

## International Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Intersections of Culture and Language: Impacts on Language Education in South America

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**Abstract:** *This qualitative study investigated teachers' understandings of the interplay between culture and language at two, English language medium, international type schools in South America. A total of 33 teachers participated in the study by responding to two questions via an online, threaded, discussion board. Results indicate that teachers in these international schools see the environments in which they teach as culturally rich and as such and either empower or disempower students. Results also illustrate teachers' belief that the study of language cannot exist separate from an understanding of the sociohistorical context in which language occurs.*

**Keywords:** *international schools; language; culture; sociohistorical context, langaculture*

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### 1. Introduction

As our world continues a growing enrichment through economic, cultural, and educational interdependence, researchers continue to realize that teachers in international learning environments should encourage and enable the development of critical understandings of the intersection of language and culture in their classrooms. Such development, arguably, remains critical to the facilitation of international classrooms that provide stimulating and sensitive lessons to all stakeholders (Lovorn & Summers, 2011). Research also suggests that better understandings of students' culture, linguistic backgrounds, and intersection of the two can lead to more impactful teaching and more teacher-student relationships (Hruska, 2000b; Joseph, 2008). The purpose of this study attempted to explore perceptions and discussion threads among K-12 teachers at two international schools in South America about how they recognize and address intersections of language and culture in their schools, and what impacts these intersections have on learning environments.

Research indicates that international teachers' understandings (or misunderstandings) of their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds can have significant impacts on teaching and learning (Bennett, 1993; Hruska, 2000a; Lovorn & Summers, 2011). Research also suggests that most teachers in international classrooms recognize that their perceptions of language and culture impact students' perceptions of self, morale, and performance (Hruska, 2000b; Sunal, Christensen, Shwery, Lovorn & Sunal, 2010). Attention to students' self-perceptions remain paramount, as studies show these and related factors often influence their concepts of citizenship (Sunal, Christensen, Shwery, Lovorn & Sunal, 2010), communication (Merryfield, 2000; Sunal & Christensen, 2002), and sense of belonging (Banks, 2004; Lee & Recchia, 2008).

### 2. Method and Data Collection

Via an online discussion board, researchers asked two key questions in this study. First, "What are teachers' perceptions of cultural empowerment (and disempowerment) in international schools?", and second, "What are teachers' perceptions of the interface of language, and culture in international schools?" The study took place at two unique K-12 international schools in South America. The first school, referred to in this study as "School A", exists within a middle class neighborhood of a mid-sized city in a country with a relatively low socioeconomic status among its South American neighbors. The second school, referred to in this study as "School B", geographically resides in a wealthy neighborhood

of a densely populated metropolis in a country with a relatively high (and growing) socioeconomic status among its South American neighbors.

By way of an online discussion board, dialogue facilitation occurred between 33 teachers from the two schools. Of these participants, 14 were female and 19 male; 12 identified themselves as Caucasian/European, 12 identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino(a), and 2 identified themselves as of African Descent. In terms of classroom teaching experience, 73% (n=24) reported having been in the classroom for five years or less; 18% (n=6) reported having been in the classroom for six to ten years; and 9% (n=3) reported having been in the classroom for more than ten years.

The online discussion board design and management provided participants the ability to post their thoughts, observations and opinions, and to read and respond to the posts of others participants at both international schools. In an effort to generate rich dialogue, participants were asked to make at least three posts to complete the data collection activity; one original post, and two response posts to thoughts of others. Each participant met this minimal request, and many made several more posts which assured rich threaded discussions.

Content analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Neuendorf, 2002) of the threaded discussions was used for interpreting meaning expressed by participants, the categorization process focused on key questions as interconnected themes, and researchers implemented strategies to protect the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Study participants from School A and School B simultaneously discussed their perceptions of language and culture, and the impacts these factors have on the learning environment. Two major themes emerged from the threaded conversations: (1) these culturally rich international classrooms can empower and disempower students; and (2) language and culture cannot exist separate. Excerpts of threaded conversations have been included to demonstrate themes.

#### *Theme 1: these culturally rich international classrooms can empower and disempower students*

Participants discussed their thoughts, observations, and opinions related to teachers' recognition of cultural diversity and growth of cultural and socioeconomic diversity within in their classrooms and schools. Jason, a third-year secondary math teacher at School B, initiated the discussion by reporting about his school's diverse student body:

"[School B] is very diverse compared to my experiences growing up in the US. I grew up in rural Missouri, and our school was all white. Although most of our students speak Portuguese as their primary language, there are several cultures (and nationalities) represented."

Cintia, a second-year high school science teacher at School B, echoed Jason's observation and added:

"Our students come from families that have moved here from the United States, Canada, and Korea to work. This is why our school is so diverse. These families make good money to come here, and they can afford to send their kids to our school, so we benefit from their diversity. They also bring lots of great cultures into the school."

Raquel, a veteran art teacher at School A, pointed out that her school represents a diverse population as well:

"At [School A], we have students from many places too. Most are from our city. They are rich. But we have some students from other countries. Many of them speak two languages. They bring their culture into our school, and it's not all rich kids. Some of their parents are not rich and work very hard to pay for their education."

Several participants posted comments confirming this perceived diversity. James, a 7-year veteran teacher in his second year at School A said: "... we have students from about 12 different countries." Samuel, a new middle school language arts teacher at School A, added: "Our student body is more diverse than most schools in [the city]." Alberto, a fourth-year fourth grade teacher at School B pointed out:

"Our school is the most diverse in town too, and I think that is one of the things that makes us such a good school. We have a reputation for having students from all over the world. Many of the students speak multiple languages. They bring their culture into the classroom, and I like to have them share their cultures with the class. We all learn from the things they share."

As discourse continued, indications became clear that most participants also generally expressed that such diversity has

a positive and empowering impact on the learning environment. Carmen, a third-year high school language arts teacher opined:

"We encourage students to bring their culture into the classroom. I find this makes my lessons better, especially when we're reading literature because they can share similar cultural examples of metaphor or alliterations... Students really have a sense of accomplishment when they share experiences and stories in the classroom. I have even begun incorporating them into my lessons. I ask students to go home and talk to their parents about culture-specific stories they can share with the class."

Nicholas, a second-year elementary teacher at School B agreed and added:

"We do the same thing in our classes. We have students bring in examples of their culture. I find that it makes them feel more comfortable in the class. They ask more questions, answer more questions, and participate more too. I think it makes them feel they are part of something bigger, yet still unique in some way."

Annie, a veteran elementary school teacher at School A added to Nicholas' comment:

"We do this too, and I think it's good for all of us. I really think when I can get students interested in each other and where they're all from, we all benefit. My students like getting up in front of the room and sharing stories. I can even use it as a classroom management strategy, because they know if they do not behave, we will not have time to tell stories."

In sum, Consuelo, a high school history teacher at School A remarked: "Encouraging our students to share their culture and background in class does several things to help the teacher. First, it makes students comfortable to share about their backgrounds. Second, it gives them a chance to talk about themselves, which makes them feel important. Third, it helps their classmates learn about different cultures. And fourth, it teaches everyone to respect difference."

### *Theme 2: language and culture cannot exist separate*

Participants discussed their thoughts, observations, and opinions related to teachers' understanding of the interplay between language and culture as such occurs in the international schools in which they teach. One teacher at School B, Renata, commented on her role as a language teacher in 4th grade mathematics.

"I am a native speaker of Portuguese, but was educated in an international school where all of our subjects were taught in English. I remember being confused by the way that our teachers and textbooks used word problems in math. It is very different from the way that we are used to. It seems that my culture has a focus on calculation rather than discussion of mathematical procedures. I try to keep this in mind when teaching math to my students. That is to say, I remember and highlight for my students the cultural differences in the ways that language is used to frame mathematics in English as opposed to Portuguese."

Joseph, a North American and a 6th grade Mathematics and Science teacher at School A, agreed with Renata's statement and commented on a similar understanding of mathematics in his students.

"I see almost the same thing in my kids in 6th grade Math. They seem to be more comfortable with rote memorization of formulae and isolated facts rather than the critical thinking skills that are required in more abstract problem solving. I think that this has to do with the way that their culture approaches learning. They have the language skills to understand word problems but lack the cultural understanding to see the importance in knowing how to solve them. Of course I saw this when I taught in the U.S. but it wasn't as widespread here. For me the difference is the cultural frame of reference."

Carole, a novice teacher at School B and a native speaker of Portuguese added to the conversation by addressing some of the English and Portuguese proverbs that she teaches in her tenth grade language arts class.

"I think that it is important for my students to understand the manner in which both cultures approach language and wisdom through idioms and proverbs. For instance, all of my students know the proverb "cão picado por cobra, tem medo de linguiça," which when translated literally means "a dog that has been bitten by a snake is scared of sausages." The English equivalent of this expression is "once bitten, twice shy." For me the English is much more direct in its meaning. This highlights for me the way that Americans are so much more direct than Brazilians. When I teach these proverbs, I not only teach the words themselves but also the cultural understanding that my students need to have to

comprehend them.

Matthew responded to Carole's comment adding his thoughts on Spanish verses English proverbs.

[School A] is located in a fairly conservative, Catholic country and I believe that the proverbs that are used here reflect this. I grew up with my grandmother telling me "the early bird gets the worm." I recently learned that here the equivalent to this proverb is "a quien madruga, Dios le ayuda" which means "God helps those who get up early." In my opinion this reflects the importance of religion in [the country in which School A is located].

The discussion of language and culture was concluded by a veteran teacher, Terri. She is a native speaker of English and a part time administrator at School B.

"I really like this discussion thread. It has helped me to organize my thoughts about language and culture. While I have only been teaching here at [School B] for two years, I taught for nine years in Houston at a school where the majority of students were either Mexican immigrants or of Mexican descent. My students in Texas would try to understand their assignments from the Mexican perspective. For example they preferred collaborative work instead of individual work and would get frustrated with me when I insisted that they work by themselves. After a couple of months I came to understand that their culture regards socialization, even in work situations, more highly than individual work.

After a week or two here at [School B] I began to see the same thing. Student's value socialized work more than individualized work. When they do free writing they prefer to write about parties and games instead of their plans for the future schooling or their chosen profession. I don't see it as a lack of seriousness on their part, but instead a snapshot into their understanding of what it is to be Brazilian as reflected by their language."

### 3. Directions for further research

While the results of the content analysis in relation to the themes proved unanimously positive, there remain still implied questions that need investigation for further study and provocation of discussion concerning this particular population and the intersections of culture that occur. For instance, if language and culture cannot exist separate, what then actually causes the separation from social and cultural perspectives, i.e. what kinds of pre-existing administrative or social apparatus work to nullify or suppress existing cultural voices or identities? (Collins, 2000; Foucault, 1995). Also, the educators surveyed seem to rely on a feminist intersectional approach in respect to students sharing of cultural stories and perspectives through the encouragement of storytelling, oral presentation, and specific cultural practices (Collins, 2000). But how do such practices resonate outside of the school in the community? Does such sharing of stories resonate as a cultural norm, or do these instances within the classroom merely facilitate learning in isolation? While Carmen opined that the students receive encouragement to go home and share insights and stories with the family, how does the teacher follow up with the student in these instances?

So further parallels need illumination in order to understand if a global interdependence exists in the themes discussed by these educators and if the practices discussed by the educators could perhaps provide a good avenue for further discussions for implementing a more global and culturally sensitive curriculum. For instance in examining the response in the second theme, one can look at how Carole indicated the importance of recitation and discussion of proverbs in her curriculum as a reflection of the religious values of the population and her own implied beliefs. From an outside perspective, in trying to understand the cultural cache or value of such pedagogical practices, further research into the possible links between religion in the classroom versus not need addressing. The danger here can bubble up of relying too heavily on a relativistic viewpoint once one becomes situated within a cultural paradigm, and perhaps a phenomenological methodology could help serve the investigation of such cultural practices. However this does not mean one cannot completely discount the power of the researcher/participant narrative as an important tool in qualitative understandings in educational research.

### 4. Conclusions

Research on the impacts of cultural diversity in international classrooms indicates that students and teachers need more student-led exchange of culture-related ideas (Kapoor, 2004; Paige, 1993; Zeichner & Hoeff, 1996). Teachers' perceptions of students' cultural background can have both positive and negative impacts on the learning environment (Kumagai & Sato, 2009; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007).

Participants demonstrated that the schools included in this discussion generally recognize and celebrate the diversity of their students and use that to empower students to succeed in the classroom. Participants' facilitation of students' cultural expressions within their classrooms appears as a priority for teachers at both schools because they increase students' openness, positively affect their ownership of in-class activities, and enrich their overall learning experience.

The discussion that centered on language and culture stresses the fact that the study of language cannot occur void of an understanding of the culture in which a native or outside language practice occurs. Participants in this study seem to echo the thoughts of Agar (1994) and his notion of langaculture; a term that encapsulates the interconnectedness of language and the sociohistorical context in which the language has evolved and becomes implemented. Moreover their discussion reflects a broader push in linguistic studies for an investigation of both the mechanics and the social, interactive factors of language (Wertsch, 1991; Bruner, 1986). That is to say, they value the social dimensions of language use as well as the linguistics ones.

Implications from this study demonstrate these international school teachers' perceptions of the relationships between culture and learning significantly impact how they present material to students. Participants also recognize and speak to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These findings indicate that in these settings, attention to cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, multilingualism, and critical pedagogy provides teachers with immediate opportunities to socially and academically empower students.

Teachers remain challenged to help students explore their own cultural and linguistic identities and build upon them in ways to maximize learning. Global diffusion of cultures ensures that classrooms become more diverse each day. Participants in this study appear up to the challenge and indicated a willingness and ability to use culture and language as teaching tools.

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