Chapter 2

Teaching English in Culturally Diverse Classrooms:
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the present chapter is on various problems related to teaching non-native speakers of English belonging to different cultural backgrounds, as well as on the solutions that instructors and curriculum makers can adopt in order to improve students’ language performance. The chapter shows that the teaching strategies used during the English classes taught to international students are of great importance for the instructional process and problems related to cultural differences, students’ learning behaviors that may be different from the instructors’ expectations, and other aspects that may hinder the instructional process in general.

INTRODUCTION

As the number of international students enrolled in universities has significantly increased everywhere in the world, both instructors and learners have to overcome the challenges of a new educational environment. The purpose of the chapter is to identify problems related to teaching non-native English speakers from different cultural backgrounds and suggest optimal strategies that may help them to surpass linguistic and cultural barriers by means of English classes.

Starting from the premise that students’ perceptions of their English classes can be a good indicator of the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process itself, the study keeps in view the following research questions:

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Teaching English in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

- To what extent do English classes help international students to feel comfortable and interact with each other?
- What are students’ most frequent linguistic errors that impede communication?
- What problems do these students have to cope with in the new educational setting?
- What teaching strategies should English teachers use to develop these learners’ intercultural abilities?
- What measures should be taken to encourage students’ interaction within a specific social group?

The research is based on a focus group made up of undergraduate students enrolled in various faculties at a Romanian University. All participants are studying English because this subject is part of the curriculum, irrespective of their chosen field of study.

The authors consider the qualitative research method the most suitable for the purpose of the study as it enables them to explore the participants’ views and personal experience in a direct, flexible and friendly way. Combined with classroom observation, the assessment of the learners’ opinions expressed during the group discussion offered the researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of culturally diverse students’ needs and expectations, and to adopt appropriate academic measures within and through English classes.

Background

In the context of the growing diversity in the student population in today’s education, researchers have addressed the issue of the teaching and learning process in multicultural classes by means of several concepts, such as intercultural communicative competence, affective cultural awareness and models of intercultural sensitivity, in an attempt to understand the complexity of the phenomenon and identify its characteristic features.

A basic assumption highlighted by researchers in many studies is that educators involved in teaching multiethnic learners have to “understand different values, customs and traditions” if they wish to succeed in their endeavors and provide their students “with responsive learning experiences” (Carrasquillo, 1994, p. 53). Without “an awareness, understanding, and acceptance of cultural and linguistic differences” (Carrasquillo, 1994, p. 58), successful teaching in a multicultural environment would not be possible. In other words, only the teachers who “embrace the enriching experience of learning about culture” (Ruiters & Dang, 2005, p. 28) can lead their learners to linguistic and academic achievements. This can be done if teachers apply the knowledge acquired in the classroom and systematically expose students to “intercultural communication” (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 1991).

Apart from linguistic competence and cultural skills, language teaching may develop appropriate attitudes in students, or, as Byram (1990) points out, such classes have “social significance and contribute to pupils’ general education by introducing them to cultures other than their own” (p. 77). Such a complex objective of the language class, including the teaching of ESL, determined researchers to discuss the idea of intercultural communicative competence and not on the one of communicative competence, which shows the teacher’s exclusive concern with the development of learner’s language skills (Byram, 1990, Aguilar, 2001). In this sense, Aguilar (2001) proposes that teachers should introduce “multicultural activities and issues” in the language class on the grounds that they are “as important as teaching and learning the right grammar structures or pronunciation” (p. 46). A major advantage of the activities focused on multicultural aspects is that they increase students’ motivation to learn and connect
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