



Multiculturalism

Vicky Loras sees beauty in diversity.

One of the most important issues, which can come up in the classroom is that of multiculturalism. I believe that it is imperative not just to teach students a language which they can use properly and to expose them to linguistic elements, grammar and syntax, but also to assist them in adopting the personal qualities which will be necessary for their lives outside the classroom.

Our responsibility as teachers is to help form children's characters for the better, and not simply teach them dry elements of a language and then send them out of the classroom without the kind of education they need most of all: humanitarian education.

A positive perspective

Nowadays, it is good to see that many ELT textbooks and a great number of literary books are beginning to touch upon the theme of multiculturalism. They now show that people are not only different in terms of personality, but also have different origins, religious beliefs, customs, traditions and mentalities. It is important to present and openly discuss new cultures in parallel with the students' own cultural experiences so that they can view unknown cultures in a positive light and can compare their knowledge of their own cultural background and that of the new one. They are often quick to realise in what ways cultures are different. However, they can also be taught to find similarities and things their culture has in common with others and to understand that countries and peoples can be different, but at the same time can have similarities.

Food for thought

Illustrating the case with examples will help. Teachers can, for example, look at issues surrounding food and help students to understand that different food, cuisine and eating habits are distinctive features of countries all over the world. Religious beliefs are also a differentiating feature of each culture, and even of people within a culture: some people are Buddhist, others Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc. An understanding of diversity will help children accept people on equal terms, and it is essential that we promote the idea that no culture is superior to any other; no person is inferior to another for any reason; no language is complex and no language is simple. Each culture, person and language has its own beauty and individuality.

Not better, just different

I work as an English teacher in Greece, where people's love of their language and history is very strong and an inextricable part of their lives. On many

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occasions students have asked me questions such as *Isn't Greek the richest and most difficult language that exists?* and *Doesn't Greece have the richest history in the world, compared to other countries?* It is certainly true that Greek is a very complex language and, if it is not your native language (as it is not mine, being born and raised in Canada by Greek parents), it is very difficult. However, any language you do not know is bound to be difficult at first. Once you become familiar with the structure, the grammar and syntax of a language, things become easier. There is really no such thing as a *difficult* language, or an *easy* one, for that matter.

It is also true that Greece has a rich and extensive history stretching over thousands and thousands of years. But it is equally true that other countries have histories to be proud of, and it is right that their people should be proud of them. We need to show our students that each culture, each civilization and country is different and unique, and that this is what makes the human race so beautiful. Our role as educators is to be a mediator between various cultures and our students.

Dealing with student reactions

Many times I have come across pictures of people from all over the world in the books I use with children. Their reactions to these pictures can take the form of simple questions, such as: *Where is this person from? In which country do people dress like this?* However, they can occasionally also give rise to unpleasant comments about the colour of skin, the



style of dress or particular features of the people pictured, comments which I believe are due to the students' ignorance of diversity. Sometimes they display complete indifference when they encounter different cultures and customs and offer no comments whatsoever. This can be equally dangerous.

Each case needs individual handling. Unpleasant comments are probably the most difficult thing to deal with. They do not call for anger or punitive reactions on the part of the teacher, but they do give rise to a need for explanation. I also believe a little sternness doesn't go amiss, so long as it is tempered with a lot of patience. We have to get students to understand that some people might seem unusual to them, but equally they may seem unusual to those people. Meeting someone or something different is always difficult for everyone at first, but in the end it is all about the acceptance of diversity, and diversity is one of the main characteristics of humankind.

Acceptance of diversity

I shall never forget one of the first times I realised that multiculturalism was an issue that could come up in the classroom and would have to be dealt with. It was when I started using a packet of reward stickers on students' assignments. The stickers I used depicted children's faces from all over the world: children with African, Asian and Caucasian features. One day, a student who had successfully completed one of his assignments complained about not wanting a sticker with the face of an African child on it. The ensuing dialogue went like this:

Student: *No, I don't want the sticker with the African child!*

Teacher: *Why not?*

Student: *Because she is black. And we are not.*

Teacher: *Do you know why her skin colour is dark? And why she is different from you or me?*

Student: *No.*

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Teacher: *Her skin is that colour in order to protect her from the hot sun, because the climate in her country is always very hot. In the same way you get suntanned when you go on holiday; it is the way your skin protects itself from the dangerous rays of the sun.*

Student: *(thoughtfully) I didn't know that. That's why our skin is light, because it is not hot here all the time, and that is why we get tanned in the summer.*

Teacher: *Exactly, that is right!*

Exposure to diversity

From the short exchange above it is clear that from a very small detail, a very big message got through. From that moment on, I realised how important it was for children to have visual exposure to different cultures around them in order for multiculturalism to become integrated in the school curriculum and assimilated by the students. Now all over our language school we have pictures, posters, photographs and short informative texts about different cultures displayed on the walls.

We also recognise that the internet can be an important educational tool. Teachers can very easily, with the click of a mouse, introduce children to various cultural elements, opening new doors and therefore automatically bringing multiculturalism into the classroom.


Students can learn a lot from all kinds of sources. Once they are motivated and their curiosity is aroused, they do become interested in

learning about life in other countries and about civilizations different from their own. My students constantly ask me to describe life in Canada, bring them pictures of Canadian landscapes and tell them about the people. They especially want to know about the First Nation people who live there, about whom they have both heard and seen a lot, and about the origin of people in North America generally.

Using their questions and their natural curiosity to learn about things they have never heard of before, I develop lessons that teach them a lot about cultures that are foreign to them, at the same time as they are learning English. In this way, I manage to achieve several goals at once: the students' knowledge of English is expanded and, at the same time, they are enriching their cultural knowledge and any misconceptions they may have are being corrected.



It is important for children to understand that diversity is a characteristic of the human race and, at the same time, one of its chief beauties. What a monotonous place the world would be if all people and cultures were the same!

It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that children learn to accept and get along with all cultures, races and religions so that they become productive citizens of the world. They are the next generation and we must help them to live better lives. I don't see this as an imposition of my own beliefs, but, rather, as something needed to make their education much better and more meaningful and to give them greater access to the, hopefully increasingly multicultural, world. 



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