

Chapter 26

Culturally Inclusive Teaching of Adult English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

The growing diversity of the United States population continues to impact public education in many ways. One key area has been the increased awareness of the need to adapt learning environments to enhance the motivation of students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. Culturally responsive teaching is one approach designed to increase motivation by replacing mainstream teaching practices with those grounded in students' experiences and ways of knowing. This multicultural approach is enacted in many adult English language classes throughout the country. It is the purpose of this chapter to highlight those practices for the larger adult education community.

INTRODUCTION

Describing an adult English language class as diverse is almost an understatement. Throughout the years, colleagues from other programs have commented on this diversity, referring to the adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class as a “mini United Nations”, as learners from China, Colombia, Ecuador, Iraq, Iran, Mexico, Panama, Syria, just to name a few, shared our crowded classroom. These same colleagues frequently asked, “How do you understand everyone? Do you speak all of their languages?”, to which I replied, “No, but I speak their cultures.” - Author, 25-year veteran adult English language teacher

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The growing diversity of the U.S. population continues to impact public education in many ways. One key area has been the increased awareness of the need to adapt learning environments to enhance the achievement of students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. Culturally responsive teaching is one approach designed to increase motivation by replacing mainstream teaching practices with those grounded in students' experiences and ways of knowing. In contrast to traditional pedagogies, the culturally responsive teaching (CRT) framework places students' cultures at the core of the learning process and utilizes the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). The adult English language classroom provides an illuminating example of effective culturally inclusive teaching practices. While many of these practices attend to the ethnic diversity most readily evident in this unique environment, educators also engage students' additional identities in recognition of the intersectionality of various facets of who their students are. Studies have revealed that CRT practices are widely and frequently enacted in adult English language classes throughout the country, often without the explicit awareness of the instructors. These practices utilized to create this inclusive environment serve as a model of teaching praxis for other adult learning environments. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to highlight those practices for the larger adult education community.

Background

It's easy to focus on the nationalities of our students and forget that they are different in so many other ways, too. One day, I stopped and noticed that I kept referring to my students as their nationalities. For example, I spoke about "Salah, my Tunisian student" or Patience, my Liberian student". But, it dawned on me that Salah was also an engineer who had emigrated later in life. He was both a father and a grandfather, as well as a cancer survivor. Patience was not only a Liberian refugee, but she was a mother who had interrupted schooling due to civil unrest. While I thought I was being welcoming to them by asking questions about their countries and cultures, I had inadvertently pigeon holed them by their ethnicity. That was when I realized that there was more to my students' identities than their nationalities. - Bernadette, Adult English Language Teacher

The number and ethnic composition of immigrants coming to the United States has been changing steadily since the 1970s (Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010). An examination of this foreign-born population provides insight into this diversity, yielding profiles of potential students in adult English language classes. A foreign-born individual is anyone who is not granted U.S. citizenship at birth and excludes individuals born in Puerto Rico, any U.S. territories, or to U.S. parents abroad. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), as of 2009, the foreign-born comprised 12.5% of the total U.S. population, numbering over 35 million strong and residing primarily in California, New York, Texas, and Florida (Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010).

Although immigration has been a source of population growth throughout U.S. history, the ethnic and linguistic background of recent immigrants has changed in the past fifty years. In 1960, 75% of the foreign-born population was comprised primarily of European immigrants; in 2009, over 80% of the foreign-born population is from Latin America (53.1%) and Asia (27.7%) (Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010). When examined by ethnicity, or country of origin, Mexicans make up the largest single group of foreign-born individuals, followed by China, the Philippines and India. Therefore, Spanish is the predominant language spoken by the largest group of foreign-born individuals, but there were at least

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