

The Importance of Considering Students’ Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds: Languages Are Friends, Not Enemies! Certamente l’Italiano e’ l’amico di tutti!

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Abstract—Every language represents a different worldview, a different way to see the world and life. Language is a door that allows us to have access to a distinct reality that provides us with the opportunity to expand our horizons. Also, it gives us the opportunity to grow as human beings, which is one of the many reasons why second language (L2) learning should be interesting and exciting. Moreover, it should be characterized by our own personal development. In this paper, the importance and value of language is emphasized as well as the benefits of second language (L2) learning, for example, the learning of Italian in Mexico. Being bilingual is to be enriched by two languages and cultures. Therefore, it is underlined in this article that L2 learning does not mean abandoning our first language and culture. In other words, quality and real bilingualism must be about honouring and respecting our own language and culture while enriching ourselves through the learning of another language and cosmovision. This can be achieved through culturally relevant teaching where students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds are considered in their L2 learning process. By doing so, cultural and linguistic diversity as well as sensitivity would be promoted. Let’s not forget that languages are a great tool to bring the community together as languages are friends, not enemies!

Index Terms—culture, language, teaching, learning, community

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the many reasons that motivates us to write this paper is our passion for languages. We are always amazed by their beauty and by all the different aspects they represent. In our opinion, a language is not a simple code or a set of words together. A language is a lot more than that. According to Coco (n.d. cited in Nadal 2006), our language is the home of our soul. Through our mother tongue, “we come to know, represent, name, and act upon the world” (McCarty 2003, p. 148). It is through languages that we can connect with others and learn from them. This also allows us to learn about ourselves. “A language is a tool for human communication, which functions as the social link between the members of a society and those from different ones” (Syamalakumari, 2004, para. 1). Vygotsky (1978) postulated that language is one of the elements that define a person’s cultural identity, as language is the basis for thinking and communication. These ideas are emphasized and enriched in this paper.



Figure 1- Undergraduate language learners

Languages are more than words!

Syamalakumari (2004) points out that:

language creates beautiful literary marvels, which remain eternal masterpieces influencing the lives of people. Language creates and protects because it maintains people with a beautiful style and nuances to bring cohesion in spite of diversity within a socially hierarchical world. (p. 2)

Therefore, “language is the greatest creator and protector...it is the supreme tool for all human beings” (Syamalakumari, 2004, para. 1). I agree with Sadeem (2009) that:

language brought the dawn of knowledge; turning over the leaf to doubting, questioning, reasoning, explaining and understanding against the centuries old simple animalistic instinct of following. What use could be any scientific invention to human kind if we were unable to communicate? Despite being a product of human invention, the language encompasses the entire human needs of communication and expression. That is the real beauty of the language. (p. 2)

Because of the beauty of languages and all they represent, it is important to preserve all of them because each language strengthens the magnificence of our world. According to the National Geographic Enduring Voices Project (n.d.) “language defines a culture, through the people who speak it and what it allows speakers to say. Words that describe a particular cultural practice or idea may not translate precisely into another language. Many endangered languages have rich oral cultures with stories, songs, and histories passed on to younger generations, but no written forms. With the extinction of a language, an entire culture is lost” (National Geographic Enduring Voices Project, n.d., para. 5). Therefore, it is imperative to care for the preservation of languages especially for those in danger of extinction as it has been the case of indigenous languages.

There is knowledge that is encoded only in oral languages. This is particularly evident in oral languages in regard to Aboriginal people and their relationship to nature, since they “have interacted closely with the natural world for thousands of years, [so] often have profound insights into local lands, plants, animals, and ecosystems” (National Geographic Enduring Voices Project n.d., p. 4). It is fundamental to respect and maintain languages because it benefits environmental understanding and conservation efforts (National Geographic Enduring Voices Project n.d.). Scollon and Scollon (1981) argue that:

each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. Although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are, nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of each person's self-awareness, identity, and interpersonal relationships. (p. 89)

Reyhner (1995) adds that “these values are psychological imperatives that help generate and maintain an individual's level of comfort and self-assurance, and, consequently, success in life. In the normal course of events these values are absorbed along with one's mother tongue in the first years of life” (para.3).

Another reason why languages are important is the history they carry. People's history is passed down through their language. Thus, when the language is lost, it might imply that valuable information about the early history of the community is also lost. Woodbury (1997) suggests that:

the loss of human languages also severely limits what linguists can learn about human cognition. By studying what all of the world's languages have in common, we can find out what is and isn't possible in a human language. This in turn tells us important things about the human mind and how it is that children are able to learn a complex system like language so quickly and easily. The fewer languages there are to study, the less we will be able to learn about the human mind. (p. 11).

II. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

As stated before, it is essential to preserve languages because they are a unique tool by which we can build our thoughts and can create, imagine and relate with other people (INALI, 2008). Also, we can dream through this beautiful tool, which allows us to communicate our feelings, ideas, concerns and hopes. In addition, it allows us to learn from others and share our learning experiences with other people as well as to learn about our history and project our future. Language is a human incomparable resource (INALI, 2008).



Figure 2- Tsotsil children in Chenalhó Chiapas, Mexico

When we learn our mother tongue, we also learn to be part of a culture that significantly influences our way to perceive the world and the vision we build of this. When we feel that our language and culture are valued by other people and that they are recognized as legitimate in social contexts, our self-image and sociocultural identity are of pride and confidence (Galdames; Walqui & Gustafson, n.d.). This is one of the reasons why students' languages and cultures need to be considered at school. This institution plays such a fundamental role in our life because other than the family, it is the main context in which we can live experiences of social interaction by which we can consolidate our identity and enrich it. That is why, I insist on the importance of taking into account students' first language and culture in their second language learning process. Yes, it is possible to learn a second language while still being connected to what is meaningful to us; to our language and culture, for example.

Being bilingual and reasons for it

Being bilingual does not imply to give up our mother tongue. Being bilingual is to be enriched by two languages and cultures. Defining bilingualism has been a subject of much debate. Diebold (1964) has shown that defining the point at which the learner of a second language becomes bilingual is either arbitrary or difficult to determine. Genesee (2008) points out that "language acquisition is an everyday and yet magical feat of childhood. Within three to five years, virtually all children become fully competent in at least one language. We accept this as totally normal" (p. 1).

He states that "we are rarely concerned on whether or not it will happen although it is the most complex accomplishment of early childhood. Even more outstanding are those children who simultaneously acquire proficiency in two, or more, languages during the preschool years. Within the same time frame as it takes monolingual children to learn one language, bilingual children learn two languages and become adept at using them in socially diverse and appropriate ways" (Genesee, 2008, para. 1).

Knezek (1997) declares that "humans speak a wide variety of different languages, and very young children of any race or ethnic background can learn to speak and understand any of these if exposed to appropriate models at the proper time in development" (p. 3). Our globalized world requires us to be bilingual or multilingual. The need for bilingualism might arise from different reasons at both the individual and societal levels. Gutiérrez (2009) defines individual bilingualism as "the ability to indifferently use with the same competence and in the same situations two different languages" (p. 3). However, in bilingualism as a social fact, there is neither equality between the two languages in presence nor equality of status and use. The coexistence between the two languages involves tension (Gutiérrez, 2009).

"There are different determinants of the need for bilingualism, for example, historical factors and events such as conquests and colonialisms, which made the newcomer wield much influence in all spheres of life" (Salle, n.d., para. 7). Because "the most powerful groups in any society are able to force their language upon the less powerful" (Romaine, 1995, p. 23), all official transactions are done in the foreign language. Examples of this are most African countries as well as Latin American countries.

Another determinant of the need for bilingualism is geographical proximity (De Mejía, 2002), which naturally leads to the need for communication among the members of the two communities. "Since language might pose as a barrier to effective communication, members of the two communities each learn the other's language, which leads to bilingualism" (Salle, n.d., para. 8). An example of this is in Europe where the need for foreign language learning has been traditionally promoted in the light of the geographical proximity of many nation-states speaking different language varieties (De Mejía, 2002). Altarriba and Heredia (2008) point out that in Scandinavia, for instance, proficiency in two or more languages is encouraged and expected due to geographic proximity among countries. Bilingualism might also arise from migration:

Either collective or individual migrants fleeing from war or searching individual attainment have settled in foreign linguistic communities. For purposes of communication and job hunting, they have been compelled to learn the languages of host communities, thus becoming bilingual. (Salle, n.d., p.10)

The massive displacement of people into a new territory can be done, not to implement a dominion or to establish a new political order, but on the contrary, to put themselves at the service of the local population. This usually raises a collective situation of bilingualism. Examples of this are the large amounts of Irish, Italian or Hispanic speakers who have migrated to the United States and have become bilinguals (Gutiérrez, 2009; Ramírez, 1985). Also, this situation can be observed in immigrants in Canada and most western European nations (Tiersman, 2010).

Salle (n.d.) states that bilingualism might also arise from public or international relations. She provides the example of countries such as Cameroon and Nigeria where the need arises for citizens to interact at the national level, which makes them use a lingua franca. Gutiérrez (2009) declares that a country with different linguistic communities can establish a federal political system that does not imply the legal predominance of none of the languages in presence. This is the case of Switzerland, Canada and Belgium, for example. A nation is bilingual, but its different territories and the individuals that constitute them might not necessarily be bilingual. "In a federal and plurilinguistic country, only the administrators in the federal government need to be bilingual" (p. 12). However, the relationships among different people provoke a certain amount of individuals who become bilinguals, which is not the result of a political or social pressure, but a consequence of these relationships. The contact among communities with speakers of different languages is one of the factors that leads to bilingualism, that is, there exists frequent contact among people from different countries. This increases the number of people who need to learn and use a second language (Gutiérrez, 2009).

It is essential to remember that regardless the reason we have to become bilingual, the learning of a second language does not mean that our first language and culture should be abandoned. We can add a new language to our life without having to walk away from our own cultural and linguistic identity. Let's not forget that languages are friends, not enemies!

Why study a second language?

Yes, there are many reasons that influence people to become bilinguals. The learning of a second language has become more common in recent times as we are living in a globalized world. The benefits of studying a second language (L2) are many, for example, people who learn an L2 improve their overall reasoning skills, do better in their studies, understand the mechanics and implications of language in an abstract way, and simply understand the world better (Cole, 2012). The benefits of learning a second language are endless as well as the reasons that motivate students to learn an L2.



Figure 3- Intermediate students of Spanish

We have experienced that there are undergraduate students who need to study a language because it is a requirement in their program. On the other hand, there are students who take a language class as they are interested or motivated to learn the L2 because of different reasons, for example, they like it, they want to travel to the country where it is spoken or they want to study or work abroad. Also, there are people who learn a language in order to expand their social networks. These people have a *specific* goal that encourages them to study an L2. With no doubt, there are many language learners all over world because our globalized world requires us to do.

We have observed that the number of students that decide to learn a second language is increasing in certain contexts, for example, we now have more learners of Italian at universities in Mexico, which is positive. These students have different reasons that motivate them to learn *l'Italiano* in specific.

The study of Italian as a second language and cultural and linguistic diversity



Figure 4: All figures in this section are related to Italy's culture

Learners of Italian in the Mexican context, for instance, state that this language is studied by initiative most of the time as it is perceived as a beautiful language. Students feel curious about it because they like the Italian culture and they are interested in learning more about Italy's cuisine, history, music and traditions. According to Emory University (2014):

knowing Italian is greatly beneficial in several career fields. Italy is a world leader in the culinary arts, interior design, fashion, graphic design, furniture design, machine tool manufacturing, robotics, electromechanical machinery, shipbuilding, space engineering, construction machinery, and transportation equipment. (p. 2)

Emory University (2014) reminds us that “Italy’s cultural importance spans from antiquity through the present, of which the Roman period and the Renaissance are perhaps the two most influential moments” (para. 3). “Some of the most famous Western artists, from Giotto to Michelangelo, were Italian. Knowledge of Italian is vital to understand the contexts of this art” (Emory University, 2014, p. 3).

Another reason that attracts people to learn Italian is the work of writers and thinkers such as Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarch and Machiavelli and Gramsci:

Since Roman times, Italy has exported its literature and culture to other parts of Europe and beyond, in the areas of Latin literature, *Romanitas*, humanism, opera, film, science, political thought, fashion, design, and cuisine. Knowing Italian allows you to understand, appreciate, and analyze this treasury of human expression. Italy has the cultures, landscapes, and histories to fill a lifetime of investigation. Knowing Italian places you in a position to explore Italy’s past and present from the most fulfilling vantage point. (Emory University, 2014, p. 6)



Figure 5- Michelangelo’s piece

Certainly, Italy’s language, culture and people have very much to offer to those who decide to learn Italian as an L2. It is worthwhile mentioning that Italy is an amazing country and that Italian is as beautiful as the other languages in the world. Let’s remember that from a linguistics point of view, all languages are beautiful and have the same value. When we talk about languages, we also talk about people, that is, about their speakers. That is why; all languages are valuable and deserve respect because they contribute to the cultural and linguistic richness of their nation (Rippberger, 1992). When we say that a language is better or superior than other, we are also referring to its speakers. Languages represent their people and the way the world works to them. Our *like* for a certain language is a matter of preference, which is valid and positive. But from a linguistic point of view, no language is inferior or ugly, *tutte le lingue sono belle*. Yes, all languages are beautiful! We believe that it is important that language teachers portray this idea. By doing so, the possibilities for respect for cultural and linguistic diversity might increase.

III. LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teaching and learning of a language is a tool for personal growth and social progress. Knowing and speaking an L2 can imply positive changes in our life, for instance, the modification of certain attitudes of how we perceive others as well as our exterior environment. Teaching and learning are both enriching processes for the student and the teacher as both of them learn and benefit each other. L2 learning implies to expand our horizons and to enrich ourselves. It also implies respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, that is, respect for other people. After all, we are all human beings regardless our nationality, the language we speak and the culture we belong, so we all share that in common.

Language teaching and learning should be a significant process because the acquisition of a language helps us become aware of cultural and linguistic differences, but at the same time it helps us build the bridge that allows us to go beyond the differences that separate us (The Report of the LSA Foreign Language Review Committee, 2004). Sadly, cultural and linguistic diversity in some contexts has been considered a “problem”, that is, a weapon that separates societies. We feel that it is possible to use such a diversity to bring people together instead of using it to divide them. For example, the creation and implementation of quality bilingual programs in indigenous communities in Latin America could be one of the ways to unify people. We need bilingual programs that take into account indigenous students’ own language and culture as well as the national language and culture of their country. Indigenous languages can and should be used as languages of instruction and also for academic tasks (Del Carpio, 2012).

It is true that we live in a modern changing world that requests us to be updated and to acquire new knowledge in order to better respond to the needs of today’s society. The learning of a language provides us with the opportunity to be prepared to face our changing reality and to participate in societies that are similar or diverse to ours (in multilingual societies, for example). Learning a second language allows us to enrich our vision of the world, which gives us the opportunity to grow as human beings. L2 learning can be interesting and exciting and can be characterized by our own personal development.

If instructors promote respect for cultural and linguistic diversity through their teaching practice, students might reinforce their desire to learn the target language, but at the same they may also be inspired to appreciate their own language and culture. The purpose of learning a language should always be to broaden our horizons, not to reduce them.

Re-thinking the role of the language teacher

Vilar-Beltrán (n.d.) emphasizes that essentially teachers have two major roles in the classroom. The first role is to create the conditions under which learning can take place, which is the social side of teaching and the second role is “to impart, by a variety of means, knowledge to their learners: the task-oriented side of teaching” (p. 4). I would modify this idea by saying that the second role of the teacher is to take the initiative to stimulate students’ knowledge in order to enrich what they already know by adding new *information* to it. Teachers definitely play different roles, for example, they are motivators, advisors, guides, facilitators, etc. All these different roles provide teachers with the opportunity to contribute to students’ lives. Rose (1997) argues that an educator must be an open mind person that should respect students’ diversity. The real educator should love his/her learners, which can be done through his/her teaching practice; his/her concern for students and his/her interest in each individual. From my own experience as a language teacher, I can say that students can immediately feel when their teacher loves them and cares for them. This might increase students’ motivation to learn and to do their best at school.

It is vital to encourage students to believe in themselves and to be grateful with life. In my opinion, teachers need to nurture grateful hearts in their students. As a result, learners may care more about their society and feel encouraged to contribute to it. The educator’s mission needs to be to prepare his/her students for life, not for an exam unless it is “*el examen de la vida*” (the exam of life).

In our point of view, the teacher has the opportunity to unify the community through his/her work. This in part can be done by creating a nice atmosphere in the classroom; a classroom full of life, good energy, happiness, friendship, knowledge, respect, etc. Also, considering students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds can help us create a harmonious atmosphere (Williams, 2007). This can lead to a sense of community (Sergiovanni, 1994) in the classroom where all cultures are valued and respected and students feel integrated rather than isolated. Sergiovanni argues (1994) that people have the essential need for a sense of belonging, that is, the need to feel related to other human beings as well as to values and ideas. Unfortunately, these are commonly unfulfilled in school because of the way they are perceived and run (Sergiovanni, 1994).

He points out that “community building must be the basis for school reform efforts that seek to improve teaching and learning; all else will come naturally when authentic communities flourish” (Sergiovanni, 1994 as cited in Thompson, 2014, para. 10). It is also important that teachers reflect on how they teach, what they teach and if they consider they give students enough opportunities to use their own language and culture in the L2 classroom. Smith (1999) states that “learning involves participation in a community of practice” (p. 1) therefore running schools as real communities where all students feel involved and cared for can be a way to bring people together instead of separating them.



Figure 6: Learners of Spanish

Indeed, the teacher plays different roles through which he/she can achieve diverse objectives, for instance, to unify the community. Society has been separated due to social, political, cultural and economic issues, so we consider that through a culturally relevant teaching practice where students’ languages, cultures and realities are considered, teachers can contribute to *heal the wounds* caused by the problems occurring in today’s society.

The language classroom needs to be a place where students feel integrated rather than isolated. Let’s remember that school is a social institution and education a social process (Dewey, 1897) therefore cultural and linguistic diversity can be used as a tool to unify the community. We think that if students are provided with opportunities to be connected to their first language and culture while learning the L2, this can have a positive impact on their attitudes towards the L2 and on the way they perceive the school and education in general.

Recognizing and taking into account students’ language and culture as the point of departure to learn a second language is to accept the richness that each individual brings to the classroom. Both students’ language and culture as well as the target ones can be used to benefit students while learning. Promoting this richness also means to honour the pupil’s culture. It is not enough for instructors “to passively accept students’ linguistic and cultural diversity in the school” (Cummins, 2003, p. 16). Teachers must be proactive and take the initiative to affirm students’ linguistic identity by encouraging them to write in their mother tongues in addition to the second language they are learning “(and

generally create an instructional climate where the linguistic and cultural experience of the whole student is actively accepted and validated” (Cummins, 2003, p. 5).

Cummins (2003) highlights that:

the cultural, linguistic and intellectual capital of our societies will increase dramatically when we stop seeing culturally and linguistically diverse students as ‘a problem to be solved’ and instead open our eyes to the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources they bring from their homes to our schools and societies. (p. 22)

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Languages are more than a set of words because of all they involve. Languages represent their communities as well as their values, worldviews, traditions, ways of thinking, etc. Therefore, it is important that both language teaching and learning become a meaningful and enriching experience where students feel connected to who they are and to what is important to them. A way to do so is through a culturally relevant teaching practice where learners’ needs, languages and cultures are considered while learning a second language, Italian, for instance. By doing so, it would be possible to build a community where each individual is honoured, respected, cared for and loved. We can use Italian and any other language as a powerful harmonious tool to bring P-E-O-P-L-E together rather than to separate them. Let’s remember that languages are friends, not enemies!

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