

The Role of Culture

(from Hamayan & Freeman Field 2nd edition: Chapter 2-04)

Question:

What is the role of culture in language learning?

Else Hamayan

English language learners (ELLs) are faced with three significant challenges in school: they must learn new concepts (often quite abstract, especially above third grade), they must learn in a language in which they are developing proficiency, and they must learn in a cultural context that may be quite unfamiliar to them. This last challenge is the one that most educators pay the least attention to because it is not an explicit aspect of schooling and education (Cole, 1996).

Every bilingual learner brings subtle cultural norms and values with him- or herself to school. Many of these norms and values go beyond the superficial displays of folktales, fashion, food, and festivals, which are merely the tip of the iceberg (Figure 2–1). They consist of the ways in which each of us interacts with and makes sense of our surroundings, or what may lie just below the surface in the iceberg model. These norms and values govern how we do what we do. Notions of modesty, a preference for competition or cooperation, and approaches to problem solving, lie well below the visible surface. However, they permeate every aspect of the lives of ELLs at school. It is precisely for this reason that administrators need to consider cultural diversity in every aspect of the program that they establish for ELLs.

Culture is tightly interwoven with not only language learning and use, but it is also a critical factor in learning in general (Garcia, 2006). Learning is seen by many sociocultural theorists as an interaction between individual learners and the context within which that learning takes place (Garcia, 2006; Rogoff, 2003). The culture of the classroom as well as the student's and his or her family's traditions play a vital role in helping or impeding the second language learning process. The way we interpret and interact with our environment can facilitate or inhibit learning. One way in which culture plays a role in the learning process relates to how well a student functions

within the culture of the classroom. Students who are comfortable with the culture of the classroom and who behave according to the norms that govern the classroom are more relaxed learners than students who feel as though their behavior is off the mark. Often, students who are not acculturated into the culture of the classroom are not even able to articulate what it is that makes them different from the others. Students who stand too close to others or those whose norms of modesty are different than those of the general school population simply know they are uncomfortable, or that they are making others uncomfortable. As a consequence, they are likely to function at a lower level than their potential allows, and they may not be able to devote their full attention to learning.

Another way in which culture plays a role in learning is that culture serves as a key to understanding new concepts. An unfamiliar cultural context in which a new concept is being introduced can stand in the way of demystifying that concept. For example, during shared reading time, a story about a young child who is rewarded for showing great independence may be very confusing to a student who has been taught that reliance on parents and older siblings is not only acceptable but highly regarded. A classroom activity that is structured around competition and “winning” may be very hard to complete for a student who has learned to shun competitiveness and to value collaboration.

Our task as administrators and educational leaders is first to be aware of the diversity that exists among all students and to see that diversity as a source of enrichment for everyone in the school community. Second, we need to be open to learning, most easily from the students and their families, what their norms and values are. Next, we must think of ways of incorporating cultural diversity, in all of its complexity, into the everyday working of the school. In summary, the culture of the student must enter into the minds and hearts of teachers and administrators if the culture of school is to enter into the minds and hearts of the students.

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