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**Preserving the Cultural Identity of the English as a
Second Language Learners in Nigeria Using
TESOL Principles for ESL Education Standards**

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Abstract

Nigeria among other nations of the world is today facing different degrees of conflicts. The divide is heightened by ethnicity, religion and multiplicity of languages. In so far as English is the official

language in Nigeria, its growth in the globalised world is sending many languages into extinction and bringing about loss of national consciousness. The cultural identities of Nigerians must be preserved in the English language classroom to awaken and promote this battered national consciousness. For decades, the argument of English only or bilingualism in an ESL classroom has persisted. These writers join in the view that language transmits the culture. The basic thesis we would want to develop in this paper is that a people's language is a uniquely powerful instrument in unifying a diverse population and involving individuals and subgroups in the national system. This paper therefore looks specifically at a critical area that is often overlooked, that is, cultural identity. In particular, we will address how we can help students retain their cultural identity as we help them learn the English language and succeed in the mainstream classroom using TESOL principles for ESL education standards.

Introduction

Of course, learning English and learning it well is absolutely essential for academic and future life success, but the assumption that one must discard one's identity along the way needs to be challenged. There is nothing shameful in knowing a language other than English. In fact becoming bilingual can benefit individuals and our country in general (Sonia Nieto, 1999).

Language is seen as an important aspect of culture and the vehicle for culture expression and transmission. Language expresses the cultural legacy and social experience of a people and transmits them from generation to generation. When children learn their first language, they learn the cultural values, norms, and beliefs that are characteristic of their cultures. To learn another language is to learn new norms, behaviours and beliefs that are appropriate in the new culture, and thus to extend one's socio-cultural competence in new environments.

Teachers of English have failed to note this transition from one culture to another.

According to Kayode (1997), a society that exists without language will have ‘chaos, turmoil, vandalism, hooliganism and violence’ as the order of the day. Nigerians’ national consciousness has been eroded by this chaos in the society and all Nigerian tread with caution and suspicion every day. It has, in fact, been established that "when a person (or a community) loses cultural/linguistic identity, and before acquiring the identity of the dominating culture/language, there is a period characterized by mental and social crisis (Bamgbose, 1976). Decades of research document the powerful academic and socio-affective benefits of a strong home language base and affirmation of home language and culture as a valuable resource (Soto, 1998). The socio-political, socio-economic, cultural, educational, socio-linguistic, etc., problems that are tearing through ex-colonies of western countries, would therefore seem to have at least one common denominator - colonial domination. To solve them, some native scholars suggest that African languages should be taught in schools. The multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria has deprived it the sole dependence on the indigenous languages; English serves as a second language and the lingua franca. This paper is advocating that despite that, that the teaching of the English language should promote national consciousness of the learners by preserving their cultural identities.

What is National Consciousness?

Wiki-answers’ definition of National consciousness is “how a whole group of people may see things and life or how they think the majority sees things, whether they really do or not. It is supposedly how the majority of people in a country view most things or commonly held beliefs in that country, even if all of them aren't unique to that country and the particular combinations of belief and would include culture, religion possibly and how they see their country, patriotism or rebellious.” National consciousness is tied to national identity which is defined as “the group’s definition of itself as a group – its

conception of its enduring characteristics and basic values; its strengths and weaknesses; its hopes and fears; its reputation and conditions of existences; its institutions and traditions; and its past history, current purposes and future prospects (Kelman, 1997). This consciousness and identity can be said to be missing today in Nigeria. The national security issue facing Nigeria today is a painful expression of gross unconsciousness. Society is now being forced to reassess its views as a nation. It is the belief of this paper that preserving cultural identity in the English language classroom can re-awaken national consciousness in Nigerians.

Cultural Identity

“Cultural identity is defined as “the relationship between individuals and members of a group who share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world” (Norton, 1997, p. 420). WordIQ (n.d.) opined that cultural identity is the feeling of being included in a group or culture. Culture is defined by attitudes and beliefs and what a person from each culture believes is normal for that group. Since there are many cultures in society, each culture contributes to cultural diversity, creating a "melting pot."

Cultural identity is not just defined by a group or culture with which you identify; it also consists of racial, religious, class, gender, sexuality and familial identities. Additionally, national, social and personal identity also contributes to one's cultural identity, as these properties envelope the entire person, making her who she is. By not accepting cultural identities, people create limited worldviews and perceptions of others. For Tolliver and Tisdell (2002) cultural identity development can "help people withstand oppression and be motivated to support social transformation." One way to work toward understanding cultural identity is to ask and answer questions instead of shying away from issues. Tolliver and Tisdell point out that many "are contemplating the need to be involved in social transformational activities in order to ensure the world will survive." Worldwide,

diversity education is entering into the classroom in order to teach tolerance and acceptance.

Principles of ESL Education Standards

English teachers should note the general principles about the nature of language, language learning, human development and pedagogy that underlie English as Second Language (ESL) education standards. These principles, according to TESOL Journal Online (2007) include:

1. Language is functional: Successful language learning and language teaching emphasize functional proficiency. This is in contrast to the traditional pedagogical approaches that view language learning and teaching primarily as mastery of the elements of language, such as grammar and vocabulary. What is important to ESL learners is to function effectively in English and through English while learning challenging academic content.
2. Language varies: language varies with respect to region, social class, ethnic differences, person, topic, purpose and situation. It also varies from one academic domain to another.
3. Language learning is cultural learning.
4. Language acquisition is a long-term process: Language acquisition moves through developmental stages and gradually growing in proficiency. Rates of acquisition are influenced by individual's educational background, first language background, learning style, cognitive style, motivation and personality. These are in addition to socio-cultural factors. ESL educational programme must take these into cognizance.
5. Language acquisition occurs through meaningful use and interaction: Effective language acquisition takes place when it is used in significant and meaningful situations as the learners interact with others. This means that ESL learners must be

given multiple opportunities to use English, to interact with others as they study meaningful and intellectually challenging content, and to receive feedback on their language use.

6. Language processes develop interdependently: Acquisition of functional language abilities occurs simultaneously and interdependently, rather than sequentially. For instance, reading activities may activate speaking abilities and vice versa.
7. Native language proficiency contributes to second language acquisition: This emphasizes the role of background knowledge. ESL students know and use at least one other language. With that, they have acquired an intuitive understanding of the general structural and functional characteristics of language.
8. Bilingualism is an individual and societal asset: Acquisition of a second language can confer certain cognitive and linguistic advantages on the individual. The learners' first language should not be abandoned in the quest for a second language. (http://www.tesol.or/s_sec_document.asp?CID=113&DID=3100)

Cultural Identity Validation and Recognition in the Mainstream Classroom

English Language Learners could become invisible in the mainstream classroom or even disconnect from the learning process if teachers do not display sensitivity toward their cultural identity. The recognition of principle no 2 that language varies and no 3 which states that language learning is cultural learning will enable the teacher recognize and validates multiple cultural identities in the classroom community and as well as developing positive student–teacher relationships which in effect will strengthen individuals' sense of worth and, ultimately, their academic performance. According to Sumaryono and Wilma (2004),

understanding and supporting the cultural norms of diverse learners help to create a safe and nurturing environment, which motivates students to take the necessary risks to be successful. Therefore, it is essential to find meaningful ways to incorporate the richness of students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum (p. 17).

Therefore, it is essential to find meaningful ways to incorporate the richness of students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. If we listen to what many students consider the most important components when describing their "cultural identity," they commonly say the *language and ethnicity* of the social and cultural group to which they feel connected. When teachers support students' primary language in meaningful ways, students feel recognized and validated in the mainstream classroom, which results in a strong sense of self.

One way in which teachers can include the students' native language in their teaching practice is by using different languages to say key words, which can be written on the board and learned by all the students in the classroom. According to a TESOL document mentioned above, principle number 8 has it that:

Bilingualism is an individual and societal asset: Acquisition of a second language can confer certain cognitive and linguistic advantages on the individual. The learners' first language should not be abandoned in the quest for a second language. (http://www.tesol.or/s_sec_document.asp?CID=113&DID=3100)

This English teacher should allow her students to use their primary language when responding to writing prompts and when doing freewrites. In addition, when students are engaged in writing bilingual poems, the teacher should use multilingual mentor texts, and her classroom library displays authors from many countries.

In addition to incorporating opportunities to acknowledge English Language Learners' expertise of their home language, cultural way of life, geography, and history into the daily fabric of classroom life, teachers can also validate the power of students' first language in the process of learning English. Encouraging students to use their language serves the dual purpose of validating who they are and furthering their academic success. For example, in assigning short exploratory activities wherein students are asked to *write to learn*, teachers can give students the option of writing in their mother tongue or home dialect. In the words of Fulwiler & Young (2000),

The primary function of this 'expressive' language (writing to learn) is not to communicate, but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense, language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding.

Writing expert Peter Elbow asserts that, ". . . unless we write in the language that is in touch with our unconscious, we lose half our mental strength" (Elbow, 2001). Therefore, when assigning journal writing, freewriting, and writing to solve a problem, allow students to choose the language they find most conducive to tapping their mental reservoirs, and then, later, they can transfer those ideas into English.

While it is sometimes useful and important to let students think through concepts in their primary language, we also want them to participate in class activities using English. According to principle number 5, "language acquisition occurs through meaningful use and interaction." This is difficult, however, as students not only struggle with the language, but worry about speaking a language they don't know well in front of peers. The use of cooperative activities wherein students share information and build meaning together is an effective way to help ESL learners learn the content while at the same time building self-esteem that is sometimes challenged as they work to learn a new language.

Cooperative activities provide an opportunity for social interaction in which students must both negotiate how to achieve the task and produce the language to accomplish the task. Grouping students and structuring cooperative learning activities should be clearly orchestrated for maximum results. If two students share the same native language, putting them in the same group will often maximize learning. Using the native language to explain and clarify content is an important advantage that should be utilized.

The temperaments and strengths of other students in the class could also be considered in designing successful group activities. Specific directions, tasks, and roles should be explicitly described, and opportunities for practice should be given; if not, English Language Learners could be excluded or tensions could develop within the group.

If the rates of acquisition of a language are influenced by individual's educational background, first language background, learning style, cognitive style, motivation and personality (principle number 4), the English teacher should aim at inculcating Socio-Cultural Competence (SCC) in the learners. SCC has been defined as the possession of sufficient background knowledge (BK) and capability to activate this relevant BK in the process of culturally appropriate communication. Background knowledge is generally defined as a body of knowledge that is shared by native-speakers of a particular language. This common knowledge facilitates the ability of individuals to communicate, work, and live together. BK unites a community and is a distinguishing characteristic of a national culture. Socio-cultural competence, according to Vegas-Puente (1997)

aims at the assimilation and proper management of the distinctive features in the target culture, particularly those embedded in the target language. The culture-specific reference implicit in the language constitutes that peculiar component of its semantics which we may call socio-cultural meaning. This

forms a significant part of the process of acculturation. The term includes the material and intellectual context of human life which conditions the way in which people mean things to each other and construct their thoughts, and consequently conditions the communicative and logical discursive functions of linguistic codes.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Umera-Okeke (2010) lend their support for SCC when they state:

Until recently, Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) failed to give sufficient emphasis to cultural specificity and its linguistic reflections. Emphasis was just on the mechanical learning of the traditional components of the language system without reference to their functional usefulness. This, at times, has led to abysmal performance of the students in the target language. For functional education in Nigeria, English as a Second language (ESL) pedagogy requires developing socio-cultural competence in the learners (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Umera-Okeke (2010:68).

The aim of socio-cultural competence in English as a second language is to help develop an understanding of general cultural contexts and their implications which enable someone raised in a particular culture to fully comprehend speech or text in that culture's language. The place of sociocultural competence in ESL programmes is recent and ESL educators need to understand the importance of this topic and implement it in their classrooms. It should be noted, however, that teaching socio-cultural competence in ESL classrooms is not the same as asking students to abandon their own cultures and adopt another identity. Instead, it is meant to offer information on some of the underlying factors that can affect discourse. Teaching socio-cultural competence is simply a way to encourage ESL students to develop an outlook on communication in the English language that is informed

and attentive. In ESL, strands of socio-cultural competence, according to Celce-Marcia, Dorneyi and Thurred (1995) include: social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and nonverbal communicative factors. The neglect of these components had led to confusion and comprehension difficulties in the English language.

Conclusion

Our willingness to view children's home language and culture as an important resource is an opportunity to enhance our nation's mission for a democratic society. Our ability to implement the kinds of educational strategies described in this article affords educators, families and communities a myriad of opportunities to share their collective wisdom.

Let us pretend for a moment that as a nation, we accept the challenge to preserve children's rights to be culturally and linguistically competent by affirming children's home language and home culture.

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