

Diversity and Challenges in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The many aspects of diversity in education, with particular emphasis in this paper on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, are interesting subjects to study. Diversity touches every discipline and perspective. One of the main conditions of diversity in education is that as it increases, teachers are faced with effectively teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Schwartz, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). To positively impact the academic achievement and learning processes of English language learners (ELLs), English language teachers must be educated and knowledgeable in many areas of language education and use, as well as sociopolitical aspects and the teachers' own socio-cultural consciousness (Greenfield, 2013). In the past, EFL teaching required the instructor to mainly focus on the linguistic competence components of the language. However, it has become highly recommended that greater attention must be given to cultural content as well, because cultural diversity, among many other types of diversity, is an integral part of the language learning process (Abu-Alyan, 2011). The presence of diversity does not exist without challenges, therefore, the focus herein examines how diversity and its challenges are present in language, learner levels, culture, ethnicity, religion, attitude, and educational systems themselves in non-English speaking countries.

Keywords: EFL, ELLs, diversity, culture, ethnicity.

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructor worldwide often struggle to teach English to their foreign language-speaking students. This is due not only to linguistic diversity or differences, but also due to the diversity of the learner levels in the classroom, the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity present in classrooms, and the attitudes of the learners themselves regarding the necessity of learning English. There is also the matter of diversity in foreign education systems' biases in practice toward the assessment and promotion of students. The focus here isn't only on the numerous challenges faced by teachers, it also encompasses the pressure to achieve in English language which is placed on foreign students, and at times creates a stressful classroom environment for them. An examination of the

current literature regarding these contemporary issues along with recommendations for personal and pedagogical strategies addressing the challenges are offered in this article.

Linguistic Diversity

In many non-English speaking countries, linguistic diversity becomes a compelling challenge in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language. In particular, Arabic speakers find difficulty in learning English because of varying features of the Arabic language. (Abdo & Breen, 2010). For instance, the Arabic alphabet is not read from left to right as in English. This among other factors such as orthography and grammar differences make fostering competence in English for Arabic speaking students quite challenging because, unlike other languages such as Italian or Spanish, Indo-European languages which have syntactic similarities to English, Arabic language is completely divergent (Shoebottom, 2015). A study by Abdo and Breen (2010) of 120 university students was conducted to obtain answers regarding, among other subjects, which pedagogical strategies promoted learning in Jordanian EFL students. The following suggestions from the study revealed several strategies to help facilitate better learning. Attempts should be made by the teacher to understand ethnic and cultural norms of the learners, along with their attitudes and behaviors. The teacher should be patient, and speak with a pleasant demeanor and tone to help lessen student apprehension and motivate them to learn. Additionally, EFL teachers need to move past the more traditional methodologies of teaching by adopting a more communicative language learning approach which integrates the social aspects of learning as well (Abdo & Breen, 2010; Kourieos & Evripidou, 2013).

Data collected by Wu, Wu, and Le (2014) in their study of 50 Chinese adult English learners further express the contrast between languages in a rather different situation. The survey of the students in the study revealed that they felt frustration because of extreme difficulty expressing themselves correctly in English, due to their own orthographic language structure and their accents. Additionally, the Chinese students were concerned with pragmatics, or their feelings about how they use the language in social settings (Aydin & Koch, 2012), plus their own learning abilities, and how confidence was a serious issue for them. Suggestions by the students themselves to alleviate the problems of learning difficulties included spending more time practicing speaking to improve their accents, which could improve their confidence; also they should think of learning English as a competition to encourage and motivate them to study harder (Wu, Wu, & Le, 2014).

Learner Level Diversity

Learner levels encompass a wide structural range, from multiple levels of learners in one classroom, and how that impacts the learning of all the students in that classroom, to the way biliteracy is supported by some teachers and not by others. The latter being key to how students whose first language is supported by the teachers in the classroom show greater improvement in their English than the students whose first language is largely ignored. These findings come from a study in Australia by Jafar (2010) of eight Indonesian students learning English, who examined comparisons between students who learned from teachers in three groups whose styles of teaching English consisted of those who strongly supported biliteracy, those who somewhat supported it, and those who were only focused on English literacy. This shares some similarity with findings by Abdo & Breen (2010) who discussed how most Jordanian EFL classrooms have a wide variance between linguistic competence, and how little accommodation is given to the individual English learners' level of readiness for learning the target language, an obstruction or barrier for the learner because the individual student's ability is not taken into account.

In a basic adult EFL education scenario, the individual student's abilities were also an important consideration for Diluzio (2011), who related how meeting students' needs was nearly impossible in a multilevel EFL classroom. Teaching between three and four different language competency levels in one classroom created problems because the course materials and books were not satisfying the needs of a class which contained that many levels. How she solved the problem was to plan lessons carefully and use a task-based syllabus to teach her multilevel classroom. She shared several suggestions and methodologies which included encapsulating lessons and working with small sets of vocabulary and grammar (Diluzio, 2011).

Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

EFL instructors have noted that students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds do have significant impact on their English language learning abilities. Studies illustrate that if students have access to learning materials which are culturally familiar to them, their comprehension is greater than if the materials are culturally different. In a study by Yousef, Karimi & Janfeshan (2014), 95 students from three ethnically and culturally different backgrounds in the Middle East (Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkish) were tested using English language reading materials which contained both culturally similar content and culturally different content. Their findings were consistent across the three groups indicating their mean scores were markedly different in that the study participants scored lower on the tests which were culturally different for them than the tests which were culturally similar. A recommendation from this study is for EFL instructors to make use of culturally relevant materials in English to help develop their students' comprehension skills. (Yousef, Karimi & Janfeshan, 2014).

In contrast to the previous study, rather than focusing on the cultural appropriateness of learning materials, Chinese culture presents challenges related to English learning in the form of the nuclear family. Eighty percent of the students in the study by Wu, Wu, and Le (2014), referred to earlier in this paper, felt as though their families were a negative influence on their learning, and complained that their family obligations left them little time to adequately study. A suggestion to alleviate the family issues, was to use time management techniques more effectively in order to balance their work, family time, and learning opportunities.

Religious Diversity

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges concerning diversity for EFL teachers, with particular significance for teachers working in the Middle East, is religious diversity. Hayik (2011) presents a poignant story of teaching English in a school where the students were Christians and Muslims, and discusses how the different groups' diversity issues were not even remotely addressed in any of the books or materials she used to teach English from. She related that these students were aware of their marginalization, particularly due to the fact that their school was located in Israel, where the two groups she taught were in the religious minority. Additionally, the students grappled with the fact they had a dual identity of being both Israeli and Arab, which presented a conflict that further heightened their already negative feelings of being marginalized. These conflicts coupled with the continuous exposure to biased media, reminded them of their minority status in Israel. A stark difficulty for these students was that they were aware of their status, but were unable to talk about it during school hours as such activity was not encouraged. To attempt to remedy this in a non-threatening way, Hayik created a way for the students to have an outlet for their thoughts by asking them to take part in a classroom activity to "consider multiple viewpoints" by drawing their interpretations of a story that she read to them in class. She felt as though the activity, which yielded positive results, allowed them to understand each other's beliefs and perspectives, and gave them an artistic method of expressing their feelings about their own religious diversity, therefore lifting the silence for her group of students (Hayik, 2011).

In a completely different scenario than the previous study, Mambu (2014) discusses the possibility of power struggles between Muslim and Christian ELT stakeholders at an Indonesian university. He contends that not enough attention is being given to the situation between the different religiously oriented spiritual identities, and that it can be problematic for educators if the students feel unfavorable toward the teachers' spiritual beliefs. In his interesting and extensive study, Mambu examined the way Christian and non-Christian English language teachers and students negotiated power associated with their religious leanings. Although he felt that the integration of spirituality (or lack of) could cause problems, his more important contention was that spirituality could be positively enriching for the students and teachers if presented in critical pedagogy inspired ELT, and also that Christianity could serve as a counter-hegemonic religion. Focus groups and interviews were conducted to collect data and analyze meanings of what it was like for an EFL teacher educator who has a sense of spirituality or a religious view in a Christian university. In his study at the Indonesian university, Mambu surveyed Christian and non-Christian teachers and students. He observed 17 participants in a focal group and six in a non-focal group. Mambu video recorded several classroom interactions in reading class sessions, and he also conducted interviews after the focus group discussions, collecting over 1,000 hours of data.

Mambu's veritable cornucopia of results found that power was not wielded by a Christian religious believer at the expense of a non-Christian, instead the power was managed productively in appropriate contexts. In some cases, incorporating spirituality into ELT seemed problematic. For example, when a teacher referred to texts from the Bible in a class, some students seemed confused. On the other hand, the lack of spirituality attention in ELT can also give rise to some questions such as if a missionary was expected to pray in class and didn't. Also, a teacher's decision to teach her class with no religious point of view at all wouldn't take into consideration the different students who embraced several varieties of religious faiths when discussing subjects which were deemed controversial. Finally, Mambu observed his original argument that the integration of spirituality into the contexts of ELT were both enriching to teachers and students (Mambu, 2014).

Attitude Diversity

EFL students can exhibit a broad range of attitude diversity with regard to learning English. A study of 50 Japanese university EFL writing students by Cummings (2004), a university English writing teacher, revealed a marked change in the attitudes of her students from negative and disinterested, to positive and participative as a result of changing from a standard classroom speaking and writing scenario to a computer mediated communication (CMC) environment. What drove her to the decision of modifying the classroom instruction were the negative attitudes of the students toward her, the lessons, and using English in any form during their class time. To alleviate the apparent attitude problem, the teacher designed a computer-based class with the students. The results of which culminated in students communicating with one another as well as the teacher through the social networking aspects of the computer based class.

Somewhat similar to the Japanese students' attitudes, Jordanian students often take the stance that English is not a necessary language for them to learn. They feel it isn't a practical endeavor, and that they probably will never need to use it for either future employment or communication (Abdo & Breen, 2010).

How some university students view the quality of their English language instruction proves to be a thoughtful collection of attitudes and feelings as illustrated in the study by Kourieos and Evripidou (2013), who conducted a study of 18 EFL learners in Cyprus. The study yielded many comments and concerns, with particular attitudes regarding the use of course materials. One student's comment revealed a negative attitude toward the course textbooks used in their

university, citing that they were extremely limiting in their use of topics and similar structures to their previous course books from high school. The student's opinion was that what the students needed was a wider variety of authentic materials from the Internet and more multi-media to watch which discussed relevant and interesting subjects for them. Another student was very keen on the idea of using YouTube in the classroom, stating that it was fun to be exposed to different kinds of English that not only encouraged the students to participate in discussions afterward, but that also helped them to improve their listening skills and to learn new vocabulary words. Perhaps the most passionate response from the study came from another student who felt that they should be treated as adult learners, and therefore instead of constantly being forced to talk about movies and fashion, or the environment, they should be given the opportunity to talk about something more closely related to students' lives, such as more controversial issues and things which are new to them. They went on to mention how topics for discussion such as religion, politics, and sexuality would be genuinely welcomed because they wanted to express their feelings and beliefs instead of only using the target language just for its own sake (Kourieos & Evripidou, 2013).

Education System Diversity

Adamson & Xia (2011) discuss how the policies of language education in China are affecting social justice for the ethnic minority students, making it essentially legal to lower the entry requirements for a highly coveted exam, the College English Test (CET), for disadvantaged students without adjusting the exit requirements. This practice has resulted in hundreds of the ethnic minority students failing to graduate, and raises the issue of discriminatory practices by the Chinese systems of higher education, among others. Because this test is so important, essentially a gate keeper which allows students to enroll in any undergraduate studies at Chinese universities, students representing some of China's 55 ethnic minority groups feel pressure to pass it, and have often failed because of their low or limited exposure to English in their early education. When examined in a court case which was foreshadowed by a lawsuit against the university, it was ruled that the university was not guilty of breaching any laws. The ethnic minority students affected are concerned that the universities' language policy is divisive as well as controversial, and needs to be reviewed realistically (Adamson & Xia, 2011).

This narrative has exhibited increasing popularity in recent years, and lends credence to commentary by Abdo and Breen (2010) who maintain that certain foreign education systems contain biases in how they allow little room for the failure of students, making the challenge of teaching foreign students more difficult for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors (Abdo & Breen, 2010). In a similar vein, Cummings (2004) reported that in some cases, the teachers themselves are considered responsible for students' learning, and are expected to pass their students regardless of their grades. Additionally, teachers are often blamed for their students' failure in the Japanese system (Cummings, 2004).

On the other hand, educational systems whose instructors are practicing an overly authoritarian style of teaching are also problematic in that those instructors can instill a fear of participation into their students because of their criticism and overuse of discipline (Cummings, 2004). These types of practices do not encourage students to try to speak in their newly acquired language because, as one student recalled, she was always feeling stress and anxiety during her English lesson due to fear that the teacher might call on her to answer a question. The student's fear stemmed from the fact that because the teacher was very disciplined and strict, she was overly critical of the way students answered, and in turn this prompted the students to stop participating and also ruined their concentration on the lessons (Kourieos & Evripidou, 2011).

Conclusion

As evidenced by the literature, diversity and challenges in EFL take many forms in educational settings and can create daunting challenges for students, and also the educators whose studies and recommendations have been expressed throughout. These challenges are diverse in that they occur in different countries where the cultures are completely divergent from the western world. The types of diversity discussed in this paper illuminated some important cases which described controversial practices and, at times, behaviors which would be considered discriminatory in the west. Diversity in education, and particularly in EFL instruction needs to be continually studied with particular emphasis on adopting communicative language learning approaches which utilize the social components of learning by depending on authentic and meaningful interaction between students and their peer groups (Kourieos & Evripidou, 2011). In education, each learning context is different and contains textures rich with multiple types of diversity, providing researchers with endless opportunities of study.

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