Cultural Factors

That Influence Learning for ELL Students

In seeking to understand the relevance of cultural factors and the ways those factors influence second language learning as well the learning of academic content, it is vital to first have a clear conception of the meaning of culture. Culture may be thought of as an individual’s and/or a group’s values, beliefs, notions about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and other socially constructed ideas that members of a culture are taught (Garcia, 1994, p. 51). Another way of expressing it may be to simply view culture as specific ways of knowing, being, and doing. Bullivant (1993) defines culture as a group’s design for survival in and adaptation to its environment. Such a design is comprised of knowledge, concepts, and values shared by members of the group by means of a system of communication. Through language, groups communicate their values, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (Banks, 2001). Language is therefore a “powerful and transformative tool of culture. Like culture, language is learned, it is shared, and it evolves and changes over time (Banks, 2001, p. 268”).

Cultural factors, then, may be viewed as those aspects of culture that members of cultural groups have acquired, consciously or unconsciously, and carry with them wherever they go. When cultural factors of one group or one individual interface with another culture it is quite likely that some form of dissonance will occur. Such dissonance or discord offers the potential for misunderstanding and in the learning environment it frequently leads to less-than-successful learning experiences for those who are cultural outsiders and not uncommonly, to frustration, loss of motivation, and reduction in self-esteem and individual worth. It is extremely relevant then that educators have a clear understanding of the role cultural factors play in the learning process so that they may utilize that knowledge to create a culturally responsive learning environment that supports the success and achievement of all students. This occurs when educators recognize those strengths that students bring to school and make use of them in order to facilitate success for all learners.

What are cultural factors then? Some elements for consideration are those issues that flow from broad cultural differences. An example may be the ways that various cultures view time. Is the group or individual’s tradition grounded in an open and flexible conception of time, often referred to as polychronic time? Here human interaction is valued over time and material things. Another view is that of monochronic time, which implies doing one thing at a time making careful use of planning and time management (Hall, 1976). Or consider the notion of gender. Hofstede (1980) designated a cultural factor termed Masculinity versus Femininity that focuses on the degree to which “traditional” gender roles are assigned in a culture. An example of this may be a cultural tradition where men are considered aggressive and competitive, while women are expected to be docile and oriented towards home and family. Another of Hofstede’s 5 cultural dimensions (factors) is that of self, a concept that he termed Individualism versus Collectivism. People from individualistic cultural traditions view the individual person and his/her rights as more important than any responsibility to a specific group to which they may
belong. On the other hand, people from collectivistic cultural traditions spring from strong extended families or communities. In this case, group loyalty always precedes individual loyalty. The valued pronoun for individualistic individuals is “I”, while the pronoun that best fits collectivistic culture tradition is “We”. A final example attributed to Hall (1959) is that of High-Context culture versus Low-Context culture. High and Low contexts refer to communication styles. Low-context implies that individuals employ direct, verbal communication, that their messages are communicated explicitly, and that reliance on words is the preferred means of communicating to others. High-context implies that the burden to understand the message is on the listener. The greater part of the information is in a physical context or it is internalized. This is to say that the communicator “talks around the point” that he or she wishes to make and the listener must discern that point on his/her own. Imagery, rather than specific words are employed as is mood, and symbolism. Meaning must be drawn from environmental clues.

Other cultural factors that may enter the learning environment pertain to culture-based preferences for learning. For example, Ramirez (1991) believes that Diverse cultural traditions (as opposed to European cultural traditions) tend to favor certain preferences for learning grounded in their cultural background. Following is an enumeration of some of those preferences. See if you can connect some of these preferences with information you have learned from the previous paragraphs. Diverse cultural traditions often prefer: cooperative learning environments, group study, to minimize distance when communicating, to express emotions freely, to see time as flexible and subjective, to view task orientation as relative to personal demands, to make use of relational and affective learning styles, and to seek personal relevance when processing information. On the other hand, European cultural traditions often enjoy: competitive learning environments, individual study, employing a rigid, formal communication style, expressing emotions selectively, adhering to rigid time schedules, viewing task completion as the primary factor in a learning situation, knowing when an analytical style is more appropriate to employ, and tends to process relevant or irrelevant information effectively.

Other relevant cultural factors to consider could be a group’s conception of formality, that is, how a given group perceives family-school relationships or student-teacher relationships. What about such things as expectations for learning? Or preferred processes for learning? The point is culture and learning are connected and thus it is important to gain all the information we can to help every learner succeed in school. Teacher knowledge of cultural factors is essential and you will enjoy the quest!

Learning More

In order to expand our understanding of culture, two articles are listed here. Please follow the links to the articles. As you read the articles, think about way in which these ideas could affect your students and you classes.

Understanding Culture is a monograph prepared by the National Institute for Urban School Improvement.  http://www.urbanschools.org/pdf/understanding.culture.LETTER.pdf

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