

Language Teachers' Cultural Identity and its Impact on their Practice



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ABSTRACT: The way we communicate information is as important as the messages we convey. Cultural variables, such as nationality, ethnic background, religion, and gender, may give us a reference for both sending and receiving messages in styles that are linear or circular, direct, or indirect, attached or detached, procedural or personal, and more confrontational in either intellectual or relational terms. These differences in values and communication styles that contribute to cultural diversity are also an integral part of the classroom environment. The present article sheds light on these individual differences in relation to teachers' cultural identities and how they impact their pedagogical practices.

KEYWORDS: communication, cultural identity, learner-centered, pedagogy, teacher-centered, teaching styles

INTRODUCTION

Language teachers' socio-cultural experiences are directly influential on the formation of their teaching strategies, receptivity towards new ideas, and their means of interacting with students. Knowles (1991) argued that experiences influence teachers' receptivity toward teaching methods and strategies. Communication style is the expression of cultural values, and power differences stem from the historic position of particular cultures within sociopolitical systems.

How we communicate is often as important as what we communicate (Egitim, 2022). Depending partially on cultural variables such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and race (among others), individuals may have a reference for both sending and receiving messages in styles that are linear or circular, direct, or indirect, attached or detached, procedural or personal, and more confrontational in either intellectual or relational terms (Ziegahn, 2001). These differences in values and communication styles that contribute to cultural diversity also reflect in the classroom environment.

Some teachers tend to be outgoing and lively around their students and believe lessons should be fun and interesting, while others love routine and predictability and favor a serious classroom atmosphere. Other groups of teachers favor the combination of both styles (Egitim, 2021). Life histories of culturally diverse teachers offer the potential for understanding how these differences contribute to enhancing and potentially redefining teaching strategies (Bonner et al., 2018; Gay, 2015).

TEACHING STYLES

However, it is virtually impossible to judge the most effective teaching approaches as in all classrooms, no matter what the subject matter, there will be students with multiple learning styles and students with a variety of major, minor, and negative learning styles (Maya et al., 2021). An effective means of accommodating these learning styles is for teachers to change their own styles and strategies and provide a variety of activities to meet the needs of different learning styles (Egitim, 2020). Then all students will have at least some activities that appeal to them based on their learning styles, and they are more likely to be successful in these activities.

Teaching styles entail methods and approaches shaped by prior experiences with the influence of cultural identity (Altugan, 2015). Therefore, teachers select methods and approach that they feel most comfortable with; if they try to change to completely different approaches, they would be forced to work entirely with unfamiliar, awkward, and uncomfortable methods. Ayers (2010) emphasized the complexity of teaching and suggested that teaching as the direct delivery of some preplanned curriculum, teaching as the orderly and scripted conveyance of information, and teaching as clerking, is simply a myth. Teaching is much larger and much more alive than that; it contains more pain and conflict, more joy and intelligence, and more uncertainty and ambiguity. It requires more judgment and energy and intensity than, on some days, seems humanly possible. Teaching is spectacularly unlimited.

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INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

Researchers have published works about the ways in which culture influences thought and behavior. They have made available a wide range of perspectives for conceptualizing the influences of different cultures on thinking and behaving. Three perspectives are of special potential relevance to L2/FL teaching: namely, the distinction between individualism and collectivism; different perceptions of power and authority; and different types of achievement motivation (Littlewood, 2001).

According to Hofstede's (1986) individualism versus collectivism dimension, an individualist orientation encourages individuals to believe in their own unique identities; they are more likely to claim the right to express themselves, make personal choices, and strive for self-actualization. A collectivist orientation encourages individuals to see themselves as an inseparable part of the in-group; they expect and are expected to accord first priority to the views, needs, and goals of the group rather than stand out as individuals. In individualist cultures, people are expected to develop and display their individual personalities and choose their own affiliations. In collectivist cultures, people are defined and act mostly as a member of a long-term group, such as the family, a religious group, an age cohort, a town, or a profession, among others (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2022; Jan et al., 2022; Rehman, 2022)

Hofstede's study also revealed that countries like Japan and Hong Kong have highly collectivistic societies and place a strong value on group allegiance (Guo, 2021). In other words, group needs and wants are placed above those of the individual and people tend to be other-directed. In such countries, English teaching is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory (Noda & O'Regan, 2020). These teaching styles have resulted in a more introverted learning style in that most students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than explored by themselves. They, therefore, find it normal to engage in modes of learning which are teacher-centered and in which they receive knowledge rather than interpret it (Egitim, 2021).

On the other hand, in more individualistic societies learners are put at the center of their learning and encouraged to learn by exploring knowledge by themselves (Benson & Lamb, 2020). Dörnyei (2009; 2014; 2020) described student-centered learning as a Western approach to learning and may not necessarily transfer to developing countries, where there are limited resources and different learning cultures. Rogers et al. (2007) identified the important precondition for student-centered learning as the need for a leader or person who is perceived as an authority figure in the situation to be sufficiently secure within themselves in their relationship with others that they experience an essential trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves.

CONCLUSION

If teaching styles are influenced by teachers' prior learning experiences, we may then expect to see more teacher-centered approaches from teachers of highly collectivistic societies and more learner-centered approaches from teachers of highly individualistic societies as a result of their prior learning experiences. However, it would also be wise to say that teachers from different cultural backgrounds could influence each other as the dynamic nature of teaching requires numerous interactions. Cultures are not static elements. They can change as they come into contact with each other as the influences of culture are diffused from group to group. Teachers' cultural identity also evolves and changes as teachers interact with each other and those changes affect the formation of their teaching styles. This is a never-ending process that would enable teachers to adopt one certain approach and stick to it. It is important for teachers to be receptive to changes and new ideas to maintain a dynamic and interactive classroom environment where students can be actively engaged in activities and learn to communicate their ideas effectively.

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