

## TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN CULTURAL AND BILINGUAL BACKDROP

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English is a difficult language to learn and it can be a difficult language to teach. Teachers who teach ESL have the advantage of teaching learners who all have the same mother tongue, making it easier to explain the content and grammar. After years of learning at school, and three years of compulsory English at undergraduate level, students cannot speak a correct sentence in English, write resume or even read an English composition. This is no exaggeration. Complaints such as these are voiced by parents, teachers and examiners. They fail to use the language effectively in day to day communication. This problem is very acute with the students of ESL. We need to continuously identify these problems and challenges, analyze these in order to bring about remedial steps.

Negative attitude towards learning and using English is still prevalent in students with ESL. This attitude can neither be completely negative or completely positive. It is paradoxical. They like English but believe that it is very difficult a language to learn. Their negative attitude along with their attitude towards their English language teachers, whom they are afraid of as symbol of authority, de motivates them. Their negative attitude is stronger is than the positive and therefore it is a great challenge for the teacher to break off the negative attitude of the students and teach the language effectively. But with effective teaching methods, a teacher can help students improve their language. A persistent problem faced by many English teachers is to sustain genuine interest in students in learning and using English language. One solution is to develop a continuous program in and outside classroom language activities which help students to acquire language skills. The famous proverb” Don’t give your students fish, but teach them how to fish” is perhaps true in language teaching. It has been observed that by memorizing set of grammatical rules and answers to the questions, students become good test takers, and yet they are not able to speak and write competently when they graduate from colleges. Teachers need to find creative ways to teach the language and increase students’ motivation to learn the language and to eventually appreciate the language. Undoubtedly, possessing the knowledge of various teaching methods is crucial but it is important for a teacher to understand the cultural and bilingual background of the learner before applying any particular method of teaching.

This paper considers the challenges faced by language minority students and their struggle to learn the English language and be accepted in a society that is unwilling to accept

diversity. These students are in a strange land trying to maintain a sense of identity related to their native culture. Language and culture constitute an integral part of the English language. Language is not an 'autonomous construct' but social practice both creating and created by 'the structures and forces of social institutions within which we live and function'.

Everyday language is "tinged" with cultural bits and pieces – a fact most people seem to ignore. By the very act of talking, we assume social and cultural roles, which are so deeply entrenched in our thought processes as to go unnoticed. Interestingly, 'culture defines not only what its members should think or learn but also what they should ignore or treat as irrelevant'. For example, a student tries to identify the meaning of a certain English word in his mother tongue. Students' cultural heritage must not be dismissed but instead utilized to enhance their learning. It is also important to identify potential areas of cultural interference where two cultures may come into conflict or overlap. Teachers must prepare themselves to be effective instructors of culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Learners can readily transfer concepts learned at home in their first language to the second language. If "bilingualism" is then extended to embrace "biculturalism", a unique opportunity is provided for exchange among learners, which allows utilizing their cultural and linguistic heritage while learning new skills in learning language. Learner's gain "a sense of empowerment or confidence when the content and ideas discussed are relevant to their experiences and understandings". For example, while teaching grammar students mother tongue helps a lot to understand the concept. For effective teaching of ESL to culturally and linguistically diverse students teachers must be concerned with students' learning styles. Content will be meaningful only if it takes into account the student's prior knowledge.

Bilingual education must include multicultural awareness and respect for different cultures to facilitate in acquiring a second language learning skills and culture, while maintaining an appreciation of their own cultural heritage. The link between effective teaching and learning and the teachers' formulation of learning goals that are appropriate to the student takes on even greater significance where effective bilingual instruction is the aim. The unique linguistic and academic needs of the bilingual student must be taken into consideration when formulating and communicating learning goals. To facilitate learning, teachers need to accommodate students' background knowledge and skills.

Many students internalized basic values and beliefs of their native culture. This is the hidden element of culture that is so important to successful bilingual education. Mc Combs defined learning as "an individual process of constructing meaning from information and experience, filtered through each individual's unique perceptions, thoughts and feelings". For example, articles are taught in the ESL classroom, where it is important to know that pronunciation is more important than the spelling. It can be easily explained in their mother tongue how to pronounce the word and thereby selecting the appropriate article. This develops a positive self concept and minimizes the conflict between cultures. As educators we need to

realize that education occurs in the context of a social climate. The reflections of social aspects on individuals have a major impact on how well ESL student learn English. Many students are made fun of when they try to speak English also when they speak their native language; so they end up silent and withdraw from participation. This further interferes with their learning of the language. Teachers can use strategies based on social interaction theory and create classroom conditions that foster learning and overcome barriers to meaningful instructions. Culture and language are interrelated and cultural knowledge is required to comprehend meaning or participate in an activity. ESL learners need to learn the words in English as well as the cultural background that gives words their English meaning. The information in our text books and lessons is culturally embedded. In cultural and bilingual backdrop the important questions that need to be answered are:

Is the class learning English for examination?

Taking reasons, as well as language acquisition needs into consideration when planning a class or individual instruction is crucial for a successful learning experience. When a student understands reasons for learning English, he can better plan his learning strategy. In the classroom he can help the teacher identify needs and desires.

Are they familiar with the language?

Students with ESL find it difficult to learn the language as compared to the native English speaking students.

Do they have the study material or workbooks?

Is there a language laboratory?

The more the learning resources, the easier it will be to employ different ways of teaching. Once having answered these questions it is up to the teacher to determine the goals and provide the means with which to meet them. Teaching English as a second language is a great challenge because performance in examinations is considered more important than for other purpose.

In the conclusions we can note that our English as a second language students will remain torn between two world's – Cultural and Bilingual, until society truly embraces diversity and the nation where biculturalism and bilingualism are assets.

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