

How Culture Influences English Language Learners in Higher Education

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Key Terms: English Language Learners (ELLs) Speakers of Another Language Acquiring English as a Second Language

Language Two (L 2) Anyone who is acquiring a second language **Dominant Culture:** A dominant culture is the standards or established norms and values set by a group of people for the members of its society.

Culture influences language and affects English language learners (ELLs) because identifying words without knowledge of the culture affects their level of comprehension. Based on this premise, this article expands our thoughts on how the variables of culture and language affect ELLs in higher education. Second language learners usually struggle in postsecondary education because of their limitations with comprehension, pronunciation, grammatical structures, colloquial terminologies, and figurative expressions of the target language. As a result, many ELLs take longer to complete their course of study. Some drop out of their programs, unable to matriculate into credit-bearing courses, and others take extra time to complete courses because their monolingual and monocultural indoctrination hinder new or target-language acquisition and adjustment to the new cultural environment.

There is a symbiotic relationship between language and culture, as acquiring the target language is intertwined with the culture. Therefore, second language learners need to learn the language as well as the culture in which the language is entrenched. Genc and Bada (2005) contended: For L2 students, language study seems senseless if they know nothing about the people who speak the target language or the country in which the target language is spoken; [therefore,] acquiring a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon (p.73). Learning the culture intertwined with the target language is key for higher education students who have not yet assimilated into the dominant culture or achieved some semblance of acculturation. Not knowing the language has led to ELLs' achievement gaps in reading proficiency when compared to their native counterparts (Russell, 2017). As a consequence, ELLs have continually shown lower test scores on standardized tests and fail to perform well in higher education (Millis, 2014; Pavlov, 2015).

Individuals use various classifications to distinguish and observe the world, based on their native language and culture, leading to different worldviews (Sapir, 1962; Whorf, 1956). In other words, worldviews vary because of the divergence in language and cultural norms, and individuals might be unwilling to accept changes based on their rigid lenses of other cultures. Consequently, these individuals make decisions based on their cultural perspectives without gaining a broader worldview from the immediate culture and language structures. ELLs might perceive native speakers of the language they are trying to learn as unusual, strange, and even discourteous, a perspective that affects the process of learning and acquiring the target language (Genc & Bada, 2005). Because of the various cultural lenses through which individuals perceive the world, educational institutions should design curricula to reflect an awareness of other cultures, ultimately increasing the cultural engagement of non-English speakers and their diverse cultural perspectives.

The term *language* has multiple meanings based on different structures, education, and academic disciplines. When used in its general sense, language is a socially specific structure that individuals use to communicate. In its general use, it refers to how individuals attain the ability to understand what is spoken, gestured, or written so that others can communicate and respond through utterances, gestures, and spoken or written words (Russell, 2017). In higher education, many ELLs struggle to understand the target language, primarily because they do not have the vocabulary to clearly articulate the language or understand the cultural norms in which the target language is embedded. While some textbooks used in ELL courses may provide some samples with cultural contexts, quite often, instructors use instructional materials that they have sourced (Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005).

Although ELLs struggle to connect with the language, they show greater improvements when peers and instructors provide clear and understandable language input. Learners show a better understanding of the language and contents when they can grasp the information communicated to them. Learners can successfully comprehend English when it is acquired through interaction (Krashen, 1988). Understanding language is a prerequisite to its production, and language input provides a framework to improve language output (Russell, 2017). Tavares (2019) contended, “Oral communication among peers remains a major element in classroom activities that aim to promote students’ involvement with learning, but it is also through oral communication that students engage collaboratively in the co-construction of meaning” (p.114). ELLs need multiple opportunities to engage and interact with the language to attain acquisition, or they will not understand and acquire a new language until they gain the social framework and context in which the new language occurs (Kuo & Lai, 2006). This is why active discussions, allowing for rich language interaction will enhance language transfer for ELLs.

Culture also plays a pivotal role in language acquisition and affects the semantic, pragmatic, and level of discourse. In addition, instruction that is culture-based and teacher-centered tends to impact teaching materials and resources, indicating the need to consider cultural sensitivities during the teaching process (McKay, 2003). Teachers’ attitudes can also affect the learner’s development and challenge them with acquiring the target language (Ciriza-Lope, Shappeck, & Arxer, 2016). As such, failure to incorporate language and classroom cultural norms could adversely impact ELLs’ performance in higher education. ELLs face linguistic challenges with the target language, as they attempt to understand structures, contents, meanings, and purposes. All of these functions require greater cognitive skills in higher education; as a result, the performance of ELLs might lag behind that of native speakers (McKeon, 1994). In addition to the challenges of navigating the new language, ELLs struggle with adjusting to the culture that embodies the language. As such, many ELLs end up in remedial courses and find that these courses are not required, but are institutional policies that result in additional resources and longer time for their course of studies (Bunch, Endris, Panayotova, Romero, & Llosa, 2011).

Quite often, ELLs take remedial courses to be admitted into higher education, but matriculation could take several semesters and prolong the time to graduation. Although ELLs find instruction helpful during the learning process, they struggle with the structure of the language of the culture. However, teachers can support ELLs by helping learners with discerning, using comparing and contrasting strategies, and placing them in groups that are more culturally accepting (Genc & Bada, 2005), enabling them to focus on becoming transformative successful scholars. Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel (2006) stated that: United States schools emphasize written education, whereas African and Middle Eastern schools emphasize oral education. U.S. culture values argumentation, debate, directness, and assertiveness [while] many other cultures emphasize accord, harmony, and cooperation, students from these cultures may not possess the oral argumentative skills that are often required in U.S. classrooms. (p. 347). While other ELLs are academically prepared to come to the United States to further their studies and improve their English language proficiency (Ciriza-Lope et al., 2016). Therefore, not all immigrant ELL students are limited in language acquisition. Some bring a depth of education, knowledge, skills, and experiences to higher education (Bergey, Movit, Baird, & Faria, 2018).

In a case study conducted at a U.S. university, Gelb (2012) found that native students had greater in-class participation than their international counterparts. Subsequently, instructors should recognize such disparities and help international students to become more engaged in the discussions, especially with courses containing certain cultural features of the target language that may not be easily understood by non-English speakers (Alshenqeeti, 2019). Gelb's study also found that international students gave only sporadic language input, which was mostly unrelated to the topics being discussed. As a result, the authors concluded that the socialization process entrenched in U.S. students since their early schooling enabled them to outperform their international counterparts. Samovar et al. (2006) stated: "Schools provide a context in which both the socialization process and the learning process occurred as children are supposed to internalize the basic values and beliefs of their culture" (p. 326). Gelb's findings aligned with Samovar et al., who found that cultural awareness is imperative in the multicultural classroom, however, education and accommodation can help counterbalance cultural behavioral misunderstandings in the classroom. Therefore, educational systems are capable of being agents of change and serve all culturally diverse students. Although helping ELLs adjust to the language and culture may be time-consuming, it can be an extremely gratifying experience for English Language Learners, educators, and institutions of higher education.

Investing in ELLs in higher education is necessary. Educators must ensure that all students in their classrooms have a chance to achieve their goals. Many researchers have focused on how ELLs are struggling to acquire the target language. However, to help them function more effectively in higher education, greater cultural sensitivity and responsiveness in teaching are needed. As such, educators must become culturally responsive in their teaching and devise strategies such as cooperative learning, models for students to follow, and differentiated instructions with multiple modalities. In addition to these strategies, using resources that are reflective of the students' cultures will actively engage them with the language and cultural norms of their new home, allowing them to contribute to their adopted society.

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