

# Diversity in the Classroom

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## **Framing the Issue**

For many years, educators in Anglophone countries made the assumption that their students showed little underlying diversity. The gradual acceptance of diversity led to its operationalization as a meaningful variable in education research. While second language teachers have been slow to recognize the depth of diversity in their classrooms, they have never been able to assume that there was no diversity. Indeed, diversity is the only constant feature of L2 education. While diversity is the essential property of the L2 classroom, and so has been historically easier to recognize in the L2 classroom, the ideological problem resulting from the conflict between the individualist and multiculturalist approaches remains (Maitzen, 1997). In brief, this conflict arises when we attempt to treat students as individuals separate from socially constructed categories such as gender, race, religion, and orientation, but also as knowers of things that arise specifically from experience with culture, gender, race, and other such constructs. Accordingly, ESL teachers have been cautioned against using the results of diversity-themed research to essentialize learners according to these social and cognitive constructs.

## **Making the Case**

Diversity is an inherent property of the ESL classroom. In this section, we will consider some of the many different ways in which and L2 classroom can present diversity. This list is far from exhaustive, representing only those areas that are most well studied and/or most salient in the ESL classroom.

Our most salient encounters with diversity might arise from different and

consequential combinations of culture, economic class, and L1/language variety in the various classes that we teach. In fact, in the ESL context, a typical class is often composed of students from many different countries and/or economic classes who speak different L1s (Gonzalez, Pagan, Wendell, & Love, 2011). This diversity may present various challenges. For example, it is well known that ESL learners with different L1s often have difficulty with different aspects of the English language, and students from the low/lower economic classes are often less prepared academically than those from the middle/upper classes and hence require additional or special assistance (Gonzalez et al., 2011). As another example, students from certain cultural backgrounds where active vocal participation in class is not encouraged are less willing to speak than students from those cultures where such participation is often expected. As one more example, the success of certain social learning activities (e.g., pair work) may depend on the arrangement of culture and gender in the particular classroom (e.g., Kinsella, 1996). When considered at the individual level, learners often transfer pragmatic formulae—informing the performance of apologies, requests, and refusals—from their first language and culture (Kasper, 1992). At the group level, however, the success of class and group activities can depend critically on the arrangement of the cultures in the class (Park, 2001).

Another key aspect of diversity is the way in which different learners may have different preferred learning styles and strategies. Learning styles refer to a person's typical ways of learning and arise from cognitive and personality-based factors, while learning strategies refer to the way in which learners consciously manage their learning experiences and efforts. Interest in learning styles originates in studies of successful learners (Brown, 2007).

Cognitive (learning) style is concerned, among other things, with the constructs of field dependence and independence (FID). Field dependent individuals are those who more readily integrate information from the context of a perception, while field independent individuals tend to focus more completely on the object of perception. First introduced in the 1960s, these concepts fell into disfavor after Griffiths and Sheen (1992) argued that they were poorly motivated, poorly operationalized, and irrelevant to L2 teaching. Later, however, the more rigorous work of the cultural psychologist Richard

Nisbett and colleagues (e.g., Norenzayan and Nisbett, 2000) showed that children raised in different cultures are reliably different in terms of field dependence and independence, and that these differences have wide ranging consequences for learning and reasoning.

Personality-based learning style variation includes the extroversion/introversion, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving dichotomies (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Extroverts prefer exploring new material through active interactions with their peers while introverts learn best through observation and the forming and testing of mental models. Learners who differ along the thinking/feeling dimension will evince different degrees of empathy toward others and are more or less concerned with appearing competent in front of their peers. Those students who are more judging than others will want clearly defined learning goals and criteria which they approach more seriously, while those who are more perceiving will approach learning as form of play, seeking opportunities for enjoyment in learning. Furthermore, some students prefer auditory or visual learning while others favor kinesthetic/tactile learning activities.

One more form of diversity lies in the difference in the intensity and orientation of the motivations that individual students may possess and display. Learners famously show diversity in the forms of integrative vs. instrumental motivations, with integrative motivations widely acknowledged to be associated with better learning outcomes. Integrativeness, an openness to or identity with the culture of the language being learned, is itself a complex notion (Dörnyei and Csizer, 1998), as it covers cases where real social and cultural integration is a realistic goal (e.g., English speaking Canadians in Montreal) and where it is not (e.g. Japanese students who want to better understand American popular music). Most recently, Dörnyei (2014) has explored motivation as a dynamical system of goals, attitudes, and beliefs about self-efficacy and the future. In these studies, each factor may exhibit different weightings or importance in different learners.

As a final note in this section, we acknowledge the tension inherent in the promotion and exploration of diversity in the classroom. This tension arises because we, as instructors, often attempt to be both individualists who respect autonomy and uniqueness, and multiculturalists who are sensitive to histories of oppression and exploitation. The conflict between these two positions emerges in our thinking about fairness in classroom transactions and in our attempts to understand students so that we

might better individualize instruction. In promoting diversity, we (as individualists) might choose to ignore completely the social categories to which an individual might belong, and insist on a purely meritocratic approach to teaching and yet at the same time we (as multiculturalists) recognize that this will only create an opportunity for historical economic and political inequities to operate by promoting the more divested over the less divested. If we attempt to address this by introducing different criteria for success for different groups, we may be guilty of stereotyping our students. Likewise, attempts to broadly apply insights from diversity-themed research can result in the simple elaboration of stereotypes, rather than the emergence of an awareness of learner individuality.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The pedagogical implications that arise from considering the many ways in which learners present us with diversity are loosely focused on the individualization of instruction. That is, success often depends on appealing to different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, L1s, motivational levels, etc. Many of these factors, which serve to create diversity in the classroom, can be brought into the service of the learner and many effective strategies can be employed to help students and teachers in a class with great diversity to collaborate and learn effectively (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

For example in the ESL context where there is a great diversity of culture and first language, sound professionalism has always included learning as much as is possible about the culture and first language of the students (Gonzalez et al., 2011). Toward this goal, the students themselves are invaluable informants. Almost all cultures specify rules for interaction in the classroom, with some cultures promoting (rather famously) deference and silence on the part of the student, and other encouraging questioning and, if not challenge, at least the open discussion of issues. Activities for students to present their own culture and learn about other cultures through examples in arts, literature, realia, and games will be very engaging and helpful for successful learning (Gonzalez et al., 2011)..

While instructors should cultivate a sensitivity to learners' cultures, they must be vigilant in their commitment to seeing individuals as more than representatives of these cultures, as every culture produces exceptions: Americans are sometimes quiet and

reflective and Japan has been known to produce individuals that are overly assertive and insensitive. That is, while knowledge of students' cultures is an invaluable asset for the instructor, it remains an asset only as long as the instructor limits that knowledge to functioning as an initial hypothesis (about the kinds of materials that students might find interesting, the kinds of activities that might be preferred, and the mode of presentation most likely to match a learning style) that she is willing to adjust as deeper insights into the individual learners emerge. Indeed, while some members of some cultures seem to prefer visual to auditory learning, or individual to group learning (Park, 2001), the diversity within these groups must be recognized for any individualized approach to be successful. It should go without saying that the first culture an instructor has to come terms with is his or her own: many of the kinds of activities that appeal most to certain populations of ESL learners are the least preferred for native speaking students (Park, 2001), and so our initial intuitions about what students are likely to find engaging must be recognized as culturally conditioned preferences, and treated with some skepticism. Students can also become linguistic informants. Many of the distinctive errors that are found in the L2 production of certain linguistic groups can be traced to the presence or absence of these features in the first language (but not always in the way that we expect: Brown, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2001).

It has long been recommended that instructors find time to assess learning styles and strategies in the normal course of their teaching and to help students become consciously aware of their learning styles and strategies so instructors can implement teaching practices that best accommodate their students (Brown, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2001). A lack of fit between a teaching style and learning style can lead to low confidence and high anxiety in the learner, as she becomes convinced that the difficulty in learning arises from her, rather than from the mode of presentation. If a student is a visual learner, for example, he can become confused by a presentation style that relies too heavily on discussion and lecture. Auditory learners, differently, thrive on conversation and verbal explanation, while kinesthetic learners profit most from activities involving objects and actions. Accounting for learning styles in teaching begins with a lesson plan that provides opportunities for students to develop an awareness of their personal learning styles. Brown (2007) recommends that teachers develop an informal checklist for

students to fill out.

Encouraging students to cultivate beneficial learning strategies also begins in the planning stage of the lesson. Instructors must be prepared to help students identify strategies that are appropriate to the assigned tasks and fit the individual's learning style (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Generally, the use of learning styles requires that the task and goal be clearly defined, with criteria for progress toward the goal, and a plan for getting there. It is generally not sufficient to describe successful learning strategies, the instructor must be prepared to help students identify opportunities for its use in the flow of classroom activity and ways in which they may generalize to other tasks and goals.

Because a major dimension of variation encountered in the classroom arises from the different kinds and degrees of learner motivation, the repertoire of instructor skills should include techniques for encouraging learner motivation. To this end, Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) derive 'ten commandments' for developing motivation in language teachers from research into learner diversity. These include setting good behavioral examples, creating a pleasant atmosphere within which learners' interest, autonomy, goal-orientedness, and self-confidence are cultivated, using thoughtful presentation of tasks and culture, and establishing personal relationships with students that support the individualization of instruction.

Of these commandments, the first may be the most opaque: an instructor sets a good example when he or she is conscientious, sensitive, and behaves in a natural and friendly (i.e., social distance reducing) manner. Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) recommend the use of competitive games, and value the instructor's sense of humor. Motivation is also increased when the natural curiosity of the learner is piqued. This is done when the instructor shows an unforced enthusiasm for the material, uses a variety of materials and instructional techniques, cultivates the students' self-confidence, and develops an ability to choose or construct truly interesting materials. Modeling good communicative behavior is critical. The instructor should approach and engage the teaching material multiple times from different perspectives in teaching and pre-teaching activities (i.e., models perspective taking), be clear about the goals of activities and about the rationale for the activity, and constantly monitor the success of her/his own efforts, activities, and communication.

Instructors should also recognize that their ability to individualize instruction must be cultivated over time, and without help from major suppliers of course materials. Indeed, the emergence of the all-encompassing course-book series from major presses has been driven by the desire to maximize profit, and so we must accept these programmatic approaches to teaching with great skepticism, since they will blunt not only our ability to engage with learners as individuals but also the ability of the learner to gain insight into her/his own best learning strategies and practices. Finally, we are ethically obliged to monitor our use of individualization strategies to ensure that we are truly individualizing our teaching, and not just developing a finely grained approach to stereotyping students.

**See also:** Individual learner differences; culturally responsive teaching; language, identity and culture; learner ethnography and raising cultural and linguistic awareness

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Wiley / TESOL / 2016