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Enhancing Cultural Understanding through Engaged Pedagogy in Language Classes

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Culture and societal issues should be understood as central to education since the issues we encounter as teachers and students are not only the question of right or wrong, but also the fight against the inequality, cultural and religious bias and gender issues alongside empowering the status-quo and voice of students. Hence, it is quite essential for ESL/EFL instructors to recognize and use their own and the learners' lived experiences as part of their teaching tools to increase students' cultural sharing attitudes. Culture sharing and understanding among learners are often overlooked in ESL/EFL classes due to the difficulty on the part of teachers to merge it with the regular teaching materials and activities. As a result, students often feel alienated due to sensitive and discriminatory issues like local culture, religion, racism, gender issues and many more. In order to build intercultural competence among learners, it is of significant importance that teachers look into engaged pedagogical activities like active learning and interactive involvement to promote increased culture sharing attitudes among language learners. Since engaged pedagogy is an accumulation of critical, anti-colonialist, feminist and multicultural theories, it significantly empowers students' values leading towards a better learning and teaching environment. This paper will focus on how engaged pedagogy can be employed keeping in mind Charles Friere's notion of knowing the 'why' of things to boost cultural understanding and attitudes among language learners. Emphasis will be placed on interactive modules, active learning activities, initializing practice from theories and supporting a platform to facilitate cultural practice because it is important to implement culturally responsive language teaching so that teachers better understand the cultural resources students bring to the language classroom. The paper will also reflect on the theories like Critical Pedagogy and Constructivism and its practical implications along with challenges in improving cultural understanding in language learning. Finally the paper will conclude with some suggestive activities and recommendations for promoting cultural understandings among language learners through engaged pedagogy.

Keywords: *Engaged pedagogy, cultural awareness, language classes.*

Introduction

The concept of culture is closely associated with behavioral customs, attitudes, personalities, courtesies that are crucial in interacting and communicating in a community and largely in a society. For a language class specifically, students bring diverse cultural and societal backgrounds into the learning environment that often needs to be addressed while teaching. Instructors face challenges addressing different cultures and local issues in language teaching. They can use different modules, sessions and activities incorporating the notions like how to behave, share and engage for the part of students in a congenial environment.

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Engaging and involving learners with emphasis on culture, society and other overlooked issues like gender, religion can make students more comfortable in expressing their understandings. Creating cultural awareness among learners should not be overlooked in any sense since culture friendly learning space can be one of the most effective ways of getting used to a second or foreign language. Classrooms should be that free space of platform for the students to share and acknowledge what they have with themselves and from where they belong. However, it is often hard for teachers to plan lessons or design materials accordingly or accentuate real life discussions and sharing per se. If Charles Freire's age old notion on freedom in education can be restated, learning and teaching in classrooms will hardly face cultural or social barriers. The main focus of this paper would be to highlight the implications of engaged pedagogy to enhance cultural understanding among EFL/ESL learners for a better learning and teaching scenario.

Literature Review

Progressive or engaged pedagogy is more demanding than any other conventional pedagogy because it emphasizes well-being of the learners (Hooks, 1991). Empowering students through accelerating the process of self-actualization is seen as an effective practice in education for many years. The major purpose of employing engaged pedagogy in classrooms is to address diverse talents, enhance cultural understanding through promoting active learning in student centered atmosphere. The idea of Critical Pedagogy begins with the neo-Marxian literature on Critical Theory (Stanley 1992).

The philosophy of Freire's Progressive Education emphasizes significantly on critical thinking skills by presenting people's situations, predicaments as problems so that learners can share ideas, think, infer and come to conclusive point by themselves. The task of teacher should be to bridge the gap by making connections among the culture and backgrounds of the learners. Being a facilitator does not only require teachers to monitor, rather she/he needs to elicit responses, give prompt to learners more often. Students should practice more based on what they know and have experienced and the teacher engages in the process as being a learner among the learners (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). The instructors should participate in critical dialogue contributing to find out the implicit ideas rather than only allowing them to do so. While this particular engagement takes place, both teacher and student share their life experiences, cultural societal issues which may act as source of knowledge or resource for further understanding for learners. While producing and evaluating their learning materials, students are engaged in the decision making process in class, which in turn results in their own decision-making outside the classroom (Auerbach,1995; McLaren, 1988;Shor, 1996). Luke and Gore (1992) pointed out that critical pedagogy is not single-strategy pedagogies of empowerment and liberation but should be able to evolve in response to local contexts and needs.

A good number of definitions of culture have come up over the last 50-60 years. In the 1960s, the social scientists have considered culture to be closely related to human learning. Since then, there has been a never ending discussion; debates on what could the exact idea on culture. In spite of taking multiple attempts, and efforts to define the term 'culture', researchers have not yet come up with a single agreed-upon definition (Tang, 2006). It is because culture is a very 'broad concept embracing all aspects of human life' (Seelye, 1993, p. 15). Previous researches on cultural understanding among EFL state that classroom activities that are not contextualized and attached to real life issues, activities and concerns , do not help the students learn to use L2 (e.g., Firth & Wagner; 1997; hall, 1997; Stoller, 2006; van Lier, 2000). Second Language Learning has been re-conceptualized over the last decade as a participatory process, in which a learner is not only a learner of new ways of expressing ideas but rather the learner becomes a learner of new ways of thinking, behaving and living in an L2 community (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Young & Miller, 2004). Adding to that Byram (1997) defines critical awareness as "an ability to

evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products of one's own and other cultures and countries" (p. 53). The notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) focuses immensely on the idea of preparing learners to interact appropriately and effectively with people from diverse linguistic systems, backgrounds and work views (Byram, 1997; Deardoff, 2006; Fantini, 2007). In other words,

> *Engaged pedagogy requires that teachers grasp the lives of their students in both intimate detail and broad outline, and also understand the role of schools in identity formation. Engaged pedagogy elevates students' voices, perspectives, historical and cultural backgrounds, and emerging cultural formations to the status of the core curriculum. Engaged pedagogy prefers dialogical approaches, where students' languages, thoughts, and ideas are linked to actions subject to critical evaluation*.
>
> (Equity Network)

Engaged pedagogy, as Hooks stated, is equal to holistic learning since it demands an environment fit for expressing values and nurturing freedom on education. And about the teachers, Hooks said, *'they are committed to nurturing intellect so that students could become scholars, thinkers and culture workers".* Byram (2008) clearly asserts that one of the goals of Critical Cultural Awareness is to unmask student ideologies concepts that could possibly lead to intercultural conflict (Yulita, 2013, p.205). The objectives (critical literacy winter school, 2006) of CCA that clearly match with employing engaged pedagogy in language classes are:

Students will see things from different perspectives, examine the origins of world views, values, beliefs and attitudes, make connections between global and local contexts; ask questions about the world, themselves and others. Galloway (cited in The NECTFL, 2015) also pointed out, therefore that as foreign language learners move forward critical awareness, teachers should craft activities that encourage students to consider new values and beliefs…. (1998). However, Lafayette (1988) noted that teachers spent the greatest amount of time and effort on teaching grammatical and lexical components of language, leaving the culture as the weakest component in the curriculum. Moreover, Strashein (1981) mentioned that teachers spent approximately 10% of teaching time on culture. Although teachers have begun to incorporate more culture in the lesson, the major concern that remains is finding effective ways for integrating culture and language that prepare the learners to communicate and collaborate effectively in 21st century. And as stated in the Standards for Foreign Language Teaching (1999) the effective practices to achieve cultural goals and objectives would be:

1. Students should demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices, products and perspectives of the culture studied;

One of the challenges that teachers face while introducing culture in language classrooms is while introducing culture, norms or respective values, such as bits of trivia, can ultimately appear to be distorted, disconnected and possibly lead to stereotypes (Dema & Moeller, 2012). By using the Culture Triangle of 3P framework (Perspectives, Products and Practices) in their planning and structuring of lessons teachers may ensure that culture is being explored in a contextual way (Lange, 1999 cited in Dema & Moeller, 2012). This framework proposed by National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999) helps teachers to merge together the knowledge and ideas on discriminatory issues like racism, class hierarchy, religion and local culture. Hooks stated when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess, and adding, engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. (1991). Most importantly, content and materials

should be presented in a positively to elicit best responses and participation from the learners to help them get a deeper understanding of the culture overall. Because any classroom that employs holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers and students are empowered by the process (Hooks, 1999).

Lessard-Clouston (1997, p. 136) claims that, "[C]ultural awareness is necessary if students are to develop an understanding of the dynamic nature of the target culture, as well as their own culture." In the same respect, Sárdi (2003) believes that although some of the researchers are concerned for the fact that teaching target language exclusively may cause the students to feel alienated against the target language culture, their own language and culture, students apparently are not aware of these matters and are glad to be involved with both the target and their native culture as well as cross-cultural issues.

Suggested Techniques Promoting Active Learning

Active learning instructional strategies include a wide range of activities that share the common element of —involving students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing|| (Bonwell & Eison 1991). Depending on the circumstances of a language classroom several engaged pedagogical techniques can be used that may prompt active learning:

Cultural Introduction by Way of Storytelling

This technique was introduced by Matthew Jellick for the purpose of exploring learners' cultural and community issues by sharing thoughts on several common aspects like food, travelling, festivals, marriage, family, rituals and so on. Teachers can stress on the vocabulary being used allowing for specific skills to integrate in accordance with the collective mastery of English (Jellick, 2015). Teachers task here is to make up creative stories to share with the class, leaving blank key cultural and personal references particular to the country and the individual (Jellick, 2015). Before allowing students to prepare their own stories, it will be helpful if the teachers show or narrate a sample story sharing examples of his/her own culture, personal anecdote with a clarification of vocabulary /phrases and sentence organization. Also class size, time and mode will also influence what way teachers should employ to promote constructivist learning in class. This technique is also a means of informal assessment in class. Likewise, oral recitations can also be introduced for practicing and sharing respective cultures. As Peterson and Coltrane (2003) state that it is important to be aware of culturally appropriate ways of addressing people, expressing gratitude, making requests and agreeing or disagreeing with someone and also intonation patterns and behavior are important facts since they might be different in the target language speech community than their own speech community. However, it is seen that in practice, teachers are more likely to teach students about English culture in terms of food/fashion even if they say they will look at it on deeper sociological levels (Önalan, 2005).

Film or Document Series around Religious, Cultural, Ethnic and Racial Diversity

In order to raise awareness and understanding among students, film shows or movie review discussions once/twice in a week can be organized to elicit students' responses on these sensitive issues. Major benefits of using this technique are: students' discussions and less effort for the part of teachers in initiating conversations during sessions.

Small Talk

It refers to short, casual, friendly conversations about less-serious but common topics. Teachers can initiate "opener" questions at the beginning. This activity is applicable for all levels of students for building vocab stock, real-life dialogue patterns and many more.

Benefits of Using Engaged Activities in Class

Building intercultural competence among students alongside increasing their language proficiency may not be an easy task for teachers. However,if employed properly, students can express their experiences in a more uninhibited, congenial environment. Some of the advantages would be:

- Help educators reach students who may benefit from more hands-on or practical learning experiences;
- Encourage students to critically think about and analyze information themselves, rather than passively receiving knowledge

Ways to Incorporate Engaged Activities in Language Classroom

Some of the effective ways of employing engaged pedagogy would be:

- Encourage all students to participate in discussions
- Use appropriate materials and learning styles for better learning outcome
- Ask and initiate open-ended discussions and questions
- Plan adequate time and proper setting to process engaged activities

Conclusion

Hooks (1994) argued for improving educational practices along the specific lines of engaged pedagogy alongside focusing on the existing ways of enhancing learning and teaching in current educational contexts. The rationale for adopting engaged pedagogical activities is to stimulate and raise effective cultural understanding among language learners so that discriminatory issues like racism, local culture, and local language etc. come to light with students being empowered enough to speak and shape ideas. Keeping in mind the notion of progressive education and critical pedagogical factors; it is high time we teachers raise and employ activities facilitating cultural sensitive learning and sharing atmosphere. The teachers should act more like a learner here to best elicit and encourage students' expressions and opinions and deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices in classroom. The objective is to empower students, believe in what they can do by allowing them to take the floor. Once learners start spending time thinking and expressing their beliefs, the process toward cultural awareness begins which engage students in tasks that encourage thoughtful and rational evaluation of persona; and social perspectives (Byram, 1997).

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