts” in their own cultures, the cultural lens through which each participant answered the interview questions is

what provided the description of phenomenon that was examined. The researcher cannot provide this insight because she does not have the same cultural experiences as the participants.

The methodology used in this study is not necessarily intended to explain a causal relationship, but rather, to describe how a particular group of individuals have experienced second language learning through the lens of a specific cultural background. The researcher examined themes in responses and common attitudes among the participants.

Research design

The design used for this investigation was an interpretive qualitative study with phenomenological understandings of how meaning and knowledge are constructed (Merriam, 2002). A qualitative approach to the study allowed the researcher to gather detailed information from the perspective of participants. The aim of the study is to describe in detail what is happening in terms of cultural and linguistic barriers for a specific group of students and the extent to which those barriers affect learning. Student expectations and perceptions of language learning were used to ascertain those barriers. Themes related to learning obstacles were used to suggest potential relationships between cultural experience and second language learning. This investigation focuses highly on the individual as a means to explain the difficulties of learning a second language rather than generalized social trends. In other words, the individual voices of the participants are valued and respected as important sources of personalized information.

'Giving a voice' to subjective experience in order to explain social issues is a key element of the philosophical view of phenomenologism (Bouma, Ling & Wilkinson, 2009; Merriam, 2002). Phenomenologists assert that humans make sense of the surrounding world through perception and have the ability to extract information from experience and to ascribe meaning to behavior (Hatch, 2002). Additionally, phenomenologists believe that research

methods that attempt to assign numerical values to opinion and personal experience do not fully capture the human experience (Merriam, 2002). Collecting detailed qualitative data allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon. The researcher interprets phenomenologism to be closely related to symbolic interactionism, a social theory that is important for understanding how languages are learned through interaction with others and how language mediates subjective experience (Merriam, 2002). Both theories highlight the importance of the individual's experience and subjective interpretation as being of prime importance to fully understanding a human phenomenon. Since cultural experience and understanding often regulate how individuals react, interact and assign meaning under certain conditions, the research design for this study needed to involve methods that would place a strong emphasis on inductive reasoning, individual voices, and the collection of comprehensive descriptive information.

Sample selection

The sampling procedure used for this study was purposive sampling. This method was used in order to select students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Ten students in preparatory university ESL programs were selected to be interviewed for the study. In order to create a sample that is more representative of English language learners as a whole, it was necessary to select students from various ethnic backgrounds. Since this particular study does not specifically examine the obstacles for one particular culture, and the population available to the researcher was composed primarily of Chinese students, the researcher decided to directly solicit students for study and target students with different cultural backgrounds.

The sample included ten students ranging in age from 19 to 26. The participants came from four different countries: China, Bangladesh, India, and Saudi Arabia. Each student spoke at

least one other language in addition to English. These languages include Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Bengali, Hindi, and Arabic. Additionally, some students spoke regional dialects of their first language. All students intend to pursue Master's degrees in the United States in a variety of subject areas, which include Business, Public Administration, Information Systems, Mechanical Engineering, and Computer Science. None of the students intend to pursue degrees in English or another foreign language. All students have previously obtained an undergraduate degree from universities in their home countries.

It is important to note that not all international students can also be considered ESL students. For example, students from Canada, Australia, and other English-speaking countries whose first language is English. For the purposes of this study, the term 'international student' will refer specifically to those students whose first language is not English.

Data collection methods

The instrument used in the data collection process was a series of questions in the form of an interview with English language learners. Students were asked questions relevant to their study of English as a second language. Each interview consisted of 17 questions about learning English as a second language. The questions aimed at determining the extent to which cultural background, classroom experiences, and other factors have had an effect on the student's learning.

The first five questions of the interview aimed at primarily obtaining information about the student's home country, culture, first language, and motivation for learning English as a second language. The remaining questions deal with the student's learning experiences in formal and informal settings; the formal setting being the ESL classroom, and the informal setting being public or home settings where there is no formalized instruction. Since language acquisition

occurs consciously and unconsciously in both formal and informal settings, the researcher aimed at assessing where students benefit most from learning and which obstacles occur most in specific settings.

The basis for the interview questions originates from other authors who suggest that a) prior learning experiences in home countries have a great influence on the student's ability to adapt to learning in the American classroom (Lightbown & Spada, 2006); b) knowledge of a first language should facilitate the learning of a second language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006); c) the influence of native speakers on the language learner (Spolsky, 1988); d) the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching strategies, curriculums, and assessments (Gay, 2000); e) cultural discontinuities and cultural 'othering' (O'Brien, 2006); and f) perceptions of instructors, administrators, and students about 'foreign' cultures (Gay, 1994). The answers to the interview questions were compared to the conclusions of other researchers in an attempt to evaluate whether or not these claims apply directly to this specific group of students. Some conclusions were supported, while others were opposed and refuted.

Students were asked to identify what they find easy in learning English as a second language, what they find difficult in the classroom, and what helps to facilitate learning. The purpose of the interview is to identify potential strategies, methodologies and other experiences that may prevent or make it more difficult for an English language learner to obtain and retain language. The purpose of these questions is for the student to identify specific areas of language learning that they find to be difficult and begin to think about why that area is challenging. Students were asked to express how culture affects their learning experiences in the classroom, especially in those areas/classes that they find most difficult. Students identified how racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity is addressed in the second language classroom. Students

shared how cultural issues may have hindered or improved the learning process. They were also asked questions about how they feel their culture is/is not valued in the classroom and how language barriers may have influenced their learning. While paying specific attention to cultural experiences and differences, students were asked to identify how cultural differences affected their learning both negatively and positively. Students expressed strategies they found most effective for learning a second language.

The data was collected from ten student interviews over a period of three months. Each participant's interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and then reviewed by the principle investigator. The researcher also took notes while the students were being interviewed. The detailed descriptive data was compiled in order to obtain a personal and individualized depiction of the experiences for English language learners in the college setting. The following data discussion describes the responses of the participants to the questions by grouped category.

Discussion

The answers to the questions about student motivation for learning English indicate that all of the students interviewed view English as a global or international language. Several of the participants expressed that learning English is the first step towards completing a Master's degree in the United States, which would ultimately lead to professional advancement and job opportunities in their home countries. In some cases, the students must learn to read documents, manuals, and other paperwork in English in order to be successful in their chosen field of work. In other cases, students are essentially required to speak English in order to engage in international business. Two students explained that studying English abroad in America is a great opportunity not only to learn English, but also to learn about the rest of the world. In the words of one student: "In America, I [can] touch *real* English."

All of the students reported that they have had some previous experience learning English in their respective home country. They all learned English beginning in elementary school. Each student also studied English in high school and during undergraduate studies. All of the previous learning experiences of these particular students included instruction of British English, not American English. Subtle differences in vocabulary, tone and inflections, orthography, and even choice of tense can be very confusing for a student who is trying to form systematic framework for understanding a language. For example, British English distinguishes between the words *dependent* (adjective) and *dependant* (noun), whereas American English utilizes *dependent* as both an adjective and a noun, despite the fact *dependant* is considered an acceptable alternative for the noun. Other orthographic differences include the use of the letter *u* in words such as colour, flavour, rumour, and favourite; the reversal of *er* in words such as centre and theatre; and the usage of the suffix *–ise* instead of *–ize* in words such as realise, organise, and recognise. The participants indicated that making the transition from learning British English at home to learning American English in the United States was quite difficult because of the different accents, regionalisms, spelling, and vocabulary. In fact, several students cited the American accents as a major obstacle to understanding native speakers. In most cases, students stated that the experience of learning English in their home country was quite ineffective as compared to learning English in America. The previous formal learning experiences of the students focused primarily on the grammatical and syntactical structures of the language. Many of the students felt that they did not learn much English from the teachers in their home countries; primarily because the students were learning English from a teacher whose first language was not English. Many of the participants indicated that they really did not care about

English class in previous school settings because it was boring and they never need to practice or speak English.

The Chinese students who were interviewed described learning English in China as learning "Chinese English". Furthermore, the Chinese students all agreed that, for the majority of the time, the teacher (and the students) would primarily speak Chinese during English class. One Chinese student described a situation in which a native English speaker had moved to China because of his parents' work. The student failed English class in high school because he did not have the "right" answers on the exams. Although the specific circumstances of this situation are not known, it does raise the question of quality and the content of the teaching of the English language in foreign contexts. Evidently, the proficiency of the teacher could positively or negatively affect the quality of learning that takes place in the language classroom. The Chinese students were adamant that their teachers taught solely from the textbook, that they would essentially translate the majority of the material, and that English was taught theoretically and was taught just like any other math or science class, not necessarily as a language class.

Students from other countries agreed that they learned very little English in elementary, middle, and high school from the non-native English-speaking teachers. However, some students did have the opportunity to learn some English from Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) trained (British & American) teachers in university. This learning experience was generally described as being a positive and effective one, but the students also highlighted the fact that they were never in a situation that required them to practice English outside of the classroom in their home country.

Every student who was interviewed found it extremely difficult to operationalize the culture of his or her home country. Students struggled with the fact that culture can be so implicit

that it is difficult to define in specific terms. The participants described certain customs, ways of thinking, festivals, holidays, religious practices, foods, and cultural norms that compose the cultural climate at home. Students did not necessarily find that their own culture acted as a barrier for learning in English America, but rather, that they had to learn about American culture quickly and effectively in order to adapt. Several students admitted that most of what they knew about American culture prior to coming the United States came primarily from the movies and the media. Many of the participants wished that they had more opportunities to learn about American culture by spending time with native English speakers. The students described American culture very positively in comparison to their native cultures: "I am surprised by how friendly Americans are to each other – even strangers greet and smile at each other; this is not normal where I am from, but I think it is very nice." "At home, it is normal *not* to be yourself, but to be what the culture wants you to be. Everyone should be the same; people think you are weird if you stand out. There isn't much individuality." "There is much more diversity in America than where I am from. [Americans] accept you for who you are. People ask your opinion." "What I like most about America is that I can do what I want; no one asks why, people don't care; they accept you how you are. In my home country, you shouldn't do something out of the ordinary." Students view the overall culture of America to be very welcoming, however, when asked about individual experiences and exchanges with Americans, students admitted that their interactions with native speakers are quite limited, and in some cases, have been quite negative in nature: "I don't speak with native speakers too much. I have experienced some frustration from native speakers when they cannot understand me." "Sometimes I feel like foreigners are not welcome. I know this from their body language. Older people are usually nice to me, but Americans my own age are not interested in being friends." "To be honest with you,

some Americans have a bad stereotype of us from the media. Every country has good people and bad people."

When asked about experiences in the ESL classroom in the United States, students had varied responses. Some students were very satisfied with their learning, while others were quite disenchanted with their experience in the ESL classroom. Students were pleased that much of the content of the textbooks used in the ESL classes specifically addresses American culture. Students also reported that certain teachers made accommodations to respect the cultural norms of the students. They expressed that in the ESL classroom, students need to adapt to each other and be considerate of each other because of the differences in culture and ethnic background.

The majority of the students who were interviewed were dissatisfied with the lack of detailed feedback they received on assignments. "My teachers don't have time to correct every single mistake in my essay, but if they don't do that, then how will I know what is right and what is wrong?" "All of us speak wrong, when we speak English with each other, we don't know if we're talking correctly. We don't know the right way to practice." Students felt that there simply was not enough feedback given to them by their teachers. The participants expressed that much of their learning was done independently outside of the classroom. Some students felt that they benefited from attending class, while others simply attended to ensure they had completed the homework correctly. Students stated that the teachers rely too heavily on direct instruction, the textbook, and writing assignments: "In class we learn formal language and grammar, which is important for writing, but we don't learn enough non-academic language to be proficient speakers outside the classroom." "We need better explanations from our teachers. We do too much teaching from the book."

Most of the students who were interviewed agreed that reading, vocabulary, and listening were the hardest concepts to master in the study of English as a second language. Students found reading to be difficult primarily due to limited vocabulary. The readability level of most academic materials is generally too high for an individual who has recently started learning the language. Students worry about starting academic classes and not being able to read the assignments, textbooks, and other materials necessary to be a successful student. Students overwhelmingly expressed that listening was a very difficult skill to achieve. Many of the participants attributed this to difficulty understanding various English accents. Furthermore, students clearly identified that it is very challenging to understand native speakers when they use slang or informal language. Additionally, the speed at which most native speakers utilize the language orally is much too fast for the second language learner to understand without repetition or a slower pace. Students generally agreed that writing is the easiest skill to develop: "Writing is much easier than speaking or listening. I can write grammar, but I can't use it properly in speech."

Students who spoke Arabic and Chinese as first languages agreed that speaking English was difficult because of the different ways of pronouncing letter combinations as compared to their first language. Most students agreed that when they compared their first language to English or English to their first language, it simply made acquisition and understanding much more difficult. Chinese students, for example, found that tenses were a very difficult concept to master because Chinese places actions temporally based on the aspect of the action rather than the tense.

In addition to the educational and linguistic obstacles faced by the students, two overwhelming concerns emerged from the discussions with the students. The first issue is an

internal concern that can be defined as a fear of not being understood by others and a lack of confidence: “The hardest part about learning English is in my heart. I am very shy to open my mouth. I am afraid that people will not understand me.” Students consistently expressed that they feel very uncomfortable conversing with native English speakers. “When I can’t express myself, it is very frustrating because I feel like I cannot be myself.” The students use repetition as a tool to be understood by others, but they expressed that repetition is embarrassing when the speaker needs to repeat himself or herself two, three, or four times. Pronunciation of certain sounds and words acts as a major obstacle to being understood, and thus, lowers the level of confidence experienced by the second language speaker. Every student who was interviewed expressed that they feel shy when speaking and they are afraid of making mistakes and of not being understood.

The second major obstacle for students is the fact that they only speak to native English speakers when it is absolutely necessary. In general, the international students who were interviewed have friends who are from the same home country and share a common first language. They naturally converse in their first language with each other, rather than practicing English as a second language. One student’s comments clearly explain this issue: “When a foreigner speaks to another foreigner, how do we know if we are speaking correctly? We make mistakes all the time, so we just speak in our first language. This is much easier.” Some students expressed that they practically have no interaction whatsoever with native English speakers despite living in the United States. They feel that there are not enough opportunities to practice English with speakers of their own age. In general, students did not feel they had much opportunity to practice with native speakers. As one student put it: “It is much more difficult to connect with people in my second language.”

Conclusions

The cultural obstacles faced by these students were generally not obstacles of involving direct marginalization for personal beliefs or traditions. Students experience a sort of indirect marginalization, or what Salmi and Dervin (2009) would term as cultural "othering", simply because they are unfamiliar with the norms of American culture. The students generally live out their own cultures in America and do not necessarily live American culture. In other words, integration into the mainstream population of society, of the community, or even of the school is very challenging, and thus, acts as a barrier to achieving a comprehensive understanding of the language and surrounding culture. As was previously shown through the literature, cultural knowledge is closely linked to linguistic understanding and acquisition. When the culture is understood, the language can also be understood. When isolation or marginalization from the mainstream culture occurs, it can be very difficult for the individual to achieve second language proficiency because the context in which the language occurs does not make sense or is not fully comprehended by the non-native speaker. This isolation described by the study participants seems to be due to the fact that the students are unfamiliar with American culture and have limited experience in interacting with native speakers.

The lack of interaction with native speakers indicates that students do not practice oral language skills on a regular basis. The feelings of fear and embarrassment as expressed by the students have acted as a major obstacle for practicing English in authentic settings. There is a definite connection between how a student feels about speaking the second language, how well they believe they can be understood, and the motivation to practice the language with native speakers. The study revealed that when the second language learner experiences frustration in expressing thoughts and emotions in the second language, he/she experiences a sense of isolation

and a lack of connectedness with other individuals. As a student spends more time immersed in American culture and increase interactions with native speakers, the level of confidence in speaking a second language seems to improve, and thus, language skills progress towards proficiency.

Second language learners will generally default to speaking their native tongue with those who are culturally similar. In the case of the students studied, several students expressed that they want to spend more time with native speakers, but they did not really know how to approach individuals or build friendships with American English speakers. In general, the students believed that native speakers of the same age seemed unapproachable and disinterested in establishing relationships with them. This lack of interaction in the second language seems to produce situation in which second language learners have very limited opportunity to practice speaking outside of the classroom setting. Consequently, the students have developed their reading and writing skills as a result of studying in artificial settings and studying textbooks, but have limited listening and speaking skills due to the absence of authentic practice.

Other than academic studying, the students' actions generally did not contribute to the advancement of learning English or practicing language skills. The participants only "practiced" speaking the second language when it was absolutely necessary. These settings include public places such as grocery stores and restaurants. The participants identified that they felt that their language skills improved as the spoke with native speakers, but that they did not have many opportunities to interact with native speakers regularly for any extended period of time. In some cases, students believe that they are perceived negatively by native speakers who are easily frustrated by the learner's inability to express himself or herself clearly and succinctly.

Consequently, the learners generally avoid speaking in English, and thus, loose the opportunity to practice the knowledge and skills learned in the second language classroom.

The participants clearly expressed that learning English as a second language in the classroom setting did not generally contribute greatly to their oral language skills. The areas of language found to be the easiest to grasp were the same subject areas that were taught by non-native speakers in the home countries. Grammar and writing skills are most familiar to these students from previous learning.

The participants did not always perceive that the ESL classroom supported their needs as language learners. The strategies used in the classroom, such as question and answer, fill-in-the-blank, and lengthy exams were not reported to be effective in helping students understand American culture or learn English as a second language. Furthermore, in some cases, the students did not always perceive the student-teacher relationship to be mutually supportive.

Although students could clearly identify differences in difficulty as they passed from one level of ESL to the next, students did not think that the curriculum necessarily promoted or incorporated cultural diversity or understanding. A culturally responsive curriculum, by definition, incorporates a student's culture, language, and prior schooling experiences to develop a plan for successful learning. The participants did not perceive that the ESL curriculum incorporated these elements effectively. A curriculum conceived for culturally diverse students must engage and motivate students by "making connections between what [is taught] – the formal, written, mandated curriculum – and what culturally different students want to learn" (Ford, 2010, p. 52). If the curriculum is culturally relevant, then the instructors of that curriculum must recognize the need for differentiated and modified instructional practices. These strategies are actually very similar to those one might implement for a child with a learning disability, a

gifted student, or teaching to a specific learning style. According to Ford, culturally responsive instruction requires scaffolding of "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles of culturally different students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them" (Ford, 2010, p. 52). In the case of the participants of this study, learning was not necessarily tailored to address prior knowledge or cultural experiences.

Students were also somewhat unclear on the specific assessment practices used in the ESL classroom. Culturally responsive assessments are necessary, in order to refer, screen, place, and identify students. Teachers must take a critical look at assessment tools in order to evaluate the validity and accuracy of those tools. When culturally diverse students score poorly on formative and summative assessments and evaluations, it is important to ask whether the score is a result of a lack of content knowledge, a lack of language, or simply a lack of cultural understanding.

The culturally responsive curriculum must be used in conjunction with culturally guided instruction and assessment practices. Culturally responsive teaching requires that the teacher acknowledges the legitimacy of cultural heritages, make connections with various learning styles, and use a variety of culturally appropriate resources. This implementation must be guided, however, by the understanding that previous and current learning experiences are likely to facilitate, or hinder the student's learning process and academic success. The development of such curricula, however, is highly dependent upon the protection of cultural heritage and identity. Maintenance of a positive culturally identity in key in assuring that the student is actively involved in the school as a community. The student's native language will also greatly influence his or her ability to access the content of the taught curriculum and successfully accomplish the tested curriculum. It becomes increasingly difficult to identify the cause of a low

test score for an English language learner because the student might (a) be unfamiliar with Western testing practices; (b) be unable to understand the language used in the test; (c) be unfamiliar with the cultural contexts and references of the test; or (d) simply lack the background knowledge to successfully learn the content of the test. Consequently, educators must critically examine the tested curriculum as it applies to culturally diverse students. In some cases, the methods of assessment could lack validity and reliability as a result of cultural experience. Similar to those students who require special programs, modification, and accommodations, culturally diverse students need a culturally adjusted and tested curriculum that accurately and fairly evaluates learning.

In order to avoid student disengagement with learning a second language, the culturally responsive curriculum must be informed by subject matter that is relevant to the lives of the students it aims to reach. In other words, there must be some form of cultural meaning achieved by the curriculum that will motivate students and reflect their real-world experiences. If the curriculum informs student learning in such a way, then success in terms of learning achievement and assessment is likely to follow. All parts of the curriculum must work in sync to produce a learner that can apply his or her knowledge in practical life situations.

Recommendations

In order to improve the second language proficiency of English language learners, it is necessary that students engage in conversation with native speakers on a regular basis. Students must interact orally with native speakers in order to not only understand and practice the language, but also to gain an improved understanding of the culture. This practice could be accomplished by establishing a program in which international students are paired with native speakers. Such a program should be part of the ESL curriculum for these students. Student

organizations such as an international or multicultural clubs could potentially be involved in such language development partnerships.

The development of another program in which students live with native speakers while in the United States would also provide an opportunity for English language learners to become more familiar with both the language and the culture. In this way, students would at the very least be able to observe the culture, if not gain an opportunity to practice living American culture. That is not to say that students need to forget or give up their heritage cultures, but students would at least have the chance to compare cultures and to understand the context in which the English language functions in the United States.

Since several students reported that they did not find the time spent in the ESL classroom to be particularly effective for learning, it is also recommended that current teaching and assessment practices be reviewed. Internal influences, such as lack of staffing and clear curriculum goals could be affecting program outcomes and student satisfaction. ESL students would greatly benefit from clear curriculum standards and outcome goals. Curriculum goals and standards are an important component of language learning. Learning should take place within the context of these objectives. Descriptions such as 'further improve reading skills' or 'practice writing an essay' do not provide a specific standard for the student to attain. Specific objectives for learning should also be accompanied by a method of tracking progress and an effective system of assessment.

Summary

International English language learners are a very diverse group of students. Thus, the needs of this particular subset of students are unique and somewhat non-traditional. Through this study, it was discovered that international ESL students in a college settings feel somewhat

marginalized due to their inability or limited ability to communicate effectively with native speakers. Students reported that they often feel embarrassed, shy, or nervous when speaking with native English speakers. The fear of not being understood or not expressing oneself effectively is a major obstacle for second language learners.

Previous language instruction in the students' home countries seems to have contributed to reading and writing skills, but not to oral speaking skills. In the American classroom setting, however, students indicated that they learned a lot of formal language, but not necessarily enough commonly used language that would provide opportunities to communicate in every day situations.

The teacher-student relationship reported by some of the study's participants was perceived as an obstacle for learning. Teacher attitudes, behaviors, and expectations towards students were perceived negatively in some cases, and thus, students did not feel that culturally responsive teaching was practiced effectively. Students felt that teachers did not recognize their existing strengths and did not provide enough constructive feedback that would allow for improved language skills.

In the case of the study participants, language teaching and learning experiences have primarily focused on the structure of the language rather than practical usage. Culturally responsive teaching involves much more than simply conveying the grammatical structures of a language; it involves understanding the social context in which the language develops and changes is equally if not more important for achieving language proficiency. Finally, culturally responsive teaching should provide access to academic success for diverse populations of students. If language teaching is to be effective, it must also be transformative. That is to say, language teaching must provide opportunities for learning that do not just impart knowledge of

grammar, syntax, or composition, but that encourage students to develop skills, values, and opinions that will allow them to function within the culture without fear, marginalization or embarrassment for practicing a second language.

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