

Prejudice in the ESL Classroom

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This article about issues and strategies looks at the need for teachers to recognize prejudice among students in Canadian ESL classrooms. The author notes the lack of information on this topic in TESL courses and publications. A sampling of responses from ESL teachers interviewed about the issues is included and serves to highlight the need for more training and other forms of assistance. Finally, a collection of classroom activities is presented as ideas to encourage learners to honor diversity.

Cet article repose sur des questions et des stratégies touchant la nécessité pour les enseignants de reconnaître les préjugés chez les étudiants dans les salles de classe d'ALS au Canada. Nous signalons le manque d'informations à ce sujet dans les cours et les publications TESL. L'échantillon de réponses provenant d'entrevues auprès d'enseignants d'ALS qui est présenté met en évidence le besoin de formation supplémentaire et d'autres stratégies d'appui. Une compilation d'activités pour la salle de classe propose des idées pour encourager les apprenants à respecter la diversité.

Introduction

TESL students are being trained in top-quality university programs in Canada on the principles of teaching, methodologies specific to TESL, the nature of cross-cultural communication, and linguistics. TESL students also benefit from current books in the field and academic journals such as the *TESL Canada Journal*.

However, there is a lack of information in these courses and publications. That gap is an understanding and awareness of the prejudice that occurs in ESL classes among the students toward one another. There is a need for educators to prepare TESL students to deal with ESL students' prejudice in the classroom. This article has a twofold purpose: to look at the issue of prejudice in Canadian ESL classes and to provide the ESL teacher with classroom ideas that promote the honoring of diversity.

Definition

Prejudice originates from Latin and Old French: *pre* means "before" and *judge* means "decide." For the purposes of this article, prejudice is defined as an

attitude of hostility, possibly including injury or damage, directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics. Prejudice may include dislike or distrust of another for perceived differences in race, religion, country, ethnicity, culture, sex, class, age, education, clothing, skills, physical features, sexual orientation, weight, and/or abilities. Prejudice is displayed when an overt attitude, statements, and/or actions reflect negativity based on one or more of these differences.

In the context of teaching ESL, one might think of prejudice in relation to the treatment of new immigrants to Canada. Certainly immigrants are faced with various types of prejudice in their new country. However, the focus of this article is on prejudice that occurs in the ESL classroom among the students toward one another. The most apparent types of prejudice revealed by the teachers interviewed were race, sex, clothing, culture, and class.

Background

Canada has made many advances in the area of tolerance. Adult educators Selman, Cooke, Selman, and Dampier (1998) insist that “there is an ever-increasing reliance on a *tolerance of differences* in order for the weave of Canadian society to remain strong” (p. 118, italics added). Many ESL classes in Canada combine students from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and other geographical areas. Most of these areas do not have the diversity of ethnicities that Canada has. Therefore, many of these students may not have grown up learning about acceptance of people who are different.

I witnessed first hand both racial and educational prejudice when I was teaching at a summer English Camp in Slovakia, Eastern Europe. While playing baseball one afternoon, several of the 20 Hungarian students were the objects of racist comments from some of the 280 Slovak students. The comments were serious enough that the Hungarian mothers considered not allowing their children to come back to camp the next day. Also, educational prejudice occurred when more advanced students teased a beginning student in my conversation class. Initially I was not aware of this teasing because the comments were in the Slovak language. The fact that two types of prejudice were displayed in a *two-week* class of *12-year-olds* shows the need for ESL teachers to be aware of this occurrence and to have strategies to deal with it.

Search of Literature

After witnessing prejudice in Slovakia, I searched for literature on this subject. Extensive searching in two Canadian university libraries, three United States public libraries, academic databases such as ERIC and EBSCO, and years of back issues of three TESL journals (*TESL Canada Journal* from 1984-2004, *TESOL Quarterly* from 1967-2004, and *TESOL Journal* from 1991-2004)

uncovered three articles that came close to addressing this issue in an ESL context.

1. A journal article by MacDonald (1990) in *Convergence* describes refugee education classes in Oregon. MacDonald states, "The multi-ethnic nature of the PET [Pre-Employment Training] classroom, while somewhat more difficult for the teacher, encourages the groups to find common ground, to help each other, and to hopefully overcome stereotypes and prejudices they may have of each other." However, the article does not provide any further information on how the students "hopefully overcome stereotypes and prejudices" (italics added).
2. Starkey and Osler's (2001) article in the *Curriculum Journal* describes pedagogical challenges in language learning and antiracism and attests that "one of the goals of language teaching is to challenge stereotypes." However, the authors conclude that this study in an Open University French course revealed that "issues of race and racism are not presented in their complexity and that the materials and learning tasks unwittingly tend to reinforce stereotyped views."
3. Ortmeier (2000) published an article in *TESOL Journal* that resonates with some of my findings when she writes, "In ESL classrooms in the United States, students of diverse backgrounds who speak an array of languages often begin to exhibit prejudice toward fellow ESL students" (p. 10). She also states that as a beginning ESL teacher, she did not expect this "level of prejudice and division," which confirms my belief that ESL teachers in training are not being prepared to address this issue in the classroom.

Some sources expose faculty members' biases against students. For example, the video *Inequity in the Classroom* produced and directed by d'Entremont (1991) examines subtle gender and racial biases that female students frequently encounter in colleges, universities, and adult education settings. However, the focus is on inequity displayed by instructors; students' biases are not addressed.

Despite the lack of literature on this topic, the international education association Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL) *did* address these issues at their 2002 convention in Utah, the first TESOL Peace Forum in 2003 in Washington, DC, and the 2004 TESOL Peace Forum in New York. Because of the September 11 tragedies in the US, the Middle East conflicts, and the recognition that "it is in [ESL] classrooms that the world comes together," the 2002 convention program was "infused at all levels with presentations that dealt with the traditional peace education topics of nonviolent conflict resolution, tolerance, understanding, and valuing of diversity" (Schroeder, 2002). One presentation at this convention was titled *The ESL Teacher's Role in Confronting Prejudice*. The 2004 Peace Forum featured workshops on diversity in the classroom, conflict management, and

confronting prejudice. It appears that ESL education leaders are beginning to see the need to equip teachers with tools to confront this dilemma. However, only a small percentage of teachers and teachers-in-training are able to attend these conventions.

Teachers' Experiences

An ESL teacher in a Canadian university declared, "Racism is rampant amongst my ESL students." E-mail interviews of three other experienced western Canadian ESL teachers documented extensive prejudice among students toward one another. One teacher replied that he would "love to" help with this article "because it is a major issue in the ESL classroom, but it isn't often addressed adequately, nor is it often covered in the TESL program." The teachers' names are withheld due to the sensitive nature of the quotes.

When I asked the teachers what groups displayed prejudice in their classes, their responses were as follows: Japanese, Polish, Korean, East Indian, Jamaican, French Canadian, Latin American, Vietnamese, Chinese, European, Asian, African, Hindus, Kurds, Arabs, Punjabis, Pakistanis, Somalis, Salvadorans, and others. One of these teachers also asserts that he has observed prejudice in every ESL class he has ever taught, "especially if a class is one race."

It is clear that every group is capable of displaying prejudice. It is also likely that every person has some thoughts of prejudice. Author Gioseffi (1993) agrees with this viewpoint:

None of us can be perfectly free of social prejudices, those subtle stereotypical reactions to surnames or cultural backgrounds or skin tones or eye slant or nose width and breadth or sexual orientation that are jumbled in the haunted attic of our psyches, causing us to prejudge people before any evidence is in. (p. xxvi)

To grasp fully the need for ESL teachers to be educated to recognize prejudice, it is necessary to examine the explicit details of what takes place in ESL classrooms. The specific language in the teachers' accounts of prejudice can be disturbing. Perhaps the reason there is a gap in TESL literature and training on this subject is because the specifics are shocking. The following condensed quotes from experienced ESL teachers in Canada represent their observations of behavior displayed in their classrooms (general statements and specific examples used with permission; once again, names are withheld because of the sensitive nature of the quotes).

Teacher A

1. Racial prejudice—Typically Europeans against Asians; Asians (especially Koreans) against Blacks, either African or dark-skinned South Asians. In the past I've also seen problems between two similar racial groups, such as Vietnamese and Chinese, Kurds and Arabs, or

others on two sides of conflicts. Koreans and Chinese don't always get along with Punjabis, partly due to clothing and hygiene differences.

2. Gender prejudice—There's definitely a lot of gender prejudice: Arab or Middle Eastern men do not like female teachers or sitting in a class with female students (sorry to generalize—I've also had some wonderful students from this group). In part, Arabic/Middle Eastern culture demands that a man walk into a room and control the situation, either by conversation or by "presence." I've also heard Pakistani men make statements like, "Women shouldn't be allowed to handle money or do banking."

Some Somali and Arabic women won't mix with men due to religious reasons. Somalis will not shake hands with the opposite sex. One Somali woman asked for a nurse's aid course just for women, with women teachers, and wanted to work in a female-only hospital.

3. Clothing prejudice—There is some clothing prejudice, mostly against Somali or Arabic women who dress conservatively.
4. Cultural prejudice—Koreans and Chinese get "grossed out" at the Arab women washing their feet in the sink (during Ramadan before they pray).

Teacher B

1. Racial prejudice—Usually differences between Latin Americans and Vietnamese. Also, between the Chinese and the East Indians.
2. Cultural prejudice—An El Salvadoran student was very insulted because, in a U-shaped desk arrangement, she was looking at the bare feet of the female Vietnamese students who had kicked off their shoes and put their feet up to rest on some empty chairs opposite her. More than once I heard Chinese saying East Indians smell bad. I also heard East Indians saying Chinese eat dogs.

Teacher C

1. Class prejudice—Eight Korean students were taking the same seminary courses and were in my advanced ESL class. Half of the class, Group A (I'll use this generically) students, had all been pastors of large churches in Korea, and the other half, Group B students, had only done some lay work in the church. There was quite a competitive spirit between the two groups: They did not mix in the class discussion. They showed prejudice and dissension when members of the other group would talk. And there was noticeable tension if I interacted more with one group. Group A did not want to learn English with Group B students because they weren't as experienced, nor did they have the same standing in their eyes. Group B was willing to study with Group A, as long as Group A didn't look down on them. Some of the Group A students

actually said, "They're not pastors; we don't want to be with them." Group A asked if I would be willing to have classes with just them, and they would pay me double. I told them, "No!" and that I would not play into their prejudices. Group A said it wasn't a prejudice issue, it was a world-view issue. I started a long Biblical discussion and told them that I would rather not have any of them in my class. One student did come, but the other three never darkened the doors of the classroom again. I have since talked with the other three, and they show no sign of remorse. In discussions with other Koreans, they have told me about a lot of the prejudices that they carry in their country to people of other races, women, and economic and cultural hierarchies. I have seen it on a number of occasions since.

2. Gender prejudice—In an intermediate classroom, the Punjabi men always interrupted the women when they were talking. I took each man aside and told him not to interrupt or to raise his hand, but it didn't work. A woman from Slovakia was talking about a book she had read. One of the Punjabi men started talking and drowning her out. The Slovak woman raised her voice louder. Another student, an Indian woman, motioned to the Slovak woman to keep quiet. I asked the Punjabi man why he interrupted. He said that he didn't interrupt, he just wasn't interested in what the woman was saying. I told him that he should remain quiet when someone is speaking. He said (verbatim), "It is just a woman speaking—what she has to say is not important." The Indian woman was nodding her head. I had a talk with the whole class about cultural definitions of prejudice. I told the Punjabi men that their behavior could have them removed from my class. They were shocked by my forthrightness, as was the Indian woman, who said that the men shouldn't be talked to that way. I had each of them write a paper on prejudice with regard to women's roles in society (due the next week). I explained how Canada views prejudice and the role of women in society. I told the Indian woman that I respected her beliefs and welcomed her comments, but that others had different views and that she was free to talk in class without fear of being judged by myself, the other classmates, or the Punjabi men. I told the Punjabi men that the rule of the classroom was respect, based on a Western definition, not their definition. I asked them if they were aware of who determines rules in the classroom. They unanimously said, "The teacher." I gave them the rules and said that if they continued to transgress them, they would be removed. They got the message! The good thing about it was that it spawned a few weeks of discussion about each student's culture and their culture shock in Canada. There were a few problems afterward, but they were easy to deal with. The Indian woman blossomed after that and spoke freely in class. She was in my classes for

a few years. The Punjabi men stayed in the class. The one that was the biggest problem ended up studying with me for three years. We became good friends, although we never agreed on several issues.

Classroom Ideas

The experiences of these ESL teachers bring to light the need to alleviate prejudice. As TESOL President Neil Anderson (2002) points out in his message in *TESOL Matters*, "As TESOL professionals, we can play a significant role in peace education because our teaching can lead to better understanding among individuals of differing beliefs" (p. 3).

Certainly ESL teachers can nurture respect, empathy, and kindness to overcome prejudice and intolerance. We can do this in two ways: (a) A teacher's example, through attitude, body language, and words has the potential to deliver a stronger message than any activity or curriculum. Although this article does not deal with the teacher's example, there is need for further detail in that area. (b) This article focuses on promoting awareness and acceptance through lesson ideas including film, a variety of activities, readings, and writing tasks.

Films

Peters (1985) produced a video documentary titled *A Class Divided* that deals with prejudice at an experiential level. In this documentary, retired elementary schoolteacher and antiracism crusader J. Elliott demonstrates a superiority experiment with groups of children and adults who are segregated by eye color. This psychologically painful experience forever opened the eyes of many of the children to the injustice of prejudice. This video (as well as other videos featuring Jane Elliott) is an excellent classroom tool for active discussion and self-examination.

This is only one example; of course there are many other videos that are relevant and may be effective. The National Film Board of Canada (<http://www.nfb.ca>) is an excellent resource.

Activities

Various activities can be used in an ESL classroom to increase awareness of attitudes of prejudice and/or to help the students get to know one another's uniqueness in a positive way. Thoughtful and careful introductions, debriefings, and interaction need to accompany these activities to ensure helpful outcomes.

"What's in a name?" exercise. Students write the answers to these questions

1. Who gave you your name? Why?
2. What is the ethnic origin of your name?
3. What are your nicknames, if any?
4. What do you prefer to be called?

Students divide into pairs and discuss their answers. Information about origin and other aspects of names can be found at the Web site, www.behindthename.com.

"Life Line"

This is a timeline for the students to fill out with important dates from their personal lives. Students divide into pairs and discuss their noted events. Alternatively, students can receive much insight by completing timelines on the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights activists.

"Cultural Handbag"

Each student writes various identifiers of his or her culture on a paper with the outline of a large handbag. Cultural identifiers may include food, clothing, nationality, values, religion, political preferences, sexual orientation, and so forth. Students divide into pairs and discuss their cultures.

"Nonverbal Communication in a Multicultural World"

Students discuss nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, facial expressions, body orientation, gestures, interpersonal distance, vocal cues, greetings, and so forth. This could encourage a discussion of individual styles and increase understanding of classmates' cultural patterns. One excellent resource for this discussion is *Nonverbal Communication in a Cross-Cultural Context* by Howie Southworth, available on the Internet at: <http://www-1.gsb.columbia.edu/cis/training/acrostuff/tooHOT.research.pdf>.

"Different Drummers"

A reading from the book *Please Understand Me* by Keirseay (1998) could be discussed in class. Here is an excerpt.

If I do not want what you want, please try not to tell me that my want is wrong.... Or if I act, or fail to act, in the manner of your design for action, let me be.... Not that you embrace my ways as right for you, but that you are no longer irritated or disappointed with me for my seeming waywardness. And in understanding me, you might come to prize my differences from you, and, far from seeking to change me, preserve and even nurture those differences.

"The Race"

This is a Manning Marable parable adapted by Thompson and Disch (1992) and published in *Radical Teacher*. It talks about and visually represents a race between two people of different ethnicities. The runner who represents the nondominant ethnicity is shackled before the race starts and cannot move. The official does nothing about the inequity, so a spectator from the stands undoes the shackles. Many in the crowd are angry; the person who inter-

vened is arrested. The previously shackled athlete is now able to run and although late and injured, almost catches up to the opponent who has been declared the winner. The shackled participant calls for a rematch in which the other participant is shackled at the beginning, stating that this is the only way a second race would be fair because he was injured by the shackles during the first race. The official declines this solution saying that in the interest of fairness, the race will be run again with each person starting at the same time without shackles. Discuss the parable. Ask thought-provoking questions such as Have there been times in your life when you were the shackled runner? How did that feel? Did anyone help remove your shackles? Why was the helper in the story arrested? Have there been times in your life when you've run against a shackled runner? What did you do? Have you ever been an official in an unfair situation? What did you do? Have you ever had the courage to get out of the stands and intervene when you observed an unfair race? How did that feel? What does this parable say to us today? How does it affect you?

"Identity"

Each student answers identity questions on six different-colored strips of paper. The questions are:

1. Male or female. Where were you born (rural or urban), and what culture did you grow up in?
2. What did you want to become at the age of 10, and what type of education did you receive?
3. What education did your parents have, and what were their approximate earnings when you graduated from grade 12?
4. What religion do you practice, and how does it affect your life?
5. What obstacles or barriers do you face in realizing your goals today?
6. Identify two things you value in your life today.

Corresponding colored bags are passed around the classroom for students to insert their colored strips. Bags are passed around a second time and each student takes a strip of paper out of each bag. The six new strips of paper represent a new identity for that person. He or she is to imagine being that person, write a narrative about it, and discuss it with a partner.

"Diversity Collage"

Students are divided into small groups to cut out magazine pictures that represent diversity to them and glue them onto a poster. Each group then explains the meaning behind the pictures in their collage to the entire class.

"Power Shuffle"

This is to build awareness of the variety of rank and privilege that are present in a group; to assist individuals to take their next step in coming to terms with their own rank and privilege or lack of it; and to invite participants to

learn to be allies and motivate them to do so. Everyone lines up in the middle of the room. The instructor reads a series of characteristics and asks the students to take a step silently forward or backward as applicable. Examples: If you graduated from college, take a step forward. If you are female, take a step backward. The instructor needs to be careful with the selection of statements because some could do emotional damage; and the discussion and debriefing afterward need to be handled wisely. However, one can go too far in filtering questions for this activity. We should not fear discomfort because that is where learning starts. The instructor needs to consider strongly where the learners are emotionally, mentally, and experientially. The entire exercise is available on director Lakey's *Training for Change* Web site: <http://www.trainingforchange.org/tools/power-shuffle.html>.

Drama

Weiss (2002), an ESL drama teacher in Australia, developed an antiracism project with 20 students involving workshops (including non-violent conflict strategies), a cultural camp with visits to Aboriginal sites, and opportunities for students to write radio plays, songs, poems, conduct interviews, and consider strategies for dealing with racism. The students learned production techniques and produced a half-hour *Anti-Racism Radio Show* that was recorded on CD (a copy for each student) and played on a local community radio station. The author agrees with Wright (2000) in asserting that drama is "a method of communicating that is much better adapted to the human process of understanding and orientating than the abstract and denotative teaching prevalent in schools" and is therefore useful in diversity issues. Weiss concludes with the benefits of this project: (a) stumbled on a communal way of playing as part of its process; (b) developed its own self-organizing system; (c) allowed participants to become more aware of their "ecology of culture"; and (d) provided the students with a voice (about branches, roots, and causes of racism) to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and stories to the wider community.

Project Homeland

Ortmeier's (2000) journal article mentioned above outlines an excellent project with each student representing his or her homeland. The project includes journaling, library research, parent interviews, written reports, peer editing, posters, public speaking practice, and public presentations for family members and others. Near the conclusion of this unit, Ortmeier observes that the students "begin to exhibit a deeper appreciation for the diversity of their peers" (pp. 16-17), form bonds of friendship, work together despite different backgrounds, and break the barriers between the cultures. "Project Homeland" is a huge learning experience with many positive outcomes.

Readings

ESL reading material can also promote prejudice awareness. Books such as Lobb's (1996) series on *16 Extraordinary Asian Americans*, *16 Extraordinary African Americans*, and *16 Extraordinary Hispanic Americans* can go far in creating respect for others. They can also restore cultural pride. Miller's (1992) book on bigotry describes cultural pride: "Each group has characteristics that make it special ... Cultural pride is good for building confidence and self-esteem, but it can be a negative force when it leads to attitudes of superiority" (pp. 36-37). This jump from cultural pride to superiority is a fine line of which ESL teachers need to be aware.

Writing

Another thought-provoking classroom activity is writing. ESL students can be given the opportunity to recount their experiences and express their views about prejudice or any topic of their choosing. As the teacher reinforces how important the student's writing is to others (classmates, relatives, penpals, newsletter readers, Internet contacts, etc.), that student may receive emotional healing. Literacy developers Cummins et al. (1990) believe that "Ample opportunities for expressive writing appear to be particularly significant in promoting a sense of academic efficacy among minority students" (p. 60). Educators Hidalgo, McDowell, and Siddle (1990) endorse this belief through their statements that writing gives students "a sense of power" and "confidence" that "can even overcome some limits of training or development" and their progress is "strongly influenced by the extent to which individual educators become advocates for the promotion of students' linguistic talents" (pp. 60-64).

Giovanni's (1994) *Racism 101* suggests counteracting prejudice through weekly writers' workshops for the students' parents and grandparents: "Older people have stories to tell ... The desire to put the story on paper can ... overcome the older generation's fears of the different and the unknown" (pp. 110, 194). If it is not possible for the parents and grandparents to be involved at the school, students could help their relatives write stories at home. Barillas (2000) describes written homework assignments that bring parents' voices into the classroom. This program "affirms, respects, and acknowledges the experiences, culture, and [first] language of students and their families" (p. 302). A topic such as *advice* is chosen, a book is published in the classroom, and an authors' reception is held with optional oral readings. Barillas' program has seen a 75% parent involvement rate, and bonds of appreciation for one another have blossomed. Many cultures have strong family ties, and it makes sense to involve the family in multicultural acceptance.

Conclusion

A workshop at the 2002 TESOL convention promoted the “design of creative teaching materials to promote peace education goals.” ESL educators were being summoned to create proactive materials both for the ESL classroom and for the TESL classroom. It is time for us to step up to the plate and advance the honoring of diversity.

In conclusion, the goals of this article are twofold: It highlights the need for publications and courses to assist ESL teachers in dealing with prejudice among their students. It also underlines a need for our ESL students to recognize, as Elliott (2000) proclaims, “We are all different and have the right to be so.”

The Author

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