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Balancing Act: Addressing Culture and Gender in ESL Classrooms

Michelle A. Johnson
Doctoral Student
Texas A&M University

Debbie Chang
Research Associate
Texas A&M University

Abstract

ESL educators find themselves teaching a diverse group of students in today's classroom. This study investigated how ESL instructors address diversity in their teaching. The literature review revealed research on the experiences of teachers using culturally responsive teaching strategies. Using qualitative research methods, this study explores the participants' subjective teaching experiences in-depth. The findings revealed particular themes related to the instructional strategies and challenges encountered when teaching culture and gender. The findings suggest ESL instructors must take an active role in creating activities, exercises and curriculum that contribute to an inclusive learning environment that empower their students inside and outside the classroom.

Introduction

English as second language (ESL) adult educators are challenged with the daunting task of balancing culture and gender with their teaching strategies within their diverse classrooms. When blending culture and gender concepts into their teaching, ESL educators often rely on their previous teaching experience, skills, and personal motivation to teach a diverse group of students (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

With the range of cultures found in most ESL classrooms, educators must take into consideration all the features that encompass diversity. Faitar (2011) stated diversity involves more than just culture and

gender. It is a concept that is far more complex and includes "academic ability, multiple intelligences, learning styles, thinking styles, attitudes, socioeconomic status, home language and developmental readiness" (Faitar, 2011, p. 7).

Because of the varying backgrounds of the students present in adult ESL classrooms, ESL educators must address the issues regarding diversity, culture and gender. Most often, these issues are addressed through culturally responsive teaching strategies designed to encourage students to share information about their backgrounds and culture (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2002; Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Woldkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching "occurs when

there is equal respect for the backgrounds and contemporary circumstances for all learners” by eliminating bias and stereotypes (Woldkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 17). Yet, to what extent do we know how educators are delivering, modifying, implementing and providing instruction to a diverse group of adult learners to reduce bias and stereotypes? This article explores the variations in perspectives and teaching strategies utilized, unintentionally or intentionally, by ESL educators when addressing issues of culture and gender with their students.

Relevant Literature

There are volumes of research on how to create a culturally responsive classroom and the various strategies on using culture to teach ESL. However, the literature on gender is limited and focuses more on how the gender of the student or educator affects teaching and learning in ESL classrooms.

This section explores the relevant literature on both culture and gender. It is divided into two categories, one specifically about culture and the other about gender. In searching for literature to inform our study, we were unable to find literature that combines both categories.

Culture

How is culture defined? Several definitions exist. Scholars such as Nault (2006) and Karmsch (1998) define culture as “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting” (Nault, 2006, p. 315). Other scholars such as Gee (2007) defined culture as a learning process. In his definition, cultural processes are passed from one group to the next in which the group ensures that every one learns the process. New members joining the group, therefore, are required to learn the cultural processes and the language. Drawing upon the definition used by Nault (2006) and Gee (2007), we define culture as the process where learners gain membership into a community by

learning the cultural meanings of the language. In which, culture is taught implicitly through word choice or grammar usage and is relayed through instructional methods or materials through a known or hidden curriculum (Nault, 2006).

For ESL students who are learning vocabulary, words possess more than a single, general dictionary meaning (Gee, 2007). Instead, they have different and specific meanings depending on the situation and context in which they are used. Words are intertwined with culture. In order for the ESL adult learner to access that culture, they need to understand more than just the basic content, language skills and assessments encompassing those words (Gee, 2007). ESL adult learners require access to the specific cultural meanings of those words in order to gain membership into the community.

In a 2007 study, Roswell, Sztainbok, and Blaney asserted that language assessments are not simple tests of vocabulary comprehension because they are entangled with cultural assumptions that may or may not be understood by the learners. This study showed there are culture and language nexus in which context helps shape literacy. Roswell et al. (2007) noted that educators should go beyond teaching culture that is centered solely on ethnic holidays and must extend their teaching to include the experiences of everyday routines and ways of life. This makes use of lived experience, which is key to teaching ESL. Therefore, in order for learners to lose the awkwardness associated with learning a second language and the culture embedded within it, educators should recognize that “culture and language cannot be divided and seeing them interwoven leads us closer to a more informed understanding of the learner” (Roswell et al., 2007, p. 153).

Holt (1995) suggested that instructors should use multiple activities that will appeal to the learners’ diverse background and indirectly integrate culture into the classroom by: (a) inviting students to discuss their experiences and activities; (b) asking learners to share their knowledge and expertise; and (c) taking field trips or using meaningful pictures as stimulus for discussion. It is also important to select materials that will enhance

instruction by providing context to develop literacy and language. For example, a camera can be used to enhance the development of language as a supplement in the creation of biographies and autobiographies (Holt, 1995). By using instructional strategies and materials that allow students to introduce their culture to the classroom, teachers will promote discussion and an opportunity for students to incorporate culture in the learning process.

Vandrick (2000) stated class participation is an essential element to learning. However, many instructors have students who do not actively participate by answering or asking questions, making comments or joining the class discussion for unknown reasons. Yet, most instructors know the reasons they sit silent cannot be simply characterized as laziness or lack of involvement; instead, the reasons are more complex in nature. Students may not actively participate due to shyness, classroom dynamics or for cultural reasons. Vandrick (2000) offered the following as backgrounds that affect participation: (a) English is not their first language, the medium of instruction; (b) students come from cultures where educational traditions are different; (c) female students are less comfortable than male students in speaking; and (d) students may be from working class background and feel insecure in the classroom. Having an awareness of students' culture and background, instructors create a more inclusive and positive space for students that encourages participation and learning.

Culturally responsive teaching is a concept that currently permeates the majority of the literature on teaching and culture. At the center of culturally responsive teaching lies the teacher, who respects diversity and is charged with creating a classroom that is considered "inclusive" or a safe space where all students feel respected and connected to each other. Pewewardy and Hammer (2003) created a framework composed of five elements they believe are crucial to creating a culturally responsive education. First, cultural literacy (knowledge of the student's culture) can help fill the gaps to ensure learning is achieved. Second, instructors must learn to reflect on their attitudes and

beliefs. "Teachers must learn to be reflective practitioners and develop observational, empirical, and analytical skills necessary to monitor, evaluate, and revise continually their respective teaching styles" (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003, p. 3). Third, teachers do not need to be experts in their students' cultures to create a caring, trusting and inclusive environment. Fourth, teachers should model a respect for diversity in their classrooms. And finally, by using a transformative curriculum to engender meaning, teachers provide students with the opportunity to enhance their critical thinking skills enabling them to analyze their story and transform it through language. It is essential to utilize/implement culturally responsive teaching so that teachers better understand the cultural resources students bring to the classroom and subsequently become skilled at using those resources to aid in the teaching-learning process.

Kambutu and Thompson (2005) stated "culturally responsive educators make a conscious effort to create learning environments that are empowering to all learners" (p. 7). In addition, Kambutu and Thompson (2005) also wrote "develop[ing] teaching resources and instructional strategies that naturally support the learner socially, emotionally, and cognitively" (p. 7) contributes to a nurturing, inclusive learning environment that empowers the learner. Thus, teaching becomes more than a daily routine for culturally responsive educators; instead, it evolves into a complex operation.

Gender

One great challenge for ESL instructors is negotiating and promoting a balance of equal participation between male and female students. Men and women play different roles in classroom participation in regards to balancing the dominance, interpersonal relations, amount of talk time and who's leading the conversation in ESL classrooms (Shehadeh, 1999). The difference in participation can be traced in the literature and is related to how gender is perceived by the given culture.

Yepez (1994) investigated how the history of sexism

and silencing of women in some cultures can create ESL classrooms in which there is an unequal treatment of males and females. Some ESL students come from cultural backgrounds which encourage males to have strong verbal skills which consequently engulf the female voices within the American classroom.

Markham (1988) discussed how gender and the perceived expertise of the speaker affect listening recall. Markham's (1998) review of the literature on sociolinguistic research focuses on how the gender of the speaker affects the ESL listening recall of the students. The reviewed literature suggests that men are more likely to be considered intelligent, sincere, and competent over women. Overall, Markham's (1988) study found that gender bias is a pervasive factor which influences the recall of material for ESL students.

Frye's (1999) research offers suggestions on how to better support learners enrolled in women's only ESL classrooms. The goal of this study was to understand ways to empower female students through language learning. Frye (1999) maintains that with immigrant women facing many barriers to education, it is imperative that literacy programs consider the gender differences and dynamics in the classroom dealing specifically with acculturation, cognitive development and learning styles. Programs failing to provide support in these areas may impede women's learning and participation.

Cochran (1994) highlighted the struggles to create inclusive language and eliminate sexual stereotyping in the ESL classroom. In order for teachers to handle the struggles, Cochran (1994) offered four suggestions: (a) provide explicit opportunities for students to discuss their feelings with carefully planned exercises; (b) become conscious of the signals sent by students through body language, oral intonation and other nonverbal communication; (c) avoid at all costs the use of sexist and racist language themselves; and (d) become familiar with the literature on the subject of sexism and language. These will help move the doubly marginalized female student out of her position of inequity in the ESL classroom.

Background of Study

In 2008, the Texas Center for Advancement of Literacy and Learning completed a statewide adult basic education teacher's needs assessment. The assessment was designed to better understand the areas where adult educators felt they needed more training. The assessment was divided into various sections, including teachers' perceived skill level on their instructional abilities to address issues of Diversity, Learning Styles, and Cultures. The results from the assessment revealed that teachers consistently rated themselves high in skill level in this domain, as well as attributed high importance on addressing diversity issues within the adult education classroom. Based on their responses in this assessment, we decided to investigate how teachers are delivering, modifying, implementing and providing instruction to a diverse group of adult learners. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the aspects of cultural diversity and gender in the adult ESL classroom.

Study Participants and Data Collection

When selecting participants for this study, we sought out instructors teaching in adult basic education (ABE) ESL and community programs. Our goal was to gain insight into how instructors, from various programs, engaged in teaching or talking about culture and gender in the classroom. Our study participants included 13 paid part-time and volunteer instructors. Twelve of the study participants were female and one participant was male. We used a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007) to explore our participants' subjective teaching experiences in-depth. Prior to the interview, each participant was observed teaching. Following the observation, we conducted face-to-face interviews which were audio taped and subsequently transcribed. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for the purposes of maintaining confidentiality.

Findings

Many ESL instructors know learning a second language also means learning culture as well as understanding how gender functions in that culture (Johnson, 2005). In our analysis of the transcripts from our interviews with adult educators, we noted particular themes related to the instructional strategies and challenges encountered when teaching culture and gender.

Strategies for Teaching Culture

The instructors in our study all believe students learning to speak English in the United States need to have an understanding of U.S. American culture. When asked about their prior experience teaching in adult education, over half of our participants talked about their own experiences with teaching and living abroad. They reflected upon and spoke about their challenges as learners living and learning to communicate in a new culture. This valuable experience helped shape their teaching strategies for their ESL students. They expressed how teaching about American culture is an essential part of teaching English as a second language and how it serves as a way of helping their students function in their new culture. In defining culture as the process where learners gain membership into a community by learning the cultural meanings of the language, we noted how participants spoke about the teaching strategies they use in order to help ease the transition for their students into this new culture. These strategies were used to incorporate both the dominant culture as well as the individual students' cultures into learning activities. Heather, an ABE ESL instructor, stated:

Different ethnic dress, we'll have a day where you have an ethnic dress, a special dress the way you dress in your country on a holiday, so I might come dressed as a pioneer woman, and they would come dressed in their ethnic clothes.

This instructor was among several others who relied on the use of ethnic holidays to teach culture. However,

Roswell et al. (2007) challenges educators to go beyond teaching culture centered solely on ethnic holidays but to extend their teaching to include the experiences of everyday routines and ways of life.

Some instructors sought to incorporate everyday American culture into the classroom by using cultural icons introduced in the literature. Misty, one of the ABE ESL instructors, stated:

Oh let's say we're talking about some kinda of literature and it mentions folk tales or fables or um American heroes like Batman, Superman then we take time out to discuss what those are and what they mean in the American culture.

Johnson (2005) suggests the success or failure of the teaching culture depends on how the instructor approaches the cultural and mainstream elements found in the curriculum and the lived experiences of the students.

Challenges to Teaching Culture

When referring to the challenges these instructors are faced with teaching culture, they spoke of tensions, conflicts, and dilemmas surrounding the classroom discussion. Mary, one of the ABE ESL instructors in a community program, spoke directly about the tensions in her classroom. She stated:

One of my students was [Religion X]. And it [the student's religion] never affected the class, but I thought a couple of other students, when she told that about herself, the [look] on their face was just a look of concern.

Mary, as well as other instructors, spoke of the possible tension or discomfort that sharing would cause the other students in the class.

The instructors also expressed a concern for the comfort of the students and not for themselves. Kristen, an ABE ESL instructor, also stated: "I think sometimes it, talking about their personal situation is a little bit uncomfortable..." By recognizing the needs of their students, these instructors worked to create an inclusive classroom in which all the students felt respected and safe to share their lived experiences.

Strategies for Teaching Gender

Most of the instructors expressed gender was not an issue in most of their classrooms and did not speak of specific strategies they used to teach about gender. However, two of the instructors spoke directly about their strategies on teaching gender. Nicole, an ESL instructor in a community program, took an opportunity to teach one of her male students about gender. She provided this example:

[The student failed his driving test] he was so disappointed and he said I wonder if she, she was a woman, if she is what's the word prejudice. I said well maybe because you're a man and she's a woman. She's young, you're old. She's American, you're Chinese. But I said it could be that she is concerned about your safety. And just wants to make sure that you know how to drive well before you get your license.

Nicole explained gender bias may not be the reason he failed his test and the woman administering the exam could have just simply be concerned about his safety. This male student called into question the gender of the driving instructor when he did not achieve his goal.

John, an ESL instructor in a community program, recognized that his gender gave him the perceived expertness as discussed in Markham's (2008) study. He stated,

One of the reasons June wants me to try and remain in the classroom is because of uh,uh particularly because of the cultural expectation in the Chinese culture men, uh they are very gracious toward June but she feels they enjoy having a man teach them.

These two instructors, Nicole and John, recognize how the gender of their students as well their own gender has an impact on teaching and learning.

Challenges to Teaching Gender

As we examined the challenges instructors faced when teaching gender, only one of the instructors talked

about her struggles with traditional gender roles and gender biased curriculum. Kristen, an ABE ESL instructor, explained how traditional gender roles impact her teaching and the students learning. She provided this example "...we have the children right next door, whenever the kids come out the mother is always the one who has to go run after them wherever, so they end up missing more of the class than their spouse does."

Kristen also noted a gender bias in the curriculum. She explained "I have noticed that [gender bias] in my curriculum and I noticed that it makes an effort to do stereotypical male gender roles in the pictures and that stuck out to me." Although, most of the instructors did not address strategies for and challenges to teaching gender it is important to understand the impact and role gender plays in the classroom.

Conclusion

As education seeks to follow the trend in the United States of shifting away from a philosophy of an assimilationist melting pot to a philosophy of cultural pluralism, it finds a new society emerging that has members from diverse social, racial, and religious backgrounds (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Although these members want to maintain their own identities, they are interested in learning about the culture embedded in language. Thus, ESL instructors are challenged to provide students with the cultural context which surrounds and is intertwined with the language. By embracing this challenge, instructors must "respect diversity; engage the motivation of all learners; create a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment; derive teaching practices from principles that cross disciplines and cultures; and promote justice and equity in society" (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 19).

The findings from our study provide some evidence that ESL instructors are using culturally responsive teaching strategies to teach culture in their classrooms. However, teaching about gender remains invisible to some instructors. The idea of gender being invisible in

the classroom is also present in the curriculum and textbooks. Blumberg (1995) argues gender bias in textbooks, and essentially curriculum, is an invisible obstacle to educational equality. Gender bias is cloaked in traditional gender roles and stereotypes. It perpetuates inequality in the classroom by impacting participation and potential silencing of female students.

As Pewewardy and Hammer (2003) have suggested, ESL instructors must be reflective practitioners who continually monitor, evaluate, and revise their teaching style. ESL instructors must be willing to accept some risk when teaching culture and gender to students. It is natural for students to exhibit varying degrees of anxiety, fear, and conflict when learning about new concepts. In order to balance culture and gender, ESL instructors must take an active role in creating activities, exercises and curriculum that contribute to an inclusive learning environment that empower their students inside and outside the classroom.

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Michelle A. Johnson is a doctoral student in the Educational Administration and Human Resource Development department specializing in Adult Education at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX.

Debbie Chang is a research associate with the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX.
