Chapter 10

A Framework for Engaging Language Learners in the Online Constructivist Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The traditional Westernized constructivist approach to online teaching will need modifications due to the proliferation of multicultural online classrooms. Instructional designers and teachers must uncover their own unconscious biases to foster a culturally sensitive learning environment. To discover discrepancies, the teacher must learn about and understand diverse cultures. With this knowledge, the teacher will be able to adapt their teaching skills to different populations. The employment of culturally sensitive techniques in the online constructivist model will promote a sense of belonging for all students.
INTRODUCTION

As globalization increases, both social and professional communication between people from different countries will take place in an instantaneous manner. Knowing and understanding different cultures and languages is highly beneficial in the globalized market. The best way to acquire a new language or culture is to immerse oneself in it (Brown, 2007). For example, students can enroll in international classes. According to Zong and Batalova (2016, para. 1):

*In 2013, the United States hosted more of the world’s 4.1 million international students than any other country. The next two destinations, the United Kingdom and Australia, hosted 10 percent and 6 percent, respectively.*

In the U.S., students also travel abroad to become more culturally competent. “Nationally, the number of U.S. students studying abroad for credit during the 2015-2016 academic year grew 3.8 percent from 313,415 students to 325,339 students” (NAFSA, 2018, para.1). Although this data is not specific to the online platform, it shows an increasing trend of language learners in higher education.

Online classes are routinely offered in the college setting; it is assumed that language learners will be in these classes. According to Friedman (2016), there are more than 6.3 million undergraduate students in 4,700 colleges enrolled in an online class. To accommodate for students from across the globe, teachers must diversify their teaching strategies to produce a culturally sensitive learning environment.

With proliferation of technology, the world has been condensed. Students can easily log into their computer to enter a classroom a continent away. In turn, the online classroom has become more diverse. Traditional research of the online educational environment has focused on classroom pedagogy. There is minimal research on how cultural backgrounds affect the online learning process. Teachers have their own cultural preferences and unconscious bias toward learning styles and student expectations. Often, the instructor assumes that these preferences resemble those of the learners. This assumption can have “a profound effect on their educational outcomes” (Gibbons, 2007, p. 166).

Learning styles and expectations are connected to an individual’s background (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). To develop an inclusive multicultural online platform, the class instructor must understand the language learners’ cultural backgrounds and learning preferences. A culturally responsive online class considers the cultural diversity represented among the learners. To create and sustain a culturally responsive course, the class must be mindful of design, resources, assessments, and facilitation methods.
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