

EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATORS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ЕФЕКТИВНА МЕЖДУКУЛТУРНА КОМУНИКАЦИЯ В КЛАСНАТА СТАЯ

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to suggest some guidelines regarding cultural differences for teachers who work in culturally diverse classrooms. Since the key to effective cross-cultural communication is knowledge of cultural specificities, the paper draws attention to some of the major factors that may hinder understanding in a multicultural educational environment. Being aware of the potential problems of this type of communication, allows educationists to make informed and conscious efforts to overcome them.

Key words: *culture, multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication, culturally diverse classrooms, global citizenship*

РЕЗИЮМЕ: Целта на тази статия е да предложи на учителите, които работят в мултикултурни класни стаи, някои насоки относно справянето с културното разнообразие. Тъй като ключът към ефективната междуккултурна комуникация е познаването на културните особености, статията насочва вниманието към някои от основните фактори, които могат да възпрепятстват разбирането в мултикултурна образователна среда. Осъзнавайки потенциалните проблеми на този тип комуникация, учителите могат целенасочено да се заемат с преодоляването им.

Ключови думи: *култура, мултикултурализъм, междуккултурна комуникация, културно разнообразие в класните стаи, глобално гражданство*

People and places have never before been so interdependent and interconnected as they are today, in the second decade of the 21st century. The unparalleled progress of communication technology and transnational mobility are the two main reasons for this phenomenon. This has resulted in the emergence of significant challenges related, but not limited, to the linguistic, cultural and racial diversity of societies. Culture, cultural differences, multiculturalism and cross-cultural communication and understanding have become the buzzwords of 21st century. With the fast steps of globalization and the unprecedented migration of people it seems that the cultural boundaries have been blurred. At least in the minds of globalists who believe that with the fall of walls (material and immaterial) between

people multiculturalism will thrive. But it is not surprising that people need to stick to their own culture and expect others to respect it. Mutual understanding and appreciation; exchange of best practices, cultural achievements and artifacts; and peaceful coexistence are theoretically possible. However, political, social, religious and other factors interfere with this ideal arrangement that could benefit the majority of people around the world.

Despite the many hindrances along the way to cross-cultural understanding, education and educationists cannot quit trying to educate young people to become better at multicultural communication. Because „... education in the 21st century is responsible for promoting in students knowledge, skills, and behaviours to value and function in their home place, ... and present to others the achievements of their community The reciprocal receipt of information from people of other cultures makes the notion of the global village seem less abstract” (Popova, 2007: 2). Education today is also responsible for promoting global citizenship which presupposes a broad understanding of humanity, awareness that the planet is everyman’s home and everyman’s responsibility.

An overview of global citizenship literature reveals that global citizenship is still a disputed concept and that different authors interpret it in different ways (Abdi & Shultz, 2008; Bennett, 2008; Carr & Porfilio, 2012; Hébert, 2010; Oxley & Morris, 2013). Despite the lack of unanimous agreement on what it means to be a global citizen, all agree that a global citizen should possess some, if not all, of the following characteristics, the list of which is not exhaustive:

- Respect for people from all races, religions, and cultures;
- Positive reception of diversity and varying perspectives;
- Belief that no culture is superior to any other;
- Willingness to resolve conflicts peacefully;
- Proactive steps to eradicate inequity and injustice.

Education focused on developing global citizenship should cultivate in students the above characteristics which will lead to creating a sense of belonging to a community much larger than the community of the home culture. Nowadays the classrooms in most European countries resemble the cultural diversity of societies. This is a challenge both for teachers and students. Students need to gain cultural competences in the host culture but their acquisition is a gradual process which requires observations, experiences and interactions with learners. According to Yvonne Pratt-Johnson (2006) there are six basic cultural differences that teachers may come across in a culturally diverse classroom: ways of knowing, ways of solving problems, ways of communicating non-verbally, ways of learning, ways of dealing with conflict, and ways of using symbols. These differences impact the way students learn and the way teachers should teach.

Ways of knowing

Cultural psychologists claim that, generally speaking, cultures fall into two large groups regarding patterns of thinking and perception. In some cultures a more analytic pattern prevails while in others, a more holistic pattern is demonstrated. Typical of the analytic pattern of cognition is taxonomic and rule-based categorization of objects, personal bias in causal attribution, and formal logic in reasoning. In contrast, holistic cognition is distinguished by thematic and family-resemblance-based categorization of objects, an emphasis on situational causes in attribution, and dialecticism (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

Varnuum et al (2010: 9) claim that „Westerners tend to be more analytic and East Asians tend to be more holistic. ... Westerners are more independent and Easterners are more interdependent”. This is determined by the social orientation of the culture (independence vs. interdependence). According to Varnuum et al (2010: *ibid*) in cultures that support and encourage independent social orientation people are self-directed, autonomous and assertive. In cultures with interdependent social orientation people appreciate harmony, relatedness, and interdependence.

Ways of solving problems

Critical thinking and problem solving have gained importance in education these days. In order to develop them effectively, teachers should understand that these competences depend largely on students' cultural background. Thinking takes place within a specific cognitive schema which shapes how people search for information, process it, make assumptions, employ and apply principles when considering and resolving problems, and settle disputes. Cultures have different ways of solving problems determined by their cognitive schema and value systems which in turn are shaped by the degree of individualism and/or collectivism in the respective culture. Societies in individualist cultures, such as those of Western Europe and the United States, value the rights of individuals, their independence, self-reliance and self-sufficiency, personal uniqueness and assertiveness. For people from collectivist cultures, such as those of China, Japan, Korea, and others, community is essential for survival. Concern for the greater good and respect for all members of the community are embedded in their mentality while growing up.

When developing critical thinking and problem solving strategies in students, teachers fall back on their own cultural and historical experiences and offer learners decision-making strategies that mirror their own culture. In multicultural classrooms this does not work effectively because cognitive schemata are not universal and are not valid across all ethnic and cultural groups (Paul, 1993). For example, activities which involve competition and acknowledge personal achievements are appreciated by students from individualist cultures but are not well received by students from collectivist cultures who prefer group goals and usually choose not to make independent decisions.

Ways of communicating non-verbally

Non-verbal communication is communication that does not involve words or refers to the way words are spoken. It is primarily body language but also extends to the environmental context involved in any communication. It is the meaning conveyed through eye contact (gaze), hand and head movements, facial expressions, touch, gestures, personal space, physical postures, glance, volume, vocal nuance, proximity, pause (silence), intonation, dress, smell, word choice and syntax, sounds (paralanguage), etc. According to Samovar and Porter, „nonverbal communication involves those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source [speaker] and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver [listener]” (2001:167). Basically it is sending and receiving messages in a variety of ways without the use of verbal codes (words). It is both intentional and unintentional. Most speakers and listeners are not conscious of this.

Non-verbal communication can differ considerably from one culture to another. If teachers are not well aware of the differences they may misinterpret things such as a lack of smiles and eye contact, „invasion” of personal space and privacy, touching others, long pauses, etc. For example, in many non-European cultures direct eye contact signals insolence, and smiles signal „shallowness and thoughtlessness. The Korean attitude toward smiling is expressed in the proverb, „the man who smiles a lot is not a real man” (Dresser, 1996).

Appearances are also a kind of non-verbal communication. People are often judged by the way they look and dress. Skin colour, facial features and clothes carry a lot of information about individuals. In some cultures students are expected to stick to modest appearances while in other cultures they have the freedom to dress the way they prefer. It is easy to jump to conclusions about an individual based on appearance. Classroom communication which is based on stereotypical and prejudiced judgement becomes counterproductive.

Ways of learning

Students in different cultures learn in different ways. In Europe and the United States students are encouraged to cooperate and work in groups to accomplish tasks and develop skills. They learn not only from their teachers but also from their peers and perform in classrooms which are student-centred. This has become the trend in modern education in these parts of the world. But there are other cultures in which the teacher is the messiah, the authority figure who knows everything and is the sole source of knowledge. Rote learning is the norm and students are required to memorize large amounts of information which they reproduce during written or oral exams. If teachers expect students from these cultures to ask questions, be creative, perform well as members of a self-ruled group, and take the initiative to become group leaders, they may be disappointed, may underestimate their abilities, and may make inaccurate assumptions about the students’ intelligence and learning

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abilities. This often leads to the marginalization of students who simply need time and special attitude to adapt to the different educational system.

Good teaching is not good for everybody even in a culturally homogenous classroom. The same methods and techniques will definitely not work for everybody. People in general have different learning styles. The variety gets even bigger when students come from different cultures. In a student-centred classroom, students who are not used to taking responsibility for their learning and making their own decisions would think that the teacher does not teach when they are asked to accomplish tasks themselves and be in charge of their own learning. Their achievement rate is often lower than that of autonomous learners who can navigate their own learning progress.

Ways of dealing with conflict

Culture shapes the way we deal with conflict. Conflicts are part of life. They arise among people who are in some form of relationship. And relationships themselves are determined by culture. Whether or not a conflict will arise also depends on the culture. For example, in some cultures conflicts between generations are common and are dealt with openly and with the understanding that they are natural. In other cultures such conflicts are considered unacceptable because respect for the older generations is embedded in the minds of people. In western cultures conflicts in general are considered to be positive things which signal that a system, a partnership, or a family needs to be addressed and taken care of. This is why they are carefully studied and individuals are encouraged to face them openly, find ways to resolve them and clear the path for successful partnerships. In eastern cultures, on the other hand, conflicts are avoided because they are considered shameful and embarrassing. If they do occur, they are best dealt with quietly and secretly so that the people involved do not lose face.

It is clear that given such major differences between cultures, teachers cannot expect students in a multicultural classroom to react uniformly to conflicts and resolve problems in similar ways. Demonstrating disrespect for the minority culture in the classroom can lead to a conflict which may pass unnoticed by the teachers and hinder effective learning and mutual understanding. Special training for conflict resolution taking into account the specific cultures of the involved students is highly required.

Ways of using symbols

Culture includes all the things that we learn while growing up in the family and the community and when socializing, going to school and to work. Some of these things are the symbols we use to connect with one another and to keep people from other cultures away. The use of symbols within a community heightens the sense of belonging and feeling special. Symbols are part of the cultural capital that people use for social and cultural exclusion and also for a sense of habitat. It is not

surprising then that the meanings they attach to symbols are often very different from the meanings that other cultures may attach to the same symbols.

Students often use symbols in classroom activities, home assignments and while communicating with their peers and teachers. Teachers need to be aware that oftentimes they may come across unfamiliar or contrary to their own culture meanings attached to otherwise familiar symbols. In such cases research into the symbolism of a specific culture can avert the danger of blaming students for wanting to imply something evil, rude, or politically wrong.

Conclusion

It can be claimed with some degree of certainty that teaching which takes into account the above cultural specificities can be more effective than one based exclusively on the host culture. This can be the starting point for „culturally relevant” teaching, a term created by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994: 17-18) which means „a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes”. This type of pedagogy is implemented by teachers who can build bridges between the students’ home culture and the culture of the host country, represented in the educational environment. Thus culturally relevant learning can effectively take place through making the most of the culturally specific backgrounds, experiences, knowledge and learning styles of the students.

The challenges for monocultural teachers in multicultural classrooms are increasing and „teachers need to structure learning experiences that both help students write their way into the university and help teachers learn their way into student cultures” (Dean, 1989: 23).

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