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Communication Across Cultural Boundaries Within
Memphis ESL Classrooms

Faculty Sponsor

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Abstract

This study looked at the ways that English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in the city of Memphis navigate cultural differences between themselves and their students through intercultural communication. ESL teachers in Memphis schools encounter diverse populations and must be able to communicate with these students in a way that is effective and culturally sensitive. Two teachers and their classrooms were observed. One teacher taught in a mainstream ESL classroom and the other at an ESL magnet school. The magnet ESL teacher actively worked to encourage intercultural communication between students. She was also able to bridge the gap between herself and a large population of her students that were Hispanic because she herself was also Hispanic and fluent in Spanish. The mainstream teacher worked to create a classroom environment that provided adequate support for students and incorporated cultural content into lessons to foster intercultural communication and respect between students.

Introduction

ESL in Memphis

Memphis is an area with a history of diversity and immigration. That diversity is reflected within the classrooms of Memphis, where nearly 8,000 English Language Learning (ELL) students were enrolled in the 2015-2016 school year (NCES, 2018). Students within the English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms of Memphis come from different cultural backgrounds than those of their English-speaking counterparts. The Shelby County School District, which merged with the Memphis City School District in 2011, has a duty to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for ELLs in its classrooms. Part of ensuring an effective and healthy learning environment for children who come from different backgrounds is having teachers who are willing to bridge the cultural gap between themselves and their students.

Memphis is home to nearly 653,000 people, the majority of which are African American (Data USA, 2017). There are 46,000 Hispanic people living in the city, and 37,000 Memphians speak Spanish as a primary language. The next most common language in Memphis is Vietnamese with 2,600 speakers. There is also a large population of people who speak a range of African languages in Memphis (Data USA, 2017). With such a large population of non-native English speakers in Memphis, the need for effective and culturally sensitive communication is evident (Zhang, 2017).

Tennessee has a large number of Hispanic immigrants. Most of these immigrants are located in the cities of Nashville, Memphis, and Chattanooga and their surrounding suburbs (Nagle, 2012). In the 2014-2015 school year, 3.7 percent of all students in Tennessee were ELLs, with the highest percentage of these being Hispanic students (NCES, 2017). This percentage grew to 4.1 percent in the following school year (NCES, 2018). This population has continued to grow in recent years as the population of immigrants in Tennessee has grown as well (Kebede and Bauman, 2017).

The Tennessee Department of Education states that it is “the responsibility of the educational system to ensure all [ELL] students are appropriately supported in their English language development and in their progress toward mastering the academic standards for each grade level and content area” (Tennessee Department of Education). While the importance of giving students adequate support is stressed here, the idea does not always play out so well when put into practice. The graduation rates of ELL students fall behind that of their counterparts in almost every state, including Tennessee. While 87.2% of all students in Tennessee graduate, only 73.0% of ELL students reach graduation (Sanchez, 2017). It is obvious that the system

in place for ESL education has flaws and needs to be improved. One of those flaws is a lack of teachers who are ready and able to take on the role of teaching English to a non-native speaker. In every year since 2005, the state of Tennessee has reported a shortage of ESL teachers (Sanchez, 2017). Teacher shortages lead to more densely packed classrooms and less comprehensive and individualized instruction. English Language Learners in Tennessee also have consistently lower averages on standardized tests that are regulated by the state, regardless of the subject that the test covers (OREA, 2012).

These gaps in performance by ELL students and native English-speaking students are due to several factors and happen nationwide. Within the city of Memphis recently, steps are being taken to help bridge this gap at the foundational level. Within most Memphis schools, newly immigrated students with no or very little understanding of English are only exposed to two classes of intense English language instruction before being placed in courses with native English speakers (Kebede and Bauman, 2017). This is not a model that benefits the children placed in these schools. It is clear from the research done on the topic that English learners need an average of three to five years to become socially, or orally fluent, and upwards of four to seven years to gain academic fluency. Expecting a student who has had less than half that amount of time to keep up with native level speakers is an impossible task. The system in place for school-aged immigrants entering Memphis is one that lacks empathy for their situation and seems to be set up against them from the start.

Within the Shelby County School District, there are 114,000 students, of these 7,600 are students who do not speak English as their first language. The number continues to grow. One of the most recent reactions to the continued inflow of ELL students into the schools of Memphis is a new magnet school for students who were born outside of the United States. Magnet schools are public schools which focus their curriculum around a theme, in this case English language learning. They are unique because they draw in students from across the entire school district (Magnet Schools of America). The ESL magnet school was spurred on in part by a complaint by the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, which sought to investigate how the Shelby County School District behaves towards and communicates with English language learners. Memphis was among many school districts which discouraged school enrolment for minors who immigrated, preferring that they sought out a learning or tutoring center instead (Kebede and Bauman, 2017).

Literature Review

Culture

Culture is a broad term for the beliefs, values, and rituals shared by a group of people. Within the field of anthropology culture is often described as the beliefs, language, and traditions that bond a social group. It is important that we view these ideas with the respect that it is due and try to understand them as best we can.

To provide a strong foundation for language learning, ESL educators must provide cultural context to their language teaching (López-Rocha, 2016, p. 106). Language does not exist in a vacuum; it is tied heavily to culture. As López-Rocha points out, “oftentimes these hidden elements of culture are the ones responsible for culture shock and misunderstandings, potentially leading to stereotyping and even prejudice” (López-Rocha, 2016, p. 107). Providing appropriate cultural content in learning can be key to providing students with the tools to navigate these misunderstandings.

Intercultural Competence and Communication

Intercultural competence (IC) is a person’s ability to communicate effectively with people from another culture in their language (Thao, 2017; Byram, 1997). IC consists of five key components. They are knowledge, critical cultural awareness, openness, interpretive skills, and interaction skills (Byram, 1997; Thao, 2017). Intercultural communication is “situated communication between individuals or groups of different linguistic and cultural origins” (LanQua). Intercultural communication requires valuing and respecting the culture of people who are different from you while learning from each other, which makes it an essential part of language teaching. In the intercultural context, the emphasis is on the “mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms” while in a cross-cultural setting one culture is often dominant and “all other cultures are compared or contrasted to the dominant culture” (Spring Institute, 2018). This imbalance is an important consideration within the context of ESL classrooms where the culture of English-speaking people is dominant.

Figure 1 explains the relationship of intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence—the first is a facet of the other. ICC is the ability to navigate a cultural setting that is not your own while communicating in a language that is not your native language (Thao, 2017; Byram, 1997). Byram’s model of ICC builds upon intercultural competence. It includes intercultural competence, linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence (Thao, 2017; Byram, 1997;

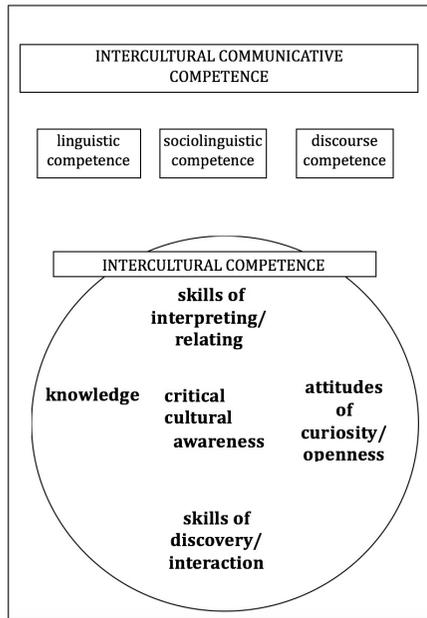


Figure 1. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997).

López-Rocha, 2016). López-Rocha summarizes these points by stating,

A person who has developed ICC is able to build relationships while speaking in the foreign language; communicates effectively, taking into consideration his own and the other person’s viewpoint and needs; mediates interactions between people of different backgrounds, and strives to continue developing communicative skills” (López-Rocha, 2016, p. 107).

A key distinction between IC and ICC is that the communication involved in the former happens in one’s native language and the latter happens in a foreign language (Byram, 1997; López-Rocha, 2016). Those learning a language must develop ICC to navigate the cultural context in which their new language is embedded.

Intercultural Competence and ESL Learning

Students in ESL classrooms have the dual challenge of learning English and learning to navigate a cultural context that could be entirely unfamiliar to them. Having students gain intercultural communicative skills is as important as their language acquisition. Many ESL programs have adopted the idea

of total immersion and assimilation of students. This pragmatic approach has led to neglecting, and at times shaming, the home culture and language of the student. This push towards assimilation puts unneeded stress on the student and raises the anxiety levels of students.

These feelings affect how students navigate the classroom experience and are influenced by a variety of factors within the classroom environment. In a classroom environment where a student feels pressured to perform before they are ready, their anxiety level increases, which might lower self-confidence and motivation. A safe and low-stress classroom provides students with a zone where they feel comfortable and are able to face challenges and grow.

When teachers lack intercultural competence, they lack the ability to bridge the gap between themselves and students of other cultures (Thao, 2017). This means that the social and cultural needs of students might be overlooked and cause students unnecessary stress. Mastering cultural competency allows educators to meet the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of students in their classrooms in a way that is both respectful and beneficial to all involved. Intercultural competence is a valuable skill that should be taught to our educators. In a city as diverse as Memphis the need for culturally aware and respectful communication cannot be neglected.

Teachers of English must be culturally aware in order to provide students with the support they need while learning. They must cross the barriers of language as well as culture, which is not an easy feat. As Zhang points out, “Learning [a] foreign language is no longer about knowing how to use language for the purpose of speaking and reading, but about knowing how to communicate with people who have different cultural identities” (Zhang, 2017, p.229). Students of ESL learn to navigate the cultural setting that surrounds them, but it is less often that teachers are pushed to analyze and relate to the mix of cultural identities within their classrooms. Because ESL teachers are also in the midst of people from different cultures than their own, they must also understand how to communicate in this way. It is harder for teachers to help students navigate social interactions with people from other backgrounds if they do not see the students’ points-of-view.

Classroom Environment as a Microcosm

Within our sociocultural context, English is the dominant language. It is hard to attend school, work, or settle into life in the US without some working knowledge of English. Because of the privileged position of English in the US and globally, English is often framed as the only important language, even if that means that students should give up their native language to

learn English.

Because culture is heavily tied to language, this belief can have detrimental effects on children from diverse backgrounds. Diverse areas like Memphis should lead the way towards a more interculturally aware and sensitive society. However, it does not appear that the southern United States is moving in that direction. Instead, “testing policies, new standards that marginalize multicultural learners, lack of resources, and local community values can constrain the ways in which linguistic difference and the teaching of language are approached by administrators, teachers, and students.” This leads to gaps in achievement like the lower graduation rates and test scores observed in the English language learner population (Fogle and Moser, 2017, p. 65).

This view of English as a lingua franca has effects that can be seen in teachers as well. Fogle and Moser (2017) interviewed teachers in the southern US who have experience working with English language learners. One of these teachers used this idea to ‘other’ students and praised teachers like herself who choose to work with them. ‘Othering’ or the creation of an us versus them mentality is one that exists outside of a society that values and seeks to understand cultural differences. This case is characteristic of many language teachers in the US and “represents a mainstream, monolingual position that emphasizes the role of the ESL teacher as a ‘good citizen’ and engages discourses of philanthropy rather than multilingualism” (Fogle and Moser, 2017, p. 72). The focus here is less on providing students with a knowledge of English that will help them to succeed and grow, and more on building teachers’ status and relationships to people outside of the classroom (Fogle and Moser, 2017). This process of othering students from different cultural backgrounds is common.

In cases such as this one in which “English language learners and immigrant families were constructed [by an ESL teacher] as in need of help, U.S. citizens, or monolingual English speakers, perhaps, were contrasted as ‘lucky’ and able to ‘help out’” (Fogle and Moser, 2017, p.72). There is a power imbalance between the culture that the student comes from and that which the teacher comes from. It is one in which one culture takes on the role of the dominant or superior and all other cultures are judged by their relationship to the dominant one (Spring Institute). As Zhang states, “competence in intercultural education is not an extra facet of teachers’ professional development but should become [an] integral part of that profession” (Zhang, 2017, p. 230). This means teachers should be acutely aware of their position within the classroom environment and how they relate to their students.

Most often in Memphis, ESL classrooms are not styled to be bilingual or transitional. They are pull-out ESL classes where students go to core classes with native-speaking peers and are pulled out from the classroom for intensive language lessons during the school day. Pull-out ESL allows students to get structured time with an ESL teacher, however, it does not provide enough support for most ELLs. The process of becoming socially then academically fluent in English is a long one that takes years to master and when students are limited to an hour or so of language instruction per day, they will struggle.

This is why new programs such as the ESL magnet school are seen as innovative and efficient ways of teaching students English. Students are given structured support throughout the day and taught the core curriculum by teachers who understand the challenges that their students are facing and have the experience, emotional intelligence, and intercultural competence to talk students through their challenges with language skills as well as course content. Unlike pull-out ESL programs, students are not pushed into classes with native speakers within a year of being introduced to English and expected to keep up.

Memphis is at the boundary of a major change in how it structures its ESL classrooms and how it treats students learning English. New programs, like those offered by the magnet school in this paper, focus on education for students who are newly immigrated to Memphis. Such programs are key to providing education that is intercultural and comprehensive. Students learning English as a second language are often left behind in classrooms where they are not adequately supported, and this shows in the statistics for ESL graduation rates and performance on standardized tests. Education that is truly fair to ESL students must give them support in a classroom that values their home language and culture. Intensive education that is based on mutual respect for other cultures and dedication to the success of students within the classroom is necessary for positive changes to occur within our ESL education system. These positive changes have never been more needed than now, because as immigrant populations within Memphis continue to grow, so will the English learning population.

Despite the unique importance of intercultural competence in Memphis schools, little is known about how educators in the area view or face this challenge within their classrooms. This gap in knowledge prevents school systems from providing educators with the information and tools they need to address the challenges of meeting their students' cultural needs alongside their language needs. It is important to understand the perceptions Memphis teachers have about culture in the classroom to work with teachers to provide students

with a classroom setting that meets their cultural as well as language needs. This paper will work to shed some light on this missing information.

Research Questions

1. What are Shelby County Schools ESL teacher's perceptions of the role of culture in language teaching?
2. How do Shelby County Schools ESL teachers enact intercultural communication in their classrooms?
3. Do teacher perceptions and enactment of cultural teaching differ between pull out ESL teachers in mainstream schools and teachers at an ESL magnet school?

Methods

Research Participants: Teachers

There were two teachers involved in this research. The first teaches at the ESL magnet school and has been teaching for nine years. She has been at her current position for two years. Before beginning this position she had been in a general education classroom. In her old position she frequently had ELL students in her classroom and saw the importance of ESL education.

The second teacher is located in a mainstream ESL classroom within Shelby County Schools. She has been teaching for 21 years and moved to the ESL classroom four years ago. She also had the experience of seeing many ESL students in her general education classroom. She saw the need for ESL teachers who cared about students and their success. When another teacher told her about the opportunity to get certified to teach ESL, she decided to go back to school.

Research Participants: Students

The students involved in this research come from many levels of English language proficiency. At the magnet school, the student population is comprised of children who have been in the United States for less than one calendar year. Most students become a part of the program because they are recommended or referred by local immigrant organizations. Typically, they lack foundational English proficiency when they come to the magnet school. The students come from many different cultures and speak many languages including Swahili, Arabic, French, Spanish, Tagalog, and Nepali. Spanish is the most common.

Research Participants: Researcher

The researcher on this project is an honors undergraduate student majoring in anthropology and English with a concentration in ESL. I have experience in conducting interviews, surveys, and focus groups through anthropological research internships. I have worked on teams of people with various cultural backgrounds both in the United States and abroad.

Observation

To understand Memphis ESL teachers' knowledge and perspectives on intercultural communicative competence and culture within the classroom it is important to observe classroom environments and talk with teachers. This project included semi-structured observations and interviews with teachers to determine how cultural teaching occurs in the specialist ESL school and in ESL classrooms in a mainstream school. A researcher reflection form was also used after observations and interviews to capture impressions and initial reactions to responses during the data collection.

Structured observations for this paper took place in Spring 2019 in two different locations, an ESL magnet school and a mainstream pull-out ESL classroom. The observations were conducted using an observation checklist that required the researcher to answer a series of standard questions, but also allowed for notes to be taken on classroom set-up, cultural content in lessons, student interest and attentiveness, as well as the way that the teacher communicates with students both verbally and nonverbally. Some questions were standard to the ESL practicum course and some were written for this project.

Observation Locations

The magnet school is open to high school students who have been in the country for less than one year. The school attempts to be a safe place where students feel comfortable speaking and developing. Teachers of every subject work alongside counselors and a bilingual cultural mentor to help students succeed.

The program incorporates science, math, social studies and language arts into courses that are taught by a teacher with ESL training. Students join the rest of their peer group for elective classes (Kebede and Bauman, 2017). Having ELL students separated from their native English-speaking peers is at times beneficial to ELL students; it creates a balance between teaching ELLs culture and language skills, and skills from other subjects. Combining subjects like science and math with language courses can provide students with the appropriate support and reduce their stress in the

classroom. During instruction at the magnet school, the teacher provides a translation of complex tasks in Spanish and repeats short phrases in Spanish after saying them in English. The majority of students in the classroom come from Spanish-speaking countries and speak Spanish as a first language.

The mainstream ESL classroom is divided into sections. There are whiteboards along two of the walls and they are filled with previous or on-going lessons along with charts and other helpful information. There are also areas with laptops and games, and a reading area with books for each reading level and subject. She says that most of the students who make up her classes are Hispanic, some are Asian, and one is Jamaican, but her “broken English” is what qualified her for the ESL program.

Observation Protocol

A total of 24 hours were spent observing the two classrooms and taking detailed notes. I observed the teacher at the ESL magnet school on three days for a total of nine hours and conducted two hour-long semi-structured interviews with the magnet ESL teacher. I observed the mainstream ESL classroom on three days for a total of fifteen hours and I conducted two hour-long semi-structured interviews with the mainstream ESL teacher. Before classroom observations took place, I talked with the teachers about my role in the classroom as the observer and discussed the data I would be gathering. Teachers and administration at the schools knew about the general research topics I aimed to address.

Interviews

After the classroom observation, I conducted informal semi-structured interviews with the two teachers. Each interview was approximately one hour in length. Interviews were not recorded, notes were typed or written. Written notes were always typed into a word document after the interview ended. The interviews were conversational. Teachers were able to provide additional comments about the cultural backgrounds of their students, intercultural communication and intercultural communicative competence, and the role of culture in the classroom during short one-on-one conversations. They were asked informally to talk about these topics and their knowledge and perspectives on these while I took notes. Each conversation touched on these topics; however, the questions asked were not standardized. It was important that the teacher felt free to lead the conversation and express their true opinions on the topics that were brought up.

Reflection

After completing observations and interviews, a reflection questionnaire was filled out and notes were reviewed to be sure they were as in-depth as possible. These questions helped to frame the data gathered in the context of the study. This questionnaire helped to organize data and begin to make sense of the things learned from each classroom experience.

Analysis

I reviewed data collected during all of the interviews and transcribed all notes into a word document. This data was coded through thematic analysis for topics relating to cultural content, teacher's perceptions of their students' cultural backgrounds, barriers to communication, and the use of intercultural communication. The teaching methods at each school were compared as ideas emerged.

Results

Teacher Background: Mainstream School

The teacher at the mainstream school was from the Memphis area. She went to school at a local college and majored in education because helping young students was important to her. During the time that I worked with her in the spring of 2019, she had been teaching for two decades. For the first several years of her teaching career, she worked in general education elementary school classrooms. While working in general education classrooms, she received quite a few ESL students. She said that she worked well with these students. She worked to provide them with the extra support they needed to thrive in the classroom.

After being in the general education classroom for 17 years she went back to school to get certified in teaching ESL. She says that she dealt with ESL students with compassion before becoming an ESL teacher. It has always been important to her that students from all backgrounds felt safe to learn and grow in her classroom. Teaching ESL allowed her to focus on a student population that she saw as more vulnerable than others. She said that she developed compassion for these students by asking herself, "How would I feel if I came here and didn't know any English?" It was important to her that students felt that her classroom was a safe place within the school in the same way she would want.

Teacher Background: Magnet School

The teacher at the ESL magnet school location was from Texas and been

teaching for nine years. She has taught many subjects in grades from pre-K to middle school. In those classes she worked with general education students with ESL and special-education students mixed in. She says that her lessons had to accommodate for all student types in the classroom. While in this position she saw a need for ESL teachers that cared about students and their development.

She had an ESL endorsement because it was a requirement in the location where she received her education degree. Later she decided that she would like to work with students like the ELLs that she had had in classrooms. She has been with the ESL magnet school since it opened two years ago. When she heard about the school and its focus on ELL students who were new to the country, she knew that addressing that need was important. She says, “It’s been nice to start with something and help build it.” She also noted that coming from another state and understanding the ways teachers perceive and treat ELL students gave her unique knowledge about how to deal with issues in the classroom that have not been addressed in Memphis classrooms.

Perceptions of Students’ Cultural Backgrounds: Mainstream School

The majority of students in the mainstream classroom come from Mexico or other Latin American countries. However, there are also some from areas such as Yemen, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The teacher says that of the Spanish-speaking students in the classroom most were born within the United States, but come from households where Spanish is the primary or only language spoken. She also says that the students who speak languages other than Spanish were not born here, they immigrated. Of the students enrolled in ESL, the teacher tells me that there is one whose first language is English. The student is Jamaican, but she says that her “broken English” is what qualified her for the ESL program.

In the mainstream school, the teacher addressed concerns about how teachers treat students of different cultural backgrounds. She says, “You would be surprised at the prejudice that I receive, or the students receive from other teachers. I’ve heard ‘their parents need to learn English’... They’ll say that in front of the child.” She describes general education teachers within the school as culturally insensitive towards ESL students. They believe that the parents of students in ESL are at fault for not teaching children English. The mainstream ESL teacher believes teachers should work alongside parents and students to make goals for the student together. Involving parents and students in this planning allows the teacher to meet the student where they are and maintain respect.

The mainstream teacher's goal is that students of any culture feel safe and heard in her classroom. It is important that students are never shamed about their identity. She says, "This [classroom] is the safest place in this building for them." Students must have a place where they feel it is okay to make mistakes. She reminds students that making mistakes is a part of the learning process. They must also understand that when they make mistakes they will not be judged or made fun of.

Perceptions of Students' Cultural Backgrounds: Magnet School

At the magnet school there are students from a wide range of countries and cultures. They come from areas in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and parts of Africa and speaking languages such as Swahili, Spanish, Arabic, French, Tagalog, and Nepali. To qualify for admission into the magnet school students must have resided in the United States for less than one calendar year. Most students become a part of the magnet school program because they are recommended or referred by local immigrant organizations. Typically, the students remain in the program for a year before moving to their local school, but there are some exceptions.

The ESL magnet teacher speaks fluent Spanish, which allows her to connect with students who are also from Hispanic backgrounds. During class she often repeats instructions in Spanish to help students understand the task that they are going to be working on. The majority of students in the classroom speak Spanish as a first language, so this is valuable. Students who speak other languages do not have this additional support, but accommodations such as translation dictionaries are available for every language that students at the school speak. Laptops are another resource that students have available.

It is important to the teacher at the ESL magnet school that her students feel relaxed and safe within the classroom. They must know that their culture is respected and that they have a role to play within the classroom. The teacher believes that each student in the classroom acts as a cultural ambassador. She tells them that in the United States they will sometimes face situations in which they are the only person from their country. In this situation, they must represent their country and their culture. She stresses the idea that students begin to play that role within the classroom, where they interact with people from many different cultures. They must be aware of cultural differences of others and cognizant of the role that they have in representing their own culture.

Navigating the Intercultural Classroom: Mainstream School

The mainstream ESL teacher noted how general education teachers fail to meet ESL students halfway. She voiced concern that teachers in the general education classrooms did not give ESL students the support that they needed. She says, “You’d be so surprised by how other teachers will go out of their way to fail ESL students knowing that they are not accommodating or modifying their work.” She says meeting students halfway is an important part of connecting with them. Understanding students and connecting with them is an important part of being able to communicate effectively with them.

She tells me that intercultural communication “means what we do together and how we communicate together. It doesn’t matter that one student is from Mexico and one is from Yemen, but that we work together and communicate together.” Collaboration promotes unity and understanding within the group of students. She focuses on the group as a whole and their ability to work together instead of the cultural differences that might divide them. During the first class session I observed, she split students into three groups for an exercise on types of energy. The teacher mixes the groups so that students get the chance to work with people that they do not usually sit with. This variety is important because collaboration is a major part of the carousel activity that is planned for the day. In two of the three carousel stations that are set up, students work together to fill out worksheets on energy. In the third station, each student works separately to film a video of themselves talking about the forms of energy. When a student at a table raises their hand to ask a question the teacher comes to the table and asks if he has asked his group members the same question and emphasizes that they are all sitting together to help each other. When she answers the question she makes sure that everyone in the group hears the answer, not only the student that originally asked the question. In this way, the teacher emphasizes that students in the class are a team that should work together to problem-solve and assist each other.

The teacher focuses on unity and collaboration in the content of the course. One text that her group read in the past year was called *Esperanza Rising*, a story about a girl who immigrates with her family from Mexico during the Great Depression. They read the book to help students develop an understanding that they all come from different backgrounds and that they should accept others’ backgrounds and accept students for who they are. It helped them to see that everyone’s story is not the same, but everyone’s story and background is valuable.

Navigating the Intercultural Classroom: Magnet School

The teacher points out that even the Hispanic students come from very different cultures, despite being grouped by language. What is most important to the teacher in this situation is that a “culture of respect” is maintained. To her, this means communicating in ways that show that the home culture of students is valued and respected. She works to promote this culture by mixing groups of people in the classroom. When group activities are scheduled, she ensures that students are not working with the same group of students each time. When they first sit down in the classroom students sit with groups of people that are familiar to them, often with students who speak the same first language. The teacher introduces variety and diversity to student groups by asking people to move around before beginning a group activity or by assigning students to groups herself. The seating chart changes frequently, and with these changes she likes to have people from diverse cultures work closely alongside each other. It is her goal that students in her class exit prepared to represent themselves and their culture outside of the classroom.

She stresses the importance of helping students to feel relaxed in the classroom. She says once they’re relaxed, they feel safe and “intercultural communication promotes that safety.” She also helps to promote a safe classroom environment by showing students that their culture and language are valued. She notes that it is important that everyone will not always agree with each other but that they always show that respect anyway. She tells the story of a young girl and boy in her classroom who had come from the same country to live here. Before each class students must grab their journals from the wall before sitting. In this case, the boy would sit, and it was the girl’s responsibility to grab both of their journals and sharpen his pencil if needed. She would grab their journals from the bin on the wall and return to sit beside him for class. Thinking back on the experience, the teacher notes, “As a teacher I can’t be upset with that.” Over time, she says, the two students have become friends, and this isn’t something that they do anymore.

Barriers to Teacher/Student Communication: Mainstream School

The ESL mainstream teacher believes that anxiety about leaving their comfort zone can be a huge barrier for students. It is hard to give themselves the freedom to make mistakes if they feel unsafe or have any fear of being judged. She wants students to feel safe in her classroom and she says,

I let down all the barriers in this room. It's just the students and me, we don't make fun of the way we talk. If you mispronounce words, it's okay. If you make mistakes, I'm okay with that. I don't mind teaching and correcting them, it's not a harsh correction... There's no sarcasm, no put-downs, we're all about helping each other.

She knows that reducing fear and anxiety plays a huge role in breaking down barriers to communication with students.

The teacher also addresses the communication barrier that arises with new ESL students. When she is interacting with a student who doesn't speak any English, yet the mainstream teacher stresses the importance of using TPR, total physical response. To her, this means using lots of gestures and slowing down speech. She says this is part of an effort to meet students where they are. It allows her to connect with them and attempt and provide foundational language skills. During one observation session, the teacher holds a class meeting in which the students and teacher discuss the lesson from the previous day and give their opinions on what went well and what behaviors need to be improved. When she gives feedback on the lesson the teacher says, "I don't think we listen to each other," and holds up a cupped hand to her ear. She asked students to also make the gesture then asked, "Why don't we listen to each other?" This is a gesture that she uses a few times throughout the conversation to ensure that students began to associate the gesture with the word listen. Each time she said the word listen she would make the gesture and students would follow along. She also used gestures for the word 'talking,' and when she made the point that students were talking over each other she made a talking gesture with both hands and waved her arms about while getting louder.

The teacher also knows sign language and first attempts to teach and use modified signs with new students. Many teachers at this mainstream school know sign language, and she says that her hope is if a student can gain some knowledge of sign language other teachers might use this skill to help ESL students with simple instruction in their general education classrooms.

Barriers to Teacher/Student Communication: Magnet School

Similar to the mainstream teacher, the teacher at the magnet school says nonverbal communication can be extremely useful when working with students from other cultures. It is a tool that she uses often with students who do not speak any English or Spanish. They were recently able to obtain dictionaries for all languages that are spoken in the school. Each student has a translation dictionary from their first language into English and they carry it around from class to class every day. This is a valuable way to

support students who do not yet have the English language skills they need to navigate the classroom environment.

Discussion

The teachers in both of these classrooms showed respect for the cultural backgrounds of their students in different ways and had different levels of engagement using intercultural competence. The magnet school teacher was able to connect with students of different Hispanic cultures because of their shared language. She acted as an example of an intercultural communicator. She believed that it was important to respect the diverse backgrounds of her students and acknowledge the way these backgrounds impact the classroom environment.

The mainstream teacher also believed it was important for students' backgrounds to be respected. However, instead of encouraging students to take on the role of cultural ambassadors, she perceived differences in culture as a barrier to equality and classroom communication. The mainstream teacher reinforced the ways in which students were all the same as a way of preventing barriers from disrupting the classroom environment. The magnet school teacher encouraged students to understand the impact that their cultural background will have in different intercultural settings in the future. She understood the value of providing students with intercultural experiences which allow them to build the skill of intercultural communication. She purposely organized her classroom so that groups of students from diverse backgrounds were able to work closely with one another.

Conclusion

For the magnet school teacher connecting with students of diverse cultural backgrounds seemed to come easy. The teacher used methods such as TPR and exaggerated gestures and movements to explain concepts to students, which was valuable. However, her background of being Hispanic and speaking fluent Spanish was invaluable to her students. She was able to connect with her students of Hispanic backgrounds in a way that was not possible for the mainstream teacher. When she spoke Spanish in the classroom it allowed students who knew little-to-no English to feel as though their teacher had a vested interest in bridging the gap and meeting them where they were. It also allowed students who only spoke Spanish to come to her with questions or concerns they had without the need for translation or dictionaries.

The students in this class who spoke Spanish as a first language were able to communicate with the teacher from their very first day. Students who spoke another language faced barriers common to many other ESL settings.

They relied on other methods of communicating with the teacher before they developed English skills. They were provided with translation dictionaries or allowed to use laptops or phones as a translation device if needed. The teacher used gestures when speaking to them and worked closely with them to provide support where she could. Because the student population was largely Hispanic and many of the teachers were bilingual, it was not uncommon for students to pick up Spanish at the same time that they were learning English. Creating situations in which, for instance, a Senegalese student whose first language was French will learn basic phrases and slang in Spanish from peers concurrently with English vocab. Culture and language are shared freely.

The students in the mainstream course did not have the extra support of having a teacher who spoke their home language. Spanish and Arabic speaking students alike faced barriers to communication with the mainstream teacher. It was important to the mainstream teacher that these students knew that their backgrounds should not create barriers between them in the classroom. She did not focus on how differences can be respectfully addressed in the classroom, but instead encouraged students to be aware of all the ways that they are the same. Part of fostering intercultural communication and respect is understanding that culture and expectations are important to their background and identity. Because of this, the magnet school teacher had a different approach to classroom differences.

The magnet teacher pointed out that even the Hispanic students in her class come from very different cultures, despite being grouped by language. What is most important to the magnet school teacher in this situation is that a culture of respect is maintained. To her, this means communicating in ways that show that the home culture of students is valued and respected. She works to promote this culture by mixing groups of people in the classroom. The seating chart changes frequently and with these changes she likes to have people from diverse cultures working closely alongside each other. She wants students to be prepared to represent themselves and their culture outside of the classroom.

Unlike the mainstream teacher, the magnet school teacher does not shy away from acknowledging the cultural differences in her student population. She is always aware of the cultural backgrounds present and acknowledges the differences that make up the classroom. She uses the experience to prepare students to be great intercultural communicators both in and out of class.

Future Implications

The number of students in Memphis city schools who do not speak English as a first language continues to rise. It is as important as ever that these students feel as though they have a safe and supportive learning environment. Teachers who have strong intercultural communication skills are an essential part of cultivating that environment.

Working with ESL teachers to provide education on the needs of a supportive intercultural environment is important to the future success of the ESL students within Memphis. Long-term, multiple-site studies on teachers' knowledge of intercultural communication and how they implement it into their classroom structure and curriculum are needed to see the full scope of this issue across the school system. The information gathered during this research and in future studies should act as a measure for determining what assets and education ESL teachers in Memphis must be provided to assist them in navigating their intercultural classrooms and supporting diverse student populations.

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