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Changing our Perceptions and Pedagogical Practices with Respect to Language Diversity

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In the last two decades, there have been significant changes to educational policy regarding English language and literacy as the need for English language proficiency has become increasingly recognized as central to both academic and career achievement. Yet, the mere implementation of a national set of English language standards is not enough to provide equal learning opportunities for all considering the range of cultural backgrounds and linguistic knowledge (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2013; Rennie & Ortlieb, 2013). What is needed is a set of instructional strategies that can build upon students' existing proficiencies (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2014) rather than ignoring what they know, who they are, and how they learn.

It is critical that issues around multilingualism be addressed within contemporary educational research, as urban centres are becoming more and more populated by immigrants (Farr, 2011). Understanding and valuing cultural diversity are essential towards strengthening student experience and achievement (Joseph, 2013). All individuals must feel free to explore the uniqueness of their culture and identity while developing English language proficiency; however, current pedagogical pedagogies often inhibit the expression of

unique perspectives on life and the transmission of knowledge from minorities. Teacher educators must take a leadership role in preparing the next generation for the roles and responsibilities associated with the current climate of schools and in turn, reinvigorate the teaching profession to embrace the idea of using diversity as an advantage in student learning (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 2011). There is much to be learned regarding how to use diversity in productive ways (Au, 2011) and there seems no one better to learn from than the very students who have experienced these challenges. What follows is a description of some effective teacher practices as recognized by one Japanese student who studies in an English speaking university in the West.

First, teachers should provide students with *extended wait time* (Farooq, 2007; McNeil, 2012). Providing students with time to think will help them formulate their ideas (Hao, 2011; Zembyras & Michaelides, 2004) and enhance the accuracy of responding in English. Moreover, it can increase the likelihood of all students contemplating the answer to the question at hand; in turn, this promotes class-wide engagement by refraining from providing the answer and allocating enough think time for cognitive processing (Ollin, 2008).

Japanese students are accustomed to teachers expecting them to answer questions as soon as possible. If they cannot answer immediately, often times, Japanese teachers will nominate other students to answer instead. This quick shift of responsibility from one student to another creates anxiety for some and for others, a compelling reason not to attempt difficult

questions because they know the teacher will just call on someone else after a brief moment. Environments like these make it challenging for Japanese students to interact with and acquire various ideas from peers, complicating their transition to English speaking classrooms to an ever greater extent.

Second, teachers should intervene by providing *language assistance* within discussion (Walsh, 2002). In order to meet learners' needs, timely language intervention is central to language development (van Lier, 2000) while also maintaining sensitivity to students' struggles in speaking English as a foreign language. Teachers need to listen to students attentively and utilize proper and precise language (Walsh, 2006).

International students who use English as a second or foreign language are often unfamiliar with words or phrases that are not found in their native language (e.g., articles, conjunctions) not to mention the lack of verb tenses and word order. Students need models; they need practice with a caring teacher who can scaffold students to consolidate their understanding to new heights (Applebee, 2002). The development of English language proficiency will in turn boost students' motivation and overall experience in western educational contexts.

As learning English in Japan is predominantly based on rote learning such as memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules rather than speaking English in the classroom, enhancing communicative skills is quite cumbersome. It is virtually impossible for students to know all of the common phrases and expressions they should use when communicating in English. Hence, non-native speakers expect to learn from teacher feedback to improve

English proficiency. Through correction accompanied with explanation, students are ready to make strides within an immersion experience with the English language afforded by pragmatic pedagogues.

Third, teachers should create a *comfortable classroom atmosphere* (Gregersen, 2003). Teachers should remind students that making errors is a natural process of language acquisition. A student's motivation can be maintained through a variety of means such as a teacher humanizing oneself by discussing his/her own errors, learning experiences, and goals for personal language improvement (Andrade & Williams, 2009). Working collectively towards English language outcomes can cultivate oral language, reading, and writing improvement. Non-native speakers often purport the importance of an open atmosphere that is conducive to learning, where teachers encourage students to make mistakes. By reducing the level of anxiety, language and content knowledge acquisition can be approached without fear or reservation.

In summary, there are a number of strategies that can promote English language development especially for multilingual students. These revolve around establishing an atmosphere where authentic relationships prevail between teacher and student as well as student to student. Acknowledging progress and providing targeted praise to bolster students with low confidence in speaking, reading, or writing English is salient practice. These conditions promote students' attention to shift from that of anxiety and timidity to that of opportunism and creativity, alongside the support of a mindful teacher who is well versed in strategies for English language acquisition.

Who are they? What are their interests? How do we provide opportunities for individual growth and development given their multilingualism? How do we build upon their existing knowledge of language and cultural experiences? These questions must remain at the forefront of contemporary research in education. As echoed by Gage (1978) nearly 40 years ago, there is a scientific basis to the art of teaching, and it starts with language.

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