

Chapter 13

Replacing the “Melting Pot” With a “Colorful Mixed Salad” in the Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In a world where the progress in technology, the affirmation of social media platforms, and gaming have made the universe a much smaller place, it should be natural to recreate this boundless space in our classroom and more so in our language classroom. Nevertheless, this is not always the case as the idea of a multicultural, diverse, and multilingual class is still opposed by many educators. Some fear that focusing on multiculturalism could endanger any sense of shared tradition, values, and beliefs in ‘one particular’ society (i.e., American society). In addition to that, language teachers might fear that embracing multiculturalism would take attention away from the culture they are there to teach. The debate becomes even more interesting when we move to multilingualism, especially in the language classroom. The author proposes that we start seeing the language classroom as a ‘mixed salad bowl’ where all the students mix but get to keep their own identity and culture.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where the progress in technology, the affirmation of social media platforms, and gaming have made the universe a much smaller place, it should be natural to recreate this boundless space in our classroom and more so in our language classroom. Nevertheless, this is not always the case as the idea of a multicultural, diverse, and multilingual class is still opposed by many educators. Some fear that focusing on multiculturalism could endanger any sense of shared tradition, values, and beliefs in ‘one particular’ society (i.e., American society). In addition to that, language teachers might fear that embracing multiculturalism would take attention away from the culture they are there to teach. The debate becomes even more interesting when we move to multilingualism, especially in the language classroom.

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As far as Second Language Acquisition research is concerned, there is still a division between those scholars who believe that only L2 should be used in the language classroom and those who advocate that there is also a role for L1. The more ‘conservative’ approach to language teaching would like to create a ‘melting pot’ in the classroom where all the students amalgamate uniformly by *speaking* the same language and *sharing* the same culture. Among the supportive arguments for banning L1 altogether, there is the justification that students have limited exposure to L2 outside of the classroom; hence in the L2 classroom, learners should be exposed only to the target language. Another argument often used in favor of using only L2 is that L1 can distract students from the end goal, learning another language.

Instead, this chapter proposes that we start seeing the language classroom as a ‘tossed salad’ where all the students mix but get to keep their own identity and culture. In this article, the author will first briefly review some literature about multiculturalism and literature that supports the role of L1 in a language classroom. Then, she would like to discuss the role of translation as a pedagogical tool in the L2 class to enhance and utilize the linguistic diversity the students bring with them.

Byrd Clark (2012) states that pedagogy should help students utilize the various linguistics resources they already possess to understand better the relationship between their set of knowledge and the new language and culture they are learning. It follows that learning a second language is certainly more than learning a bunch of words and rules. Learning a second language means learning a new world, discovering a new self, and reconciling the new self and world with the old ones.

The author believes that translation can help do just that. When translating a text, even if it is just a proverb or slang, we need to identify with the author, the culture and understand the context in which s/he uttered the words. Then we proceed to translate all of it into our own language, culture, and context (thus bringing in our linguistic resources and cultural background.) The act of translating creates a bridge that unifies all the linguistic diversities present in the class and lets learners utilize their L1 without the stigma of guilt (which they feel in a classroom that bans the use of L1.) Ultimately, this chapter wants to prove that allowing students to bank on their own heritage to learn a new language and culture is a powerful way to turn linguistic diversity, which many see as an obstacle, into an efficient pedagogical tool.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation as a tool to learn a second language has been around for the longest time. The first appearance of translated text can be dated back to the Mesopotamian era, approximately around the second millennium BC. By the end of the 18th century, translation from L2 into L1 was the most common way to practice and learn a foreign language. The majority of textbooks favored this method of learning and teaching a second language, so the base for the ‘grammar-translation method’ was set. Translation became the elected method to teach a second language. However, it focused primarily on teaching the grammar and syntax of the target language. The leading idea of the grammar-translation method was to teach that language structures and grammar rules solely through text translation. Students were often given artificially constructed and decontextualized sentences to translate, and no space (or minimal space) was given to culture and communication. This practice reduced learning a language to a ‘mechanical’ and somehow artificial experience which was a great injustice to both language as a living thing and translation as a possible communication tool. Furthermore, the emphasis on word-by-word translation communicated the false idea that a literal translation from L1 to L2 is possible. However, in reality, literal translation often leads to a nonsensical end product in L2.

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