

Effective Teaching Strategies in the Culturally Diverse Classroom

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Abstract

Many tertiary institutes in New Zealand have a large percentage of students who have English as an alternative language (EAL). The international students are primarily from Asia and have a "Confucian Heritage Culture" (CHC) background. The diverse needs of this student set have called for new applications of classroom teaching strategies. The key recurrent message from New Zealand industry, relates to the need for independent minded students with good problem-solving and communication skills in the workplace. Students with CHC backgrounds from Asian countries are not familiar with these skills, since they are not emphasised in their secondary education. This can create challenges for the New Zealand Lecturer who needs to manage the culturally diverse learning skills of the students whilst meeting industry requirements. This paper proposes a range of classroom teaching practices based upon a student-centered approach to learning that encourages EAL/CHC students to be more independent, critical thinkers with appropriate business communication skills.

Keywords: Effective , Teaching Strategies , Culturally Diverse , Classroom

1. Introduction

The diversity of the students, in the modern classroom, has required changes to be made to teaching and learning approaches. This paper explores the diversities of the students in a Marketing class at a tertiary institute in New Zealand and discusses how the increase in international students has required a review of traditional teaching approaches in order to determine those most applicable in this multicultural learning environment. The paper details four learning principles which, the author feels are particularly relevant to this group of students. Thereafter, four teaching strategies are suggested which would be effective in supporting their learning by creating a positive learning environment for them.

The increase in migration from Asian countries as per Legat (1996) in the mid-nineties has resulted in more students with English as an alternative language (EAL) entering Australasian Tertiary Institutes. This trend continues with international fee paying students coming to New Zealand in large numbers (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). More than 80,000 foreign students studied in New Zealand in 2005, earning the country close to \$2 billion and making education the fourth-largest export earner. Nearly 86% of all foreign fee paying students are from Asia and as described by Biggs (1996) of Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). The Ministry of Education has identified many other potential benefits, including greater diversity of programmes; exposure to different cultures and perspectives; enhanced facilities and teaching; and a wider international network (McKinlay, 2002).

2. Diversity in the Classroom

The term “diverse” is often used to describe classrooms with cultural diversities (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995), however, the diversities of learners go far beyond ethnic differences. The students hold a wide range of motivations for taking the course varying from the begrudging attendee who just wants the course credit to the enthusiastic student who has a thirst for knowledge in the subject. According to Zepke, Nugent and Leach (2003) these diverse motivations of students can lead to three different learning approaches: surface, deep and strategic learning.

Another way in which the students’ learning differs focuses on how individuals organise and process information. Differences in learning styles are covered by a number of learning style theories, including Honey and Mumford’s (1992) “four learning styles” theory and Roberts’ (1996) “Groupers and Stringers” theory.

In the classroom this diversity in individual learning styles and motivations is compounded by a Confucian/Western difference in learning environments. The Confucian Heritage Culture learning environment is expository and lecture driven as opposed to the more student-centred learning of Western cultures (Biggs, 1996).

With such a diverse class of students it is impractical to accommodate everybody, however, teaching styles should be varied enough so that individual learning preferences are recognised and addressed some of the time (Zepke et al, 2003).

3. Teaching Strategies and the EAL/CHC Student

The tendency to stereotype and infer that the learning strategies CHC students bring to our tertiary level context are inadequate and superfluous is misplaced. The CHC student certainly is used to learning environments that Ashman and Conway (1997) refer to as “teaching-centered” that commits students to rote and reproductive learning. However as Ballard and Clanchy (1991) have suggested, we must understand the contextual features that CHC students experience in their previous learning. For instance, these students come from highly competitive educational systems that emphasize examinations as the only measure of achievement. In addition, the relationship between the student and teacher is one where the teacher is placed on a pedestal as the source of all knowledge. Therefore students show great respect to Lecturers and consequently for example, do not question or speak out in class.

Since one of the major problems of CHC students is that they are lecture driven as opposed to learning through problem solving, the following four teaching strategies based on four relevant learning principles, are suggested to facilitate EAL/CHC students developing a more independent approach to learning.

4. Four Learning Principles

In the relatively new field of andragogy, defined as the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1980), many general learning principles abound. The four learning principles, selected for their relevance to the students are:

4.1. Adults learn best in a safe and secure social environment in which they can test new ideas and ways of doing things without the threat to their self-esteem (Clark, 1986).

This learning principle embodies not only creating an environment where students feel safe to learn but involves building mutual respect among lecturers and students.

As a large percentage of the students are EAL/CHC students, creating a friendly yet respectful environment where they will feel comfortable interacting with their peers and the lecturer is critical to their learning.

4.2. Independence, control and active engagement (Ramsden, 1992).

Ramsden (1992) states that high quality teaching recognises that students must be engaged with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach a better understanding. Actively involving students in more student-centred activities like small group work, encourages a degree of independence and choice over learning. This not only recognizes individual learning styles but the active engagement which takes place in relevant group discussions aids in their understanding of the subject and leads to a more practical yet enjoyable learning experience.

4.3. Appropriate assessment and feedback (Ramsden, 1992).

Ramsden's learning principle is also strongly supported by Vella (1997) in the following statement. "An adequate needs assessment is a basic principle of adult learning, which honours the fact that while people may register for the same program they all come with different experience and differing expectations".(p.4)

More appropriate assessments can be set for the students if their differing needs are listened to at the beginning and throughout the course. Immediate feedback is extremely helpful to the EAL/CHC students as it not only encourages and reinforces understanding but also helps address any misunderstandings or misconceptions.

4.4. Interest and explanation (Ramsden, 1992).

According to Ramsden (1992) giving clear explanations of complex subject matter is mandatory; the ability to make the learning genuinely interesting and relevant to the student will engender more pleasurable learning.

Giving clear and explicit verbal and written explanations and objectives is always important when dealing with students with differing learning styles but no where more so than in the case of EAL/CHC students where the possibility of misunderstanding is so much higher due to language considerations.

Sharing of relevant personal experiences in the classroom helps students contextualize the information that might otherwise be unfamiliar to them and develops self-confidence and communication skills.

5. Four Teaching Strategies

The following teaching strategies have been selected with the objective in mind of creating a positive learning environment for the specific diversity of the students.

5.1. Assessments

Assessment is about getting to know the students and the quality of their learning (Rowntree, 1977). Apart from the obvious advantage of carrying out a needs assessment with the students at the beginning of the course, regular formative assessments are beneficial in the following ways:

- Formative assessments create opportunities for students to make mistakes and advance their learning through making these mistakes in a low risk environment because constructive feedback can be provided without the possibly demoralizing effect of a low mark or grade.

- Peer assessment is often even more beneficial than formal or informal feedback from the lecturer as the feedback can be more interactive.
- Formative assessments can be used as a lead- up to summative assessments to reduce the anxiety that summative assessments can evoke.

The provision of a conceptual framework with details on the line of questioning required helps in adopting an analytical approach. In addition a detailed marking criterion for the assignment indicating the weight given to each part also directs student effort appropriately. All this provides the CHC student with the logical sequential approach that they prefer.

Further strategies include:

- Linking the assignment to relevant parts of the text and the course objectives.
- CHC students could prepare an initial outline of their assignment to allow for corrections to be made before a lot of effort is made that may be wrongly directed.
- The provision of a feedback sheet that reflects the marking criteria originally given to the students also helps CHC and other students to evaluate areas that they can improve upon.

5.2 Lesson plans

A well structured lesson plan is a very effective way of communicating with students who have different learning styles and language skills. Writing appropriate learning outcomes on the whiteboard at the start of the session not only aids students in understanding what is expected of them but also creates “pathways to learning” by breaking down the lesson content into smaller, more easily understood parts.

A lesson plan that includes a variety of student- centred interactive or problem solving tasks that create interest and engagement will help students’ concentration levels and their understanding of the subject matter. Case studies are a good example of problem solving exercises but these should be handed out in advance for EAL/CHC students to read at their own pace.

Another strategy is to select end of chapter questions that will be used to review the lesson next class. This gives the EAL/CHC students time to prepare and subsequently the confidence to respond in the lesson review or even to ask questions to clarify content.

5.3. Questioning

Done correctly, questioning can be one of a Lecturer’s most powerful tools. According to Petty (1993) some of the advantages of questioning as a teaching method are that it:

- Displays the ‘logic’ of the subject and passes it on, encouraging understanding rather than rote remembering.
- Gives instant feedback on whether learning is taking place (to Lecturer and student).

Questioning can be used at the beginning of the lesson as an “ice-breaker”; places students in the “zone of learning” and helps them participate more confidently during the course of the lesson. Varying the type of questions asked makes the lesson more active and interesting for the students. The Lecturer may need to write the questions on the whiteboard, paraphrase the responses and repeat them more loudly to the rest of the class.

5.4. *Small Groups*

The very fact that the students are EAL/CHC students implies a lack of confidence to be able to participate in class discussions. Yet as Australian studies (Chalmers and Volet, 1997) have discovered, Asian students want a high degree of interaction with local students. Both aspects are true of even those students who have overcome their cultural barrier of not asking questions, discussing or volunteering opinions in class.

Small groups provide peer support for learning and create a cooperative learning environment where students can freely be involved in discussions and assume a variety of roles (Imel, 1998). The use of small project groups is especially advantageous as they allow both EAL/CHC students and less confident students to participate and learn to work with others as one does in the business world. These project group discussions can help students clarify more complex concepts and present an opportunity to build relationships.

6. Conclusion

Student diversity in all its forms has been the catalyst of change with regard to effective teaching and learning strategies in the classroom. The selected teaching and learning strategies are more applicable when teaching in a diverse and multicultural environment. A good understanding of the students' diversities is essential in order to optimise the learning process. To quote Zepke et al (2003) "The more we learn to appreciate different perspectives, branches of knowledge and ways of being, the more our teaching can cater for difference and diversity" (p.10). The application of the selected teaching strategies should help the students attain the skills that will facilitate an easier transition into the NZ workplace.

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