Chapter 19
Deepening Understanding of Multicultural Online Education:
Teaching Presence for English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, online education provides an alternative instructional medium for teachers and students in United States educational systems and the world at large. Technology transforms how, when, and where students can learn, as well as the trends and use of instructional tools by students and teachers in the teaching-learning process. Online learning has developed during the past two decades to support traditional face-to-face classroom instruction and provides an opportunity for students to "interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, p. 7). The increase in minority students within U.S. schools has created a rise in socio-cultural, personal histories, educational, religious, and language/linguistic differences within the virtual classroom, requiring online instructors who teach in these contexts to be prepared to meet students' diverse needs. Despite the increase in online instruction, many questions remain unanswered with regards to how one group of minorities, particularly, English learners, adjust to instructional processes and teacher presence in an online learning environment. This chapter addresses the role of teacher presence in multicultural and online education, potential challenges of online learning for English learners, and teacher presence in multicultural online education.

INTRODUCTION

The population of minority students, and particularly, students classified as English language learners (ELLs) or English learners (ELs) has grown steadily in the past three decades. About 8.7 million United States children have at least one-foreign-born parent, a figure which has doubled since 1990. A recent survey of over 50 United States online learning program directors who belong to a consortium of colleges and universities that offer fully online university degree programs responded to a survey in October 2002 in which they projected that the proportion of their students enrolled in totally online courses would increase from 20.2% to 36.6% in the next few years, but that those enrolled in "blended" courses would increase at an even faster rate, from 7.6% to 21.1% in the near future. In addition, the percentage of public school students who are ELLs in the U.S. has increased. For example, the percentage of ELLs increased from 8.7% in 2003 to 9.1% in 2011/2012. In contrast, during the latter part of this period, between 2009 /2010 and 2011/2012, the overall percentage of ELLs remained about the same (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Reports show that foreign students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United Stated increased from 547,873 in 2001 to 690,923 in 2009. This growing ELL population has drawn the attention of educators to offer suitable instructional strategies that meet ELLs' learning needs. The large number of ELLs in U.S. schools requires urgency in education reform if U.S. schools are to provide equitable learning opportunities and environments. The growth of diversity among students' population requires educators/institutions to seek and choose appropriate teaching methods and learning content in school, and to solve the cultural differences that exist between teachers and students who speak English as a second language (Taliaferro, 2011). During the past two decades, online instructors have attempted to teach to meet the needs of students in an increasingly diverse and inequitable society and interconnected world (Merryfield, 2001), but the questions of how mainstream classroom teachers can teach effectively in a multicultural learning environment continue to remain unaddressed. Despite long existing calls for mainstream teachers to change their beliefs, values, and attitudes toward English as a second language students (Clair, 1995), the problem persists even in the wake of new modes of teaching and learning in online education.

If language pedagogy and multiculturalism are to be leveraged successfully in the teacher education curriculum, and specifically, in educational technology courses, teachers and educators in all content areas must begin to demonstrate the rigor and systematic reflective teaching that allows for re-examination of their own beliefs and practices (Major & Brock, 2003). Several researchers such as Bandura (1982), Gay (2000), and Nieto (2000) contend that the cross-cultural perceptions, beliefs and behaviors of classroom teachers can negatively affect the academic and social development of their students. Research indicates further that these beliefs and behaviors are instilled early in one's personal life (Richardson, 1996).

Technology educators responsible for inculcating the ideals of multicultural education can foster the kind of dedication necessary for facilitating educational experiences in which all students have equitable opportunities in a digital classroom. In this context, 'digital equity' is taken to mean ensuring that every student, regardless of socioeconomic status, language, race, geography, physical restrictions, cultural background, gender, or other attribute historically associated with inequities, has equitable access to advanced technologies, communication and information resources. Sufficient evidence is available (e.g., Beckett et al., 2003; Brown, 2004a; Damarin, 1998; Merryfield, 2001; Orly, 2007; Roblyer, et al., 1996; Sleeter & Tettagah, 2002; Wassell & Crouch, 2008) to reflect the ways in which technology is associated with multicultural education. Much of this literature indicates that professionals consists primarily of

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