# THE CHALLENGES AND STRENGTHS OF CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOMS: A CONSIDERATION OF INTERCULTURAL CURRICULA

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## Abstract

In this paper, the need for intercultural curricula in the Canadian context is discussed. The relevance of this discussion is based on the significant number of international students choosing Canada as a place to study and live. Given the importance of language competence to success in post-secondary education and adjustment to Canadian society, development of students' language skills is a high stakes goal as many of these students aspire to advanced post-secondary schooling at colleges and universities. Additionally, there is a need for English language teachers to create classroom settings where students from all cultural backgrounds are safe and comfortable and that reflect the culturally diverse classrooms that are a reality in Canadian schools and educational settings. In this paper, the challenges and strengths of intercultural curricula will be explored. Finally, three classroom activities designed to facilitate an intercultural curriculum in a multicultural language classroom will be recommended.

## Introduction

The internationalization and multicultural character of Canada are affecting both the content and delivery of educational and language programs. As

students learn, live, and work to become global citizens, the need for programs and curricula that reflect culture and diversity will only continue to grow. An intercultural curriculum, defined as a planned program of study with intentional inclusion of culturally-diverse content and a culturally-safe learning environment that fosters cognitive and affective learning (Mestenhauser, 1983; Shenk, Moore & Davis, 2004), is suggested as a response to this need. The reasons for this are that such a curriculum engages students' thinking, prompts reflection, and promotes dialogue about various cultural perspectives. Such curricula also facilitate students' development of understanding and respect for their own cultures as well as others' cultures. This curricular approach is particularly relevant as Canada continues to recruit more international students and mobilize Canadian-born students to engage in education in international settings.

While the above is affecting educators who teach in varied subject areas, particularly affected are those teachers who teach language. The challenges and strengths of teaching language to a diverse group of learners as well as three practical strategies for facilitating the process of learning language in a classroom characterized by cultural diversity will be presented in this paper.

Although educators face challenges of all kinds in their work, the greatest challenges for a teacher who works with international students are often related to language acquisition and cultural diversity. Learning a language is never easy; moreover, difficulties related to language can be compounded in the context of a culturally diverse classroom where others have the same goal but differing learning styles and varied cultural backgrounds. The challenges and complexity of this situation are explored in the next section of this paper.

## The Culturally Diverse Classroom: Challenges

Although all students in an ESL classroom share a common goal—to learn and use English—achieving this goal is often difficult and time consuming. Like any classroom, students in an ESL classroom have personal goals that they are working towards, and they must fit these goals within the scope of the course. The hugely diverse population of students in an ESL classroom, however, can

present challenges for both students and teachers.

Each person learns a language differently and in light of their own abilities, experiences, and preferences. Lightbrown and Spada (2006) examined a number of variables that affect how a person learns a language. Of particular interest within the context of this paper is their discussion of learning styles, personality, and identity and ethnic group affiliation. Regarding learning styles, they point out that every student has a preferred learning style and that there is no one correct way to learn—or, by extension, teach—a language (p. 59). In addition, language learners from different countries may have different preferred learning styles. Further, a number of personality traits, including introversion and extroversion, anxiety, self-esteem, empathy, dominance, talkativeness, and responsiveness, have been studied in connection with language learning. Although the research does not show a clearly defined relationship between personality and language learning, many language instructors suggest that personality does affect language development. Linking this to culture, it is likely that a student who comes from a culture that strongly discourages making mistakes will fear doing so in the classroom, and therefore, refuse to take language risks. Identity and ethnic group affiliation also play an important role in a person's language development. A person from a minority group learning a majority group language may have different attitudes and motivations than a person from a majority group learning a minority language (p. 65). Learners from some ethnic groups, perhaps more than others, may be more willing to learn a language based on how they are perceived, or feel they are perceived, in the community.

By comparison, the literature on culturally diverse classrooms is characterized by a cross-section of concepts, all of which are relevant to this discussion. These concepts include but are not limited to cultural awareness, cultural competence, culturally responsive teaching, intercultural competence, intercultural curriculum, and hidden curriculum. While each term could be considered on its own, the breadth of this work is beyond the limitations of this paper. Sharing some key ideas though is both possible and appropriate.

An outsider's experience of culture typically falls along a continuum ranging from awareness and knowledge to competence within the culture and when interacting

with the members of a particular culture. Ideally, for example, a teacher who is teaching English to a class of students from Korea aspires to be competent in the group's culture to create a supportive and trusting learning environment where language development occurs. However, when the class is composed of learners from different cultures who speak different languages, the challenge of interculturality manifests. In this context, the teacher needs to strive for learning experiences that are meaningful, respectful, and effective for all members of the class. According to Smith (1983), an intercultural curriculum is the desired model because it acknowledges the differences and the commonalities between and among cultures and, in an ESL classroom, languages. Smith's recognition of the intercultural curriculum as distinct from multicultural and cross-cultural curricula is significant. Most importantly, an intercultural curriculum encompasses more than other cultures and diverse groups of people; it also serves to promote an understanding of and response to one's own culture. As noted above, an intercultural curriculum involves the intentional programming of culturally-diverse and safe content and instruction to encourage learning (Mestenhauser, 1983; Shenk, Moore & Davis, 2004). Lastly, such a curriculum enables students from different disciplinary and work backgrounds to broaden their perspectives and respond to cultural diversity (INTER-Project, 2007; Yershova, DeJaeghere & Mestenhauser, 2000). Certainly, an intercultural curriculum plays an important role in an ESL classroom where the culture and language of students is diverse. Learning about others and about one's self facilitates the language learning process in positive ways and contributes to students' understandings of their own and others' languages and cultural values. Activities to promote understanding of the self and of others will be offered later in this article.

Although an intercultural curriculum is desirable, it can be difficult to put into practice. One particular challenge that heavily impacts how an intercultural curriculum functions is the hidden curriculum (Egbo, 2009, p. 9). The term hidden curriculum refers to unstated assumptions or rules that are in play in the classroom but not necessarily articulated in a course, program, or institution. Students learn the unofficial rules about power and structure in order to succeed in the academic environment. For example, there is the unacknowledged

assumption that we learn from experts and that the knowledge that teachers present is valuable (Jones & Young, 1997). In the context of an ESL classroom, the teacher, as an English speaker, holds tremendous power over students who have limited linguistics capabilities and who may struggle to effectively and easily communicate; the teacher's knowledge of English is highly valued and desired by students. There may also be the issue of the dominance by one cultural sub-group within the class: perhaps, for example, there may be members of a culture in the class who are more verbal than students from other cultures who are in the same class. The former may inhibit the participation of the latter. Furthermore, there is sometimes the challenge of cultural groups who may not respect each other and, therefore, affect the learning of all in the classroom. It is important for the teacher to recognize these types of situations and to navigate them appropriately and sensitively; this paper will offer practical suggestions and activities for how to do this.

## The Culturally Diverse Classroom: Strengths

While the development and delivery of an intercultural curriculum is no small task, there are many recommendations to assist educators engaged in the development and delivery of courses and programs with an intercultural focus. The following provides insights into what is involved in an intercultural curriculum.

It is necessary to acknowledge that culture and the learning of language are complex realities; therefore, it is vital for the teacher to be aware of and sensitive to the following: race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, nation of origin, age, immigration experiences, physical/mental ability, and other key cultural elements. Understanding of and sensitivity to these elements of students' backgrounds are necessary for instructors to create a classroom environment where students feel welcome, understood, and safe. At times, it may be necessary for instructors to directly and openly acknowledge these realities for themselves by taking active steps to learn a more about students' backgrounds. A simple but meaningful way that instructors can become more familiar with students' backgrounds is by asking students questions about themselves and their experiences. Students are often open and glad to share

information about themselves with the instructor and, by extension, their classmates. A classroom environment, which encourages openness will be more comfortable and interesting for all members of the class; additionally, instructors can better connect with their students, understand how they approach the learning experience, and identify factors beyond the classroom that may help or hinder student success. At other times, however, implicit understanding of these realities is sufficient and appropriate.

Furthermore, culture and language should be explored through the voices and perspectives of many individuals including those in the classroom as well as people outside the classroom who share their experiences in stories, memoirs, films, and other forms or representations. These individuals include political figures and artists. By ensuring the experiences of many are respected and shared, student interest and participation increase and course content and delivery are enriched. Including students in a safe learning environment helps them learn about their own and others' cultural identities as well as develop respect for culture generally and specifically. Through the fostering of safe learning environments, teachers ensure that students feel comfortable and included; such settings are essential to student success.

With respect to the hidden curriculum, critical thinking is necessary to expose potential hidden elements of a curriculum, assumptions about culture, and marginalization. Curriculum developers, instructors, and students alike need to engage in critical thinking activities to better understand how the hidden curriculum is at work. All groups have a responsibility to break down barriers that prohibit some students from accessing and excelling within a particular cultural context. Curriculum developers should carefully examine materials for cultural biases and ensure that materials are fully and properly explained as well as accessible. Instructors need to acknowledge the hidden curriculum that exists within any curriculum and facilitate student awareness of the unseen, and often unspoken, elements that are required for academic success. Finally, students hold a certain responsibility for making sure that they are actively trying to understand how the classroom functions. Increased critical thinking by all parties results in an improved teaching and learning experience.

In addition to ensuring that materials are well developed, curriculum developers and language instructors should always work to include multiple examples and activities in lessons. This awareness is especially important in an intercultural classroom. Examples and activities need to be varied, interesting, and meaningful for students. Examples need to be deliberate, culturally relevant, and accessible. Further, constructivist learning approaches where students learn from and with each other are recommended whenever possible (Freedman, 1998; Leonard, 2002). Constructivist learning involves recognizing the context where students learn as well as the attitudes and beliefs that students hold. Students should be encouraged to reflect on how their own biases and views affect their learning and understanding.

Fluidity, or culturally responsive teaching, is critical in the planning of classes and programs of study. Scaffolding of learning is highly recommended to ensure that individual students and the class as a whole are progressing (Pea, 2004). Through scaffolding, students see progression and a clear path toward reaching their goals. Students feel comfortable and safe working through a well-planned and closely connected series of lessons. Effective scaffolding is essential for student success, particularly when learning language. While intercultural teaching requires fluidity, pre-established learning outcomes are vitally important. To paraphrase a line from Alice in Wonderland, one cannot know that he or she has arrived if the destination has not been clearly delineated in advance (Carroll, 2009). Assessment is necessary to ensure that appropriate progress is being made, and it offers validation for both instructors and students.

## Thinking Strategically: Strategies that Work in the Intercultural Second Language Class

Knowledge of an intercultural classroom is not enough for a teacher. Instead, teachers need a repertoire of activities and specific strategies to support the development and maintenance of an intercultural classroom. In this section, three classroom activities that can be used in an ESL classroom to promote interculturality and language development are presented.

### Activity #1: Stereotypes

First, activities that address stereotypes about cultural groups are particularly eye opening for students. Although some instructors may be hesitant to bring this topic into their classrooms, purposefully discussing the oversimplified ideas that we hold about each other is extremely powerful and engaging. Discussing stereotypes helps students to learn about how they might be perceived, but it also allows students to respond to the stereotypes that others hold about them. Students can offer comments and corrections thereby helping others to build a more accurate and fuller understanding of different cultures, which contributes to a respectful classroom and learning environment. This improved understanding of cultures will extend outside the classroom as well. To comfortably begin a discussion of stereotypes, ask students to list stereotypes they have about Canadians and make clarifications and corrections as necessary. Then, discuss the stereotypes that students have about each other. Students are sometimes surprised by the stereotypes that other people have about their cultural group, and they should be encouraged to respond to these stereotypes in order to teach their classmates about their culture. As mentioned, this kind of discussion is useful for students to better understand each other and to consider how they are perceived by others. In all, students develop a deeper understanding of both their own cultural group and other cultural groups.

### Activity #2: Teach Your Language

A second activity that promotes interculturality is a teach your language activity. For this activity, students are put into mixed language groups, and each group has a leader and an assigned language. The leader of the group is responsible for teaching their group members five words in their language related to a particular topic (for example, the names of five animals, body parts, or colours). Then, the group teaches the entire class the five words in their assigned language. Students who do not actually know how to speak the assigned language are teaching other students words in a different language. For example, a Korean-speaking student helps teach the class five words in Italian. This is a useful activity for two reasons: it promotes language awareness, and students learn about each other in a personal way. The leader of the group is given an opportunity to share the

language with classmates and experience a sense of power in their position as teacher. Moreover, the leader develops a greater awareness of his or her language and how best to share it with classmates. Likewise, the students who learn the new languages develop a greater understanding of the person who speaks the language and may reflect on their pre-existing assumptions about particular languages.

### Activity #3: Presentations on Countries and Cultures

A final activity that promotes an intercultural curriculum is having students create and do presentations about aspects of their cultures and countries. Students are generally pleased to do this activity and share beautiful pictures and interesting information about important places, foods, music, and customs in their countries and lives. Although some students feel nervous about doing their presentations, they often far exceed the required time limit because they are proud to be sharing their countries and cultures with their classmates. Students always have many questions for each other about their cultures. They often realize that, although they live on opposite sides of the world, their lives and values are deeply connected.

## Final Thoughts

The experience of teaching language in a diverse cultural classroom is daunting and exciting. As globalization becomes the norm rather than the exception, there is no question about it: we must learn to communicate, work with, learn from, and socialize with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, this should happen in a context of respect and openness. The intercultural second language classroom is an ideal place to prepare students for this connected and increasingly open world.

At the same time, the need for support for teachers who work in such classrooms is critical. Employers need to appreciate the complexities involved in language instruction and enable teachers through relevant professional development opportunities and adequate resources. As an example, there are new technologies available that are showing real value in the second language classroom. Virtual

classrooms where students assume an avatar and interact in a 3D virtual space have been reported to show promise with language learners who may be shy to speak in the face-to-face classroom and in role-playing situations that could involve cross-cultural interactions. Such resources need to be investigated and possibly made available to teachers to employ with their students. While the face-to-face classroom will always be central to language learning, there are technologies and strategies that can be used to enhance the process and support teachers and students.

In closing, intercultural classrooms are places of energy and challenge. If educators bring personal and professional energy to these settings, further energy and, of course, learning will be the outcomes. Indeed, 21st century classrooms cannot afford to be anything less. Supports for the intercultural classroom should be a priority as geographic boundaries become less significant and classrooms become increasingly diverse. Opportunities for students of the world to meet, understand each other, and work together are paramount to achieving goals within and beyond the language classroom.

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