Teaching for Diversity in an EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Achieving equity in a diverse classroom is difficult but essential in an educational environment. The process of acquiring multicultural competency requires the effort of all involved parties and a willingness to create and operate in a 'community of respect'. In all subjects this is important, but especially so in ESL and international EFL classrooms. Constructivist pedagogies employing cooperative education tenets and collaborative learning practices are most effective for attaining these ends because of their inclusive nature.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching for diversity and equity means acknowledging the diversity that students bring to the modern classroom while making sure equal opportunity exists for all students to succeed. While a myriad of pedagogies exist that instructors can use to provide access to all learners, constructivist pedagogies, incorporating cooperative education and collaborative learning strategies, seem to lend themselves most effectively to this endeavor. Their student-centered nature, relying on participant-generated production, offers different roles for diverse learners in a non-competitive atmosphere that encourages a multitude of academic and interpersonal possibilities for participation in the learning process. The assumptions in this paper are about the pedagogical decisions made that prioritize excellence at the cost of equity. In the traditional academic environment excellence is determined in terms of meeting uniform national and/or local standards, however, this can come at the cost of equity for diverse students and deviant or non-traditional learners who are at risk of being disenfranchised.

ACKNOWLEDGING DIVERSITY

Diversity can be defined and understood in many ways; race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ability (physical, motor, mental, classroom, practical etc...), religion, and cultural preferences to name a few, all of which contribute to an individual student's identity formation and experiences in society at large. Regarding formal education, all of these factors ultimately influence a student's unique approach to learning, cognition, and achievement, and can play a role in students' treatment in various institutions in society, which so often reflect cultural norms, offering, as Covert (2001) points out, unearned privilege to some and denying access to others. Diversity in the classroom exists in so many forms, but what is important to focus on, given the environment, are not the factors that contribute to the individual's make-up, but the individual themselves and their personal methodology for comprehension and retention.

It is rare in any formal academic environment for a student to be asked specifically, 'how do you learn best?' Yet, I cannot conceive of a more important question for a teacher to ask a student. This question should be center to everything the student does. I believe when someone knows how to learn, how they learn, they can learn anything. The inverse of this query is that teachers also need to be aware of the

assumptions about teaching, learning, assessment, evaluation, and participation that they bring, consciously or unwittingly into their classrooms, curricula, and courses, and do their best to open their courses to all learners; diverse, non-traditional, and deviant.

One of the most effective things an instructor can do to achieve equity and acknowledge diversity is to encourage autonomy. This process begins by asking students how they learn best, and initiating the defining and creating of an individual methodology for information and input analysis, retention, and performance on tests and measures of assessment. The effect is twofold: when students ask this question they begin to claim ownership over their educational experience; when teachers do this they begin opening their classroom and curriculum to diverse learners with unique and different (often deviant) approaches to traditional notions of learning.

This is especially important in international education and EFL/ESL classrooms. In these environments an understanding of diversity and the need to achieve equity is especially important because of the cultural differences between the native speaker teacher and the students. These cultural differences often imply differing conceptions of the role, modes, and means of education and classroom practices / behavior. In a Japanese classroom diversity is often not so visible because of the homogenous nature of the student body and the cultural imposition of certain modes of participation and manners (Stockwell, 2001), making the need to explicitly open the classroom to all individual variations, apparent or not, incredibly important.

TEACHING FOR DIVERSITY

The instructor who wishes to acknowledge the diversity that students bring to the classroom in an equitable way has several choices when considering pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom construction. One choice is to teach in a traditional manner, e.g. sage on the stage, outlining the manner of evaluation and assessment before the course begins, and requiring students to achieve an acceptable level of proficiency in utilizing methods and meeting instructors' standards. Students are treated equitably in this regard because they are made equally aware of the expectations and requirements for success. Another choice is to make assumptions about how different students learn based on membership or association with different definitions of diversity, for example, 'Japanese students learn in a certain way', or 'men do one thing, women do another,' and set different standards pertaining to identity or group associations based on the setting.

The most effective option is to examine the idea of instructor as instrument, and through personal reflection and evaluation, determine what assumptions about teaching and learning are brought to the course by the instructor, and, once acknowledging this, ask how can the course be opened to all types of learners. An instructor who has reflected on her preconceived conceptions to learning is more likely to encourage students to follow a similar path of self-discovery to make their educational experiences personal, relevant, and meaningful. Compared to traditional pedagogies, this sort of student-centered teaching is what Dewey (1938) refers to as the difference between imposing an external structure generated from 'outside' and facilitating the internal germination of individuals' voices, ideas, beliefs, and interests.

In a multicultural classroom individuals' voices are essential and need to be prompted and developed in a transparent, inclusive way, so potential conflicts can be resolved and all participants encouraged. The goals of a multicultural classroom are threefold: to allow all students to reach their potential as learners, to respect diversity and individuality while promoting respect for others, and to emphasize the contributions of all involved parties (students, source/material, and the various groups that make up the socio-cultural environment) (Covert, 2000). Creating a multicultural classroom in a transparent way prompts students to think about their own upbringing and values while interacting with other students who are immersed in a similar task. According to Covert (2001), reflecting on these values and perceptions is important to

help students work in constructive ways with peers, and engage with course content in a scholarly manner. Constructing a multicultural classroom and teaching for diversity requires a safe space for students to take risks, this is best accomplished by defining and creating a community of respect among participants.

> The best way to work for change and social justice is to encourage individual growth through fostering connections and communication... one of the primary concepts [used] to support individual growth through interpersonal interaction is the "Community of Respect," which recognizes the importance of giving all voices the chance to be heard in an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation (Covert, 2000, p.2)

Discussing the construction of a multicultural classroom and curriculum, Covert (2000) identifies three major components contributing to a multicultural classroom experience: curricula, teachers, and students. Curricula should contain not only statements and examples from different perspectives and involved parties, but should have room for students' productions. The assumption is that material from different sources will help provide opportunities for students to discuss their differing points of view within a 'community of respect'.

The emphasis on community is necessary because in a multicultural classroom the ultimate responsibility for contributing and participating lies with individual students. The goal for instructors is to implement strategies of learning that involve all students, with regard to different backgrounds, experiences, languages and learning styles and offer as many valid avenues towards inclusion and participation as possible. The success of a course depends on the inclusion of everyone in the room.

> This is no easy task. It takes the committed effort of each person in the room, and cannot simply be established by the professor or any one individual. In this way, the class is extremely student-centered and so the success of the course depends on the success of each individual student's commitment to her or his personal quest. (Covert, 2001, p.2)

The quest Covert mentions is the achievement of comfort and competence operating in a diverse setting that allows for unpredictable individual variations. Multicultural competency begins the moment one is able to move beyond parallel processing (understanding another's experience through your own) and questions of validity, and truly listen, ask, and learn from other people. This is an essential skill for instructors who wish to be effective in multicultural classrooms. Daily, I strive for multicultural competency as a teacher by questioning my own biases and prejudices, and reflecting on my experiences, values, and ideals to determine their sources and presence in my life. Whether considering issues of diversity and equity in curricula, classroom, or pedagogy, it is important to acknowledge that instructors might need support and training to become aware of their own perspective and issues, before they help students approach theirs. Achieving multicultural competence, or simply being an effective instructor, is a process, lifelong, personal, and continuing.

This is especially difficult and perhaps even more necessary in international L2 learning environments. It is difficult for instructors to divorce themselves from their own assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning, especially, as McGroarty's (in press) research indicates, if these constructs are culturally accepted and promoted in their experience, but foreign to their students. Pedagogical approaches and techniques that help learners to reflect objectively on their own culture are especially important because language teachers and learners need to be sharply aware of their respective points of departure in learning and the basic expectations and definitions that govern classroom practices.

Joritz-Nakagawa defines her approach to achieving fluency in the classroom as being rooted in

humanistic and student-centered teaching. She defines these terms in practice to mean "...not only attempting to understand and respect students' individual differences, but also using students' ideas and the students themselves...as the course content, frequently, if not chiefly" (Joritz-Nakagawa, 2006, p.135). In EFL/ESL classrooms, cooperative education pedagogies are appropriate because they put the students into peer groups where there is an attainable model of language use being demonstrated. Assisted by the careful integration of technological components, more equal discussions and outside-of-class activities can be initiated in a way that potentially alleviates conflicts between traditional practices and imported expectations.

APPROPRIATE / EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

Students come from different backgrounds, and bring so much of that with them to learning environments. Recognizing this, part of students' tasks is to begin to identify how they learn best, and what is difficult for them. Teachers are in similar positions. Not only do teachers have the task of imparting a certain knowledge base to students, they have to choose the method of learning and evaluation that is most appropriate. Pedagogy is determined based on a number of factors, scale and size of the class, academic level, and administrative determinants, to name a few. To be effective in the classroom, instructors need to reach as many students as possible, with the greatest depth of material students' cognitive processes will allow. In addition, this has to occur in an environment where, regardless of individual differences, students' performance, in one way or another, will be evaluated and assessed.

An application of multicultural competency to this situation would encourage teachers to recognize what choices they have made, and how those choices might possibly impact students with different learning styles. Reflecting on their own method and process of learning might help instructors to remember what worked for them, and draw from their experience as students when constructing curricula. Recognizing bias is an important part of becoming multi-culturally competent, especially as the term is applied to education, teacher training, and preparation. It can be defined as the process of opening classrooms and curricula to as many different types of learners as possible. As an instructor, I have found constructivist pedagogies most applicable to this sort of teaching. Including students in the process of creating meaning within the context of a community of learners affords individuals the opportunity to claim ownership over their work and to understand a subject's pertinence to their own experience, making it more valid and memorable.

Effective instruction in this context begins by separating the material to be learned from students' learning styles. The instructor presents the material that is going to be studied in a variety of ways so it is accessible, while students should begin to determine how they learn best (visual, auditory, holistically, comparatively, etc...) and create a methodology for learning that they can carry into everything they do. Their methodology becomes solidified as courses, material, instructors and the overall environment around them changes. What is begun is the process of synthesis, which is the ability to distill knowledge from one area and transfer its principles and parameters to other subjects. Synthesis occurs in education when there is common ground between all subjects learned and courses taken, and is essential to helping students make their education personal and viable. Often this common factor is the students' own approach to learning, generated by their experiences, beliefs, background, and perceptions.

Curricula that draw from student's experiences, questions, and thoughts, encourage them to express and vocalize their ideas. Encouraging self-expression, recognition of process and reflection as components inseparable from experience, helps in creating a personal methodology for comprehension and retention (holistic learning), increases use of 'I' statements (shying away from generalizations) and overall helps develop classrooms and communities that reflect individual students' values, beliefs, point of view and other elements of their heritage.

Though often entirely different in subject matter, courses that are firmly rooted in the concepts of individual expression, experience, and reflection can be referred to collectively as 'reflective curricula.' 'Reflective curricula' can be seen as attempts to bring distinctly different factions (pedagogy, content, individual experience, administrative mandates, academic atmosphere, etc...) into collusion in controlled environments. One of the central dualities that these curricula recognize is the difference between individuals' perceptions versus societal or cultural constructs. For individual learners, in many ways, traditional classrooms embody this bifurcation. Traditional classrooms place teachers at the front of the room, standing between the information being presented and students' comprehension. 'Reflective Curricula' operate under the principle that students are responsible for creating their own individual methodologies for learning, comprehension, and retention. Teachers are the medium that initiates the process of separating the material to be learned from students' developing styles, so that both can be considered and attended to. Additional sources are valuable assets; however, in order to be effective, 'Reflective Curricula' rely partly on student-generated production with an emphasis on multi-modal means of participation.

Equity can be addressed and diversity promoted when students are given a chance to participate in different ways, and encouraged to claim ownership over the course in an environment where the opportunity to succeed is offered to all. Collaborative learning methods and cooperative education pedagogies are one way of creating this sort of environment. When balanced with opportunity for individual expression a myriad of venues can exist for students to participate in the course and engage with the material. Inherent in group work is the acknowledgement that different individuals bring different talents, and that these diverse approaches need to be combined and utilized for maximum efficiency. Diversity in this instance can refer to student approaches to work, as well as challenges to traditional notions of intelligence, capacity, and capability. Kagan and Kagan (1998) and later McCafferty (2006) and others refer often to the importance both of recognizing the diversity that exists, and offering appropriate challenges to encourage students to step outside their academic and personal comfort zones. When pondering the pedagogical and curricular implications of these ideas, McCafferty and others refer to Kagan and Kagan's earlier work about diversity and instruction, offering three reasons for an instructional approach of this manner:

- Instruction should match the way that students want to learn.
- Because we want students to learn in a variety of ways, instruction should sometimes place students in contexts outside their comfort zones...
- Students should come to recognize, understand, and value the diversity that exists among them.
(McCafferty et. al, 2006, p.24)

Cooperative learning promotes diversity in the classroom of opinions, thoughts, and the different learning styles that individuals bring. As the traditional role of the student changes, so do the nature of teaching and the role of the teacher. In many ways, the modern teacher is more of a facilitator, instructing in the art of questioning, analysis, evaluation, and reflection. This encourages students to develop individual learning styles within a formal academic structure, acknowledging both the need for universal outcomes and assessment and the diverse background, ideas, and experiences that students approach learning with.

> ...on a continuum from teacher lecture to self-study, cooperative learning represents a major step away from dependence on teachers and toward greater reliance on self and peers. Further, the purpose of cooperative learning is not to get everyone to think alike, but to get everyone to think and to share and to develop their own thinking through engagement with others. (McCafferty et

al, 2006, p. 16)

Cooperative pedagogy, drawing from the basic concepts of collaborative learning practices encourages the classroom construct to reflect the diverse nature of its student body, support the multitude of learning styles and opinions, and prepare students to become life-long learners, capable of processing information beyond textual analysis, but in ways that will be relevant to real-world situations that require peer-production and group work.

SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Cooperative Education / Collaborative Learning has long been considered an effective pedagogy for second language learning and teaching. Cooperative learning is student-centered learning, which encourages and promotes a diversity of approaches to the material for students and teachers and can re-define traditional definitions. Different roles, input, output, assessment, and participation all add to the sense of ownership over the process and course, and therefore the material.

Cooperative education pedagogies rely on student-generated production, which makes topics and consequent grammar relevant, immediate, and meaningful. When the topics are generated by the participants (even in response to parameters or guiding factors introduced by the instructor) students can claim ownership and a measure of control over the process, increasing their interaction with the course, and improving their potential performance.

Regarding language acquisition, a classroom that is designed around group and community work initiates an atmosphere that is supportive for developing and nurturing communicative ability by including all participants and providing a context for L2 production. In a classroom designed following these principles, no one voice is dominant, not the teacher's or a particular student or group of students (Belz & Thorne, 2005). This adds to the potential for recognizing diversity and promoting equity. Regardless of the student's background, approach to learning, or degree of ability, there is a role for everyone, and everyone therefore has a chance to succeed.

Utilizing cooperative methods creates a supportive atmosphere for the students, gives them peer groups to work in and solicit help from at a comprehensible level. These pedagogical approaches also create an opportunity for more proficient students to take a more active role and cement their knowledge by leading groups and assisting peers. This provides an atmosphere for lower level or under-performing students where input is given at the appropriate level and peers model attainable levels of L2 use in an atmosphere free from competition. This contributes to encouraging a diversity of approaches, methodology, roles, and student input in many ways. Furthermore, autonomy is increased offering each student a chance to participate equally, regardless of mode or manner, effectively achieving a certain level of equity. Diversity, interpreted to mean multicultural course content, is encouraged as well by having students generate topics and content for discussion that reflects their myriad backgrounds and experiences. This moves the course away from the more traditional method of students being engaged in the instructor's sphere of beliefs, ideals, and practices. Participation in this atmosphere requires a certain capacity for self-expression and personal reflection, which, can be encouraged through classroom practices and written assignments to balance the group work and to bolster individual expression skills that are so necessary for cooperative education and collaboration. Additionally, personal reflection papers can be utilized to supplement and augment classroom practices (Holtzman, 2008), providing a chance for L2 learners who want to work independently or participate in other ways,

Inherent in the process of self-reflection is the need to engage students to move beyond the idea of validity (thinking strictly in terms of right and wrong) by introducing the concepts of self-expression, self-assessment and self-evaluation. For students, this can lead to greater consciousness and depth of material

analysis; simultaneously instructors can achieve a greater understanding of the students as individuals. This approach effectively tailors the learning process in personal and unique ways. In a cooperative classroom, students begin as observer/learners, but then progress to assume other roles based on ability and inter-personal relations. If conducted in a community of respect with carefully structured exercises and strategies, individual approaches can be accommodated, encouraged, and made a central focus of peer-to-peer learning.

> Cultural and linguistic diversity in the student population has profound implications for education. The learning climate of the classroom is affected by the nature of the interactions among students. In a culturally diverse classroom, students reflect a variety of attitudes toward and expectations of one another's abilities and styles of behavior. Without structures that promote positive interactions and strategies for improving relationships, students remain detached from one another, unable to benefit from the resources their peers represent. (McGroarty, in press, pp. 5)

Examples of effective structures that 'promote positive interactions' are collaborative and cooperative pedagogical practices that create peer support groups and rely on assessment measures that are group-oriented and project-based. There are additional meta-curricular benefits to the incorporation of cooperative education learning techniques and practices. There are social skills that cooperative learning and collaborative pedagogies make use of, skills that are essential for students to flourish in their professional lives and other communities (McCafferty et. al, 2006). Being prompted to work together, and ask and receive help in L2 situations can lead to greater comfort with these necessary skills in any situation. Inherent in group work is the acknowledgement that different individuals bring different talents, and that these diverse approaches need to be combined and utilized for maximum efficiency. Diversity in this instance can refer to student approaches to work, as well as challenge traditional notions of intelligence, capacity, and capability.

What cooperative education practices can do is help open a traditional classroom to diverse learners and create a student-centered content-based forum for authentic production in the target language. Furthermore, when formed into groups, students cement their knowledge by assisting each other, receive peer feedback in an appropriate and understandable manner, and have a supportive environment to work in that is receptive to individual attempts to negotiate meaning.

CONCLUSION

To achieve equity in a diverse classroom, constructive pedagogies that employ the tenets of cooperative education and collaborative learning practices are the most effective. Cooperative learning is considered effective for a wide range of topics and fields because its student-centered nature capitalizes on existing classroom, social, and cultural conditions. It is extremely pertinent today given the multicultural atmosphere of the modern classroom and the subsequent need to recognize and promote diversity. For these reasons, cooperative learning approaches are well suited to second language acquisition and the international teaching of English as a second language. Language is often best learned in context; therefore cooperative practices that encourage a high rate of student-to-student communication using the target language in the comfort of a peer group is desirable.

Teaching for diversity and equity in L2 classrooms, or any classroom, means striving for multicultural competency in a community of respect, and preparing students to embrace a world whose borders are rapidly shifting and barriers falling. As new definitions are developed we must all work hard to ensure old ways that give privilege to some and deny access to others because of socio-cultural, physiological, or psychological factors are not continued. This is especially difficult in an academic atmosphere where the

need to validate student diversity and individuality is often juxtaposed by traditional modes and means of content transmission and expectations for behavior and practice, in an environment with uniform measures for evaluation and assessment.

Acknowledging diversity in our global climate means not just being concerned with immediate and local issues, but developing an understanding that encapsulates information, sources, and previously unidentified or unrecognized means, modes, and manners of teaching and learning.

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