

Challenges and Highlights of Teaching Other Cultures

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I trained as Chef and worked in a kitchen for seventeen years before moving into education. I was never a “scholar”. My strong points were not English, science or math but rather home economics, design and technology, gym, arts and anything else that involved hands on learning.

I didn't realize until I was a teacher that knowing my own learning style would influence and help me understand the way my students, especially English as a Second Language (ESL) students learn new information.

Right now, I am in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, working as an exchange teacher at the National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism. The experience has been both interesting and rewarding but, as it is new to me, I have encountered a few challenges teaching students from another culture.

Having taught in classrooms in Canada for several years, I have observed Canadian classrooms becoming increasingly diverse and populated with students whose first language is not English or French. Whereas, here in Taiwan, the students are predominately from Taiwan, with a few other Southeast Asian countries represented. The classroom compositions in Canada and Taiwan are quite different and it is important for educators, like me, to understand how demographic and cultural differences affect teaching practices and learning.

One of the most noticeable differences is that Taiwanese students are reluctant to participate or answer questions. Without oral participation in class, it becomes difficult to assess the students' level of knowledge. I can ask leading questions but often there is no response. Sometimes, I single students out to ask them if they understand - to which they reply “Yes” so I follow up with a very basic question and they do not answer, staring back at me blankly as if they do not understand.

After a few such experiences, I implemented a different style of teaching that seems to resonate with students and allows me to determine how well they understand the material I am teaching.

First, I observed basic student behavior. Based on my observations, I realized that the lack of proficiency in English (the language of the classroom) was the largest barrier. The teaching method also played a big role. In Asia, teachers lecture while students listen. No questions are asked as it is believed that asking questions could be considered impolite and may cause the teacher to lose face. Typically, Asian students are shy and quiet. They fear that if they speak out in class their classmates will “mock” them which might be more emotionally damaging than answering the question. There is also a belief that only the teacher, not other students, should comment on a student's work, keeping all students on an equal level.

Then, I changed from a “lecture and listen” method to one that improved the understanding and increased communication of students by breaking down the language barriers, adding group activities, games and demonstrations. I created engaging lesson plans that captivated my students and had them participating with ease and excitement.

To remove the language barrier, I encouraged students to answer questions in their own first language, even though my class was in

English. Most answered in Mandarin Chinese (other students would translate for me). This approach allowed them to participate freely if they knew the answer.

Then I implemented interactive group activities such as “mind maps” [1] (showing the relationship of individual components to the whole), Think-Pair-Share [2] a collaborative discussion strategy designed to provide students with time to think and formulate their individual thoughts and ideas about a given topic or concept before forming a pair with a peer to share their thinking, “Twitter” [3] (students sum up lesson and interact with messages, “tweets”, restricted to 140 characters) and “4 corners” [4] (posting key terms/ideas on four different corners of the room and having students elaborate on each corner) Just to mention a few. Activities that allow students to move around the classroom are great for stimulating learning.

A bit of competition was also motivating. I introduced games with incentives such as “Candy Questions” [5] (Each colour of candy (M&M's® or Skittles®) represented a question. In order to eat the candy, the student had to correctly answer the question). Another game, “Around the World” [6] presents students with questions on “flash cards”. Students stand at the back of the classroom to begin. With each question, the student who answers fastest moves closer to the front of the classroom with the one moving it all the way to the front of the classroom winning a prize.

With the language barrier removed, the students interacting in groups and communicating through games, I introduced the next method, hands-on learning with live demonstrations. For example, I described Canada's maple syrup industry including an interactive demo on pancake making with maple syrup. We also did an ice-wine tasting. Students loved the hands-on aspect and including food is always a winner! I encouraged students to experience ingredients through taste, smell and touch.

Realizing that 65% of people are visual learners [7], I adjusted my presentations from 40% images and to almost 70% images using both the English word and Chinese word. Encouraging language learning, each class I chose the hardest to pronounce or most complex word to be our “word of the day”, asking the students to repeat and use as many times as possible during the class.

I also had the students take pictures of the written content (from activities) and post on our class Facebook page for the students to

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review. I encourage the class to vote on the Facebook page on which group had the best idea, answer or response (prizes are awarded to winning votes). This incentivized students to review the topic.

The results have been remarkable. Students learn through fun and interactive small group exercises, rather than solo, increasing their comfort level to the point where they participate without being prompted. As a result, I was able to better assess the students' knowledge, as it was quickly clear from participation levels, who was grasping concept and who I needed to monitor more closely.

I could see the results but also wanted to know what the students thought of the change in learning methods so I deployed a simple "Stop? Start? Continue?" [8] exit slip at 5 weeks. At 10 weeks I also sent out an online poll (that was completed anonymously), asking about content delivery and information clarity. Lastly on week 15, I asked for overall thoughts and suggestions on how to improve the course via a paper questionnaire. The feedback was valuable as it allowed me to adjust my teaching techniques as the semester progressed with simple fixes to feedback such as "talking to fast" or "clearer instruction for assignments" being addressed immediately. It also gave me an awareness of how the class was standing.

In conclusion teaching other cultures can be challenging. Sometimes it seems like I am trying to communicate with something that cannot

talk to tell you what it understands or doesn't understand. Through observation, cultural awareness and lots of trial and error, I was able to introduce different, somewhat unconventional teaching methods that resonated with the students and increased their participation and understanding as well as interaction with other students.

It takes some imagination and a creative approach to prepare for classes but the benefits are well worth it. My students' grades have improved and so have their attitudes towards learning. Perhaps most rewarding for me is the satisfaction I get from my students telling me "this is their favorite class".

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