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## **Students as Experts: Tapping the Cultural and Linguistic Diversity of the Classroom**

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*The challenges of the increasingly diverse U.S. college classroom may at first seem problematic. However, when educators become aware of the broad range of cultural and linguistic behaviors that can inform their particular classroom culture, areas in which students are expert, they can not only defuse incipient tensions but also experience such diversity as a rich resource for alternative modes of teaching and learning. The dynamics of the culturally diverse classroom are outlined, and strategies are proposed for reducing miscommunication and expanding understanding of different educational practices and varieties of English that may emerge in the classroom.*

### **Introduction**

The classrooms of American colleges and universities today include students and teachers from all over the world. The culturally diverse classroom presents numerous challenges because international students and teachers bring with them culture-based styles of communicating, learning, and teaching, along with the assumptions that underlie these styles. Such conventions are also intertwined with cultural practices associated with studying various subject areas, from the arts to the humanities to the sciences. There is a tendency to reduce this rich complexity to “the problem” of the multicultural classroom. The culturally diverse classroom, however, presents opportunities for students and teachers to collaborate in creating a classroom environment that is comfortable for all involved.

The multicultural classroom allows students and teachers to engage in mutual consciousness-raising activity that will lead to a classroom reflective of their teaching, learning, and communication style preferences. In such a classroom, the teacher remains the subject matter specialist, but students are the experts on how they can best relate to the subject matter and how the teacher can best relate to them. This sort of jointly constructed activity ultimately can expand methods of exchanging information in the classroom, increase tolerance for different ways of relating to subject matter and to other members of the class, and provide opportunities for teacher-student and student-student discussion of how learning is occurring and to what end.

The culturally diverse classroom lends itself to informal research on different ways of being a student or a teacher, communicating in the classroom, and using English. The purpose of this article is to present perspectives and tools that can help teachers and students to explore these domains jointly within their own classrooms. The larger intent is not to advocate radical changes in teacher behaviors, but rather to encourage teachers to work closely with students and to make judicious adjustments and choices that may lead to heightened mutual understanding, learning, and communication among everyone in the multicultural classroom.

First, we outline the dynamics of the culturally diverse classroom and suggest strategies for reducing miscommunication, which involve being polite within the classroom context, structuring information, and addressing diverging expectations for classroom behavior and activity. Next, we introduce research that uncovered different concepts of being a student or a teacher in the classroom, followed by suggestions on how instructors might explore the educational practices and attitudes of their students through questionnaires and discussion. Finally, we address attitudes toward the variations in English usage that occur in the multicultural classroom. We present consciousness-raising activities on aspects of the talk of language-minority students (native or non-native speakers of English) that can help both teachers and students reframe their thinking about different-sounding speech.

Our aim is to offer a variety of perspectives, strategies, and tools that instructors may employ selectively to defuse tensions and to create alternative modes of interaction and instruction within the culturally diverse classroom.

## **The Dynamics of the Culturally Diverse Classroom**

The key to tapping the cultural and linguistic diversity of the classroom is raising teacher and student consciousness about the cultural assumptions and linguistic nuances that contribute to classroom communication. The nature and interpretation of classroom communication, like societal communication, are likely to diverge on the basis of cultural background (Gumperz, 1982) and on subcultural levels corresponding to ethnic heritage, class, geographic region, age, and gender (Tannen, 1992). At the broadest level, the culturally diverse classroom may be regarded as the product of two major cultural parameters that shape one another: the culture of the classroom and the culture of the class participants. These two parameters intervene and interact in complex ways to create the dynamics of the multicultural classroom.

Understanding the culturally diverse classroom thus entails understanding the interaction between classroom-specific communicative norms and the cultural beliefs of the class participants. Such understanding is crucial because successful teaching and learning depend upon effective communication in the classroom. Breen's (1985) characterization of the language classroom can be adapted and expanded to identify at least five essential features of the multicultural classroom.

**The culturally diverse classroom is interactive.** It involves all of its participants in verbal and nonverbal interaction, from the ritualized and predictable communication associated with institutionalized classroom culture to the dynamic and unpredictable communication resulting from norms that participants bring with them. Interaction in the multicultural classroom can result in misunderstandings that arise from mismatches between intentions and interpretations. For example, American teachers may expect their students to ask questions out of interest and respect. Students from certain backgrounds, however, might regard asking questions as intrusive and disrespectful. Thus, patterns of classroom interaction hold varying significance among the class participants.

**The culturally diverse classroom is differentiated** with respect to its educational connotations for various participants. On the basis of their previous experience both in and outside their cultural community, students bring with them different preconceived notions of what constitutes teaching and learning. If students do not find themselves or the teacher going through certain expected routines, they may think that no teaching or learning is taking place. Any perceived radical departure from cultural norms may be resisted or rejected, at least until a sense of security prevails. For example, students who regard the teacher as the sole

authority and repository of knowledge on a given subject may be reluctant to participate in small group discussions. Thus, teaching and learning methods, as well as content, are being interpreted continually and differentially by participants as classroom events unfold.

**The culturally diverse classroom is collective.** In spite of the different beliefs and assumptions that individuals bring with them, the culturally diverse classroom invariably represents the psyche of the group rather than the psyche of the individual, which results in tension between the cultural beliefs of the individual and those of the other participants as a group. Students for whom silence is an active communicative stance may find themselves at odds with those who place a high premium on verbal exchange. To relieve such tension, individuals (the teacher as well as the learners) must adapt their own interactive styles to the social and psychological processes of the group, which unfold from the contributions (whether verbal or nonverbal) of individual participants.

**The culturally diverse classroom is judgmental.** The behavior of class participants is continually judged, mostly subjectively, against various cultural conventions the participants adopted before they came together as a group, and also against stereotypes associated with a particular cultural or ethnic group. For example, students who whisper to each other instead of raising their hands to address the teacher, as happens in certain South and Southeast Asian cultures, may be viewed as inattentive, disruptive, and, in a testing situation, potentially dishonest. In most classrooms, participants are sorted, consciously or unconsciously, into the categories of good or bad learners, good or bad teachers, high or low participators, and so on, in a stereotypical manner. Thus, great care must be exercised in evaluating behaviors in the multicultural classroom.

**The culturally diverse classroom is asymmetrical.** Teachers are generally expected to know what learners are not expected to know, and these expectations result in asymmetrical relationships, with the teacher inevitably in an advantageous position. In the multicultural classroom, academic asymmetry has the potential to become cultural asymmetry as well. Cultural asymmetry occurs when the teacher, as a member of a particular social, cultural, or ethnic group, knowingly or unknowingly expects learners to exhibit classroom behavior that is typical of the teacher's group and discredits behavior typical of other social, cultural, or ethnic groups. Such insensitivity can generate psychological dissonance. For example, one American teacher jokingly threw chalk at students to get their attention and generate classroom discussion. This informality, although intended to release tension, was experienced as demeaning and invasive by those students accustomed to far greater classroom formality. Asymmetrical relationships can exist among learners as well. Learners

who share a common identity may form subgroups, which may have both positive and negative effects on learning and teaching processes.

### **Causes of and Strategies for Reducing Miscommunication in the Culturally Diverse Classroom**

As indicated above, the interactive, differentiated, collective, judgmental, and asymmetrical nature of the culturally diverse classroom can result in miscommunication. Another cause of miscommunication is the way interlocutors use a common language; that is, participants in the multicultural classroom may speak the same language differently according to various cultural discourse patterns. For instance, they may have different ways of structuring and sequencing information. Gumperz (1982) pointed out the tendency in some Asian cultures to respond to a clarification question by first outlining general background information and then providing the specific information requested. An interlocutor who expects the English convention of making the relevant point first and explaining the background afterward may switch off in the middle of the conversation or even think that the Asian is evading the question.

A partial solution to such problematic situations as the one above might lie in emphasizing those assumptions and norms of interpretation that are shared by all members of the class. An important first step is

to break the grip of the one language: one culture fallacy, and to sensitize teachers and other educational personnel to the fact that the use of the "same" surface linguistic code may conceal significant cultural differences in communicative intentions and misunderstandings. (Saville-Troike, 1992, p. 154)

A teacher can take several steps to reduce the frequency of miscommunication in dealing with culturally diverse students.

1. Learn about cultural differences regarding face-to-face communication, particularly beliefs about politeness, rudeness, and directness. Such awareness can help the teacher guard against offending a student or jumping to wrong conclusions about student behavior and understanding.

2. Use explicit words to convey meaning rather than relying entirely on intonation patterns that may not be familiar to all students. If students have not fully understood a particular point, reformulate or rephrase the message in several different ways rather than simply repeating it verbatim.

3. Assess students' preconceived notions, expectations, and perceptions of classroom behavior by designing and administering a question-

naire at the beginning of the semester (see next section), followed by an informal conversation with the students, either in the privacy of the teacher's office or, if appropriate, in the classroom. This effort can lead to jointly constructed interpretive procedures that minimize cross-cultural miscommunication and maximize the learning and teaching potential of the culturally diverse classroom.

A profitable beginning can be made if, as Kramsch (1991, p. 202) suggested, teachers consider themselves "border people" at the intersection of different languages and cultures and if they reflect critically on their own and others' forms of discourse.

### **Other Educational Practices That Affect the Culturally Diverse Classroom**

As noted earlier, the classroom community is a minisociety with its own cultural rules, regulations, and role relationships. As a minisociety nested within the larger society, the classroom community operates within certain prescribed, preferred patterns of behavior. "Some of these patterns of behavior are carried over from the general society. Others are generated within the organization. Both the general and locally generated patterns of behavior are guided by rules or norms" (Mehan, 1979, p. 73). A useful tool for uncovering differing cultural expectations regarding classroom rules and norms is the attitudinal survey. This section reports two such surveys administered in culturally diverse educational programs and suggests how instructors might construct their own surveys.

McCargar (1993) administered an extensive attitudinal survey to approximately 200 international students in the American Culture and Language Program (the intensive English program) at California State University, Los Angeles to elicit their expectations regarding both student and teacher roles. Although the students were in an intensive English program at the time, they were preparing to enter such diverse majors as civil engineering, business administration, computer science, and English language education. The attitudes of students from each ethnic group were compared with those of students from the other ethnic groups and, collectively, with the attitudes of their American teachers. The results indicated, for example, that over half of the student ethnic groups represented (Arabic, Chinese, Hispanic, Indonesian, Iranian, Japanese, and Korean) believed that students should agree with the teacher and try to write down whatever the teacher says, whereas their American teachers explicitly disagreed. Concerning teacher roles, a majority of the student ethnic groups believed that teachers should correct every stu-



dent error, use teaching methods familiar to the students, slow the pace of class so that everyone could keep up, follow the course syllabus exactly, be able to answer any question on the subject, be available to students whenever needed (including through telephone calls at home), and use the single best teaching method; again, their American teachers explicitly disagreed. The teachers stated that it was acceptable for students to smile and laugh and make jokes in class, whereas the students generally considered such behavior inappropriate and disrespectful. The teachers also were opposed to correcting every student error and being available to students “whenever needed.”

Rather than forcing change, the survey results provided a forum for discussion, first among the teachers, and later among the teachers and their students. In some cases, teachers chose to accommodate student preferences by, for example, correcting every error on certain tasks but correcting only selectively on others. Most teachers chose to continue their joking behavior, but made sure that they explained their motive of creating a relaxed, informal atmosphere for learning new material. They also took special pains to ensure that their jokes were understood, by giving background information when necessary and checking whether students were familiar with words used less frequently or in colloquial or special-context ways.

College instructors can easily construct a survey of 10 to 20 items or more that includes statements regarding practices germane to their own subject matter and classrooms. Responses can be elicited effectively with either a true-false format or a five-point scale (-2 = strongly disagree; -1 = disagree; 0 = neutral; +1 = agree; +2 = strongly agree). The following kinds of items might be considered:

- It is acceptable for professors to ask questions of individual students during lectures.
- It is acceptable for professors to make jokes during lectures.
- It is acceptable for students to help their friends with homework.
- It is acceptable for students to help their friends during quizzes.
- It is acceptable for students to copy directly from books or articles when writing test answers, essays, reports, or papers.



Because it is considered taboo in some cultures to criticize teachers overtly in any way, care must be taken to avoid judgmental language in survey statements.

Ideally, the survey responses reveal students' preferred learning methods and behaviors as well as attitudes toward the instructor's preferred teaching methods and behaviors. Optimal results occur when (a) statements are framed in a general manner (e.g., "professors" vs. "the professor"), (b) statements are open to negotiation, (c) responses are anonymous, and (d) the results are discussed in class.

An open-ended, although not anonymous, questionnaire can also be given. A modified version of the following *Language/Culture/Schooling Survey* (Bean & Kumaravadivelu, 1991) was administered in the fall of 1991 to four Academic English (lower-division writing) classes consisting mostly of first-year students at San José State University (SJSU):

Please answer questions 1 to 4 from the perspective of the "largest" or most appropriate category that applies to you.

1. What is your country or state or city of origin?
2. How long ago did you come to the U.S., or this state, or your city of residence?
3. What differences have you noticed between your previous school or school in your country—and this school?
4. How was this subject area of this class taught in your previous school or in your country?
5. Which classroom interactional style do you prefer? (circle the letter)
  - a. The instructor calls on students individually.
  - b. The instructor asks students to volunteer or raise their hands.
  - c. The instructor asks questions and anyone may respond (open reply).
  - d. The instructor does not ask questions.
  - e. Other:
6. What might make you feel more comfortable in this class?
7. What might help you understand the subject matter of this course better?
8. What do you see yourself doing in five years? Where?

Open-ended questions like the above yield less precise but more holistic insights into the students' "take" on education in this country. For ex-

ample, the following responses were given to the question about differences between SJSU and the student's previous school in the 1991 sampling above:

Chinese system is more strict and disciplined in their studies. They tend to value education greatly. Such things as cutting school, being rude to an instructor, is almost never heard of. The students are too competitive. School is their life. The educational level determines their identity in society.

The difference of educational system in Mexico (where I grew up) and U.S. is that here in the U.S. you get opportunities like multiple choices in tests. In Mexico everything is comprehensive and there are no make-up sets.

Answers like these reveal the significance of factors such as motivation and testing practices in education.

Interaction practices also emerged as particularly important in the multicultural classroom. Survey responses suggested a discourse strategy that has worked well in culturally diverse classrooms at SJSU. The teacher begins by asking questions to which anyone might reply, but later starts calling on students by name without waiting for them to volunteer. This system accommodates students from cultures, particularly Asian, in which handraising would be an affront; these students often know the answers to questions on the floor but feel awkward or arrogant if they attempt to volunteer an answer. As long as instructors refrain from joking or scolding when a student misses an answer, calling on students by name works well.

Another benefit of open-ended surveys is that the unique qualities of individual students can surface. For example, instructors may not appreciate the subtle cultural differences among Chinese from Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of China (Taiwan), each of whom faces slightly different classroom adjustment issues that are influenced by the particular political situations of their homelands. Students from the People's Republic of China may be less open to discussing politics or sharing certain life experiences than are students from either Hong Kong or Taiwan. Also, instructors may learn that students with certain surnames or physical characteristics do not come from the countries or cultures that might easily have been assumed. Moreover, it can be helpful to know students' plans for the future; those who indicate they intend to stay in the United States indefinitely may be more willing to entertain and adjust to new classroom norms and practices than are students who expect to return to their country of origin.

Asking students about their backgrounds and the educational practices that are familiar to them opens classroom dynamics to joint negoti-

ation and provides a forum where both student-student and teacher-student differences can be discussed. Often the most potent tool is the consciousness raising itself. Once students realize that it is safe to express their fears and discomforts and to share their preferences and predilections, new possibilities for classroom communication and experiences are created.

### **Attitudes Toward Variation in the Use of English in the Culturally Diverse Classroom**

Also central to multicultural classrooms are attitudes regarding the forms of language that are acceptable in the classroom. When asked which form of language is generally appropriate in American educational settings, students and teachers from most cultural and linguistic backgrounds agree on "Standard English," believing that it is "good English" or "correct English."

To raise students' awareness of what constitutes Standard English, early in the term they can be asked to respond to a questionnaire containing true-false statements such as the following:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| Anyone who speaks a dialect is speaking nonstandard English.                                      | T F |
| Any variety of English is Standard English as long as it is used in the appropriate context.      | T F |
| People who use nonstandard English cannot communicate as well as people who use Standard English. | T F |
| Jesse Jackson speaks Standard English.  | T F |
| There is one correct way of pronouncing Standard English.   | T F |

A discussion of the answers might begin with the observation that American English actually consists of a number of dialects that are generally regional (e.g., Texas English) or social and ethnic (e.g., African American English). However, additional dialects based on socioeconomic variables are used by speakers from diverse regional, social, and ethnic backgrounds. One of these is a dialect used by highly educated Americans in settings and institutions accorded the greatest social power and prestige. This dialect, called Standard English, includes the linguistic forms of English normally employed in formal speaking and writing. Standard English is the accepted model for official, journalistic, and aca-

ademic writing; for public speaking; and for use as a medium of instruction and testing in schools.

Although Standard English is generally associated with educated, White, middle- and upper-class individuals, many of whom speak some variety of Standard English as their only dialect, it is also used by those who are bidialectal and speak other, nonstandard dialects of English in their homes and neighborhoods. American sociolinguists Labov (1972) and Fasold (1984) empirically demonstrated that nonstandard dialects are just as complex and systematic as the standard dialect. Nonstandard dialects are used to signal solidarity, friendship, and rapport, and to communicate nuances of denotative and connotative meaning that would be impossible or inappropriate to communicate in Standard English. A striking example of the bidialectal speaker is found in highly educated African Americans, such as Jesse Jackson, who exhibit a solid command of Standard English in formal, mainstream contexts but switch effortlessly to African American English when it is called for socially.

Whereas the grammar and vocabulary of Standard English are remarkably uniform across the United States, speakers tend to pronounce Standard English, either intentionally or unintentionally, with a broad range of regionally and ethnically distinct accents (e.g., Boston or New York City, African American or Latino). In certain settings, particularly the national broadcast media, a highly restricted subset of these accents, often called Network English, is associated with higher prestige than are other accents. However, in most contexts, speakers of Standard English are willing to accommodate a wide variety of regional and ethnic accents.

Unfortunately, this acceptance does not always extend to the accents of the increasing number of bilingual and non-native speakers of Standard American English, whose accents often include pronunciation features transferred from the speakers' native and other languages. In some cases, such features can challenge mutual intelligibility. For example, most native-speaker accents of American English tend to be stress-timed, in that primary stress is placed on particular syllables to emphasize them, and unstressed syllables are frequently reduced in length, pitch, and volume. In contrast, the accents of many non-native speakers may be syllable-timed, with each syllable having more nearly equal length, pitch, and volume. In syllable-timed languages, such as Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog, stress plays a much smaller role in conveying meaning.

Non-native speakers often transfer syllable timing to English (Kachru, 1990; Llamzon, 1969), as demonstrated below. In responding to the following questions, native speakers of American English would place primary stress on the *information* requested in the question.

1. To whom did you give the tickets?
  - 1a. I gave the tickets to *him*.
2. What did you give him?
  - 2a. I gave the *tickets* to him.
3. Who gave the tickets to him?
  - 3a. *I* gave the tickets to him.

In syllable-timed languages, however, syllables in the *phrase-* or *clause-final position* tend to be spoken at a higher pitch (Platt, Weber, & Ho, 1984). In responding to the questions above, for example, speakers of syllable-timed languages might answer with the following stress pattern:

1. To whom did you give the tickets?
  - 1b. I gave the tickets to *him*.
2. What did you give him?
  - 2b. I gave the tickets to *him*.
3. Who gave the tickets to him?
  - 3b. I gave the tickets to *him*.

Responses 1a and 1b are identical, but responses 2b and 3b, having clause-final stress, sound markedly different from responses 2a and 3a. This could confuse monolingual speakers of American English, who would expect the most heavily stressed words in the answers to signal the information requested. However, such differences in accent are often neutralized by the nonphonological features of Standard English and by the context. Therefore, a different accent may be understood by speakers of Standard American English just as they understand, for example, the different British English syllable stress patterns found in such words as *laboratory*. Communication difficulties occur when intelligibility breaks down, or when pitch, stress, or intonation convey unexpected affective or cognitive connotations, thus marking the utterance or its speaker as strange.

This discussion can be summarized by returning to the five true-false statements given in the questionnaire. The first statement is false because Standard English is simply one of many dialects of American English, differing from the others only in that its linguistic forms are considered appropriate in most domains of power in the United States. The second and third statements, too, are false. There is no evidence that nonstandard dialects are any less sophisticated in their communicative potential than is Standard English. In fact, in many settings Standard

English would be semantically and socially inadequate and therefore inappropriate. The fourth statement is true. It is common for Americans to be proficient in both Standard English and a nonstandard dialect, for example, the many African Americans involved in education, business, government, and the mass media. The final statement is false, given that Standard English is inevitably pronounced with a wide variety of accents by both its native and non-native speakers. Communication problems for all speakers of Standard English result less from any linguistic difference in the way English is used by speakers from diverse regional, social, and ethnic backgrounds and more from sociocultural and sociopolitical attitudes toward the speakers themselves.

### Conclusion

We advocate seeking information about the cultural attributes of students as learners and selectively adopting the classroom practices they prefer. Although teachers traditionally have been cast as the sole orchestrators of classroom activities and atmosphere, we urge instructors to invite their students into an exploratory space—a space in which teachers and students together may uncover the diverse cultural and linguistic practices and preferences surrounding the teaching and learning of the subject area at hand. In this space, teachers remain the authorities on the subject area of the class, but students are the experts on the preferred communication and learning styles of their cultures of origin. The result is a new kind of classroom, one neither American nor “foreign,” but which, for the class and subject area at hand, capitalizes on the increased awareness of and appreciation for the characteristics of the participant groups. Teachers and students jointly construct the culture of their particular classroom in a manner maximally beneficial to all.

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