

Interview on the Impact of Culture

The twenty-first century marks a time of diversity. The demographics of the United States continue to change, and the rise and prevalence of technology means more people than ever are communicating on a worldwide scale. In order to ensure students are successful in this arena, educators must become proficient in providing multicultural education and explore their own views on culture and diversity.

In an effort to better understand culture, diversity, and language, two participants were selected for short interview sessions regarding their experiences acquiring a second language. The purpose of this interview was to identify factors that influenced the subjects' views on education and culture. A particular emphasis was placed on a cross-cultural view of education from the perspective of an English language learner. The interview questions were structured in a way that would elicit not only views on education but also provide insight into the transition from one education system to another, as well as cultural factors that were impacted as a result of relocating to a new country (see Appendix A).

Participants

The first individual selected for the interview was a 26-year-old male college student enrolled at the University of Kansas. He is currently obtaining his second Bachelor's degree, majoring in Neurobiology. Selection of this individual was based on the fact that he and his family moved to the United States from Uzbekistan when he was 9 years old. Prior to moving to the United States, he spoke only Russian. The researcher met this participant during the completion of undergraduate coursework, thus the

interview had a casual approach. The meeting took place in a coffee shop over the course of an hour.

The second interviewee selected for the study was a 34-year-old female college student, also enrolled at the University of Kansas. She is currently taking classes at the Applied English Center to advance her mastery of English prior to taking graduate courses in Social Work. She was selected for an interview based on her recent move to the United States from Saudi Arabia with her husband and three young sons. The researcher met this participant through the Applied English Center and served as her one-on-one English tutor once a week for a semester. The interview was conducted at the university's union over the lunch hour.

Learning a New Language

Both participants came to the United States with the need to learn English. The male participant came as a child and thus was quickly enrolled in an English-only elementary school. Rather than receiving services from an ESL teacher, the subject's parents elected to have him stay in the regular classroom because they wanted him to be immersed in the language. The participant found that learning a new language came easy once he started school. For the first several days in his new classroom, the subject recalled sitting back and watching everyone. He heard certain phrases repeated throughout the day and began trying to use them. Over the first several weeks, his ability to speak English developed rapidly. He recalls that his younger brother, who was in kindergarten at the time, picked up English even quicker than he did. He recalls it took their parents much longer.

In contrast, when the female participant arrived in the United States, she spoke a small amount of English that she had learned in Saudi Arabia. However, she needed to further develop her communication skills in order to understand and communicate during courses on campus. Her English placement test indicated that her English was at “Level I,” placing her in entry-level grammar, speaking, and listening courses. During these courses, one strategy she found particularly useful in learning and remembering new words was to write them phonetically in her native language. This helped her when she was studying outside of class to remember what the instructor had said. Although she is a dedicated student, she expressed that she has occasionally felt frustrated when trying to convey certain ideas in English, but that this strategy is one way for her to practice words and improve her speaking ability.

Views on Education

Both participants expressed positive views on education. As a child in Uzbekistan, the male subject’s family emphasized the importance of receiving an education. Each of his parents had achieved the highest honor of earning a red diploma upon graduating from medical school. This was atypical in their community, as education was not highly valued. This area of the Soviet Union lacked good jobs at the time, and people were encouraged to join the army rather than attend college. Despite this, his parents instilled in him from an early age their belief that nothing was more important than receiving an education.

Education in Uzbekistan was very different from the United States. The male participant recalled fondly that the elementary school he attended had mandatory

chess lessons as part of the curriculum. He also recalled that each year he had the same classmates and the same teacher, rather than the reorganizing of students as is customary in the United States. The teacher he had throughout elementary school had a cold demeanor and regularly insulted the children, calling them names and criticizing their ability even though the school was a prestigious school for gifted children. As a result, he began to feel particularly weak at mathematics despite being incredibly bright. Upon arriving in the United States, the male participant was surprised at how nice and encouraging his new teacher was. He shared that she gave him a copy of "Where the Red Fern Grows," which he read multiple times and still has to this day.

The female participant also shared positive views on education, but from the perspective of a teacher. She shared that back home in Saudi Arabia she had worked as a lecturer at a women's university. This position was highly valued by the participant, as she enjoyed sharing knowledge with her students and being looked up to as knowledgeable. The university recognized her strengths as an educator and obtained funding for her to come to the United States to obtain a PhD in social work, after which she would return to her position at the university. She expressed that she was honored to have been selected and was eager to return and begin working with her students again.

Challenges

Both participants experienced challenges when moving to a new country and learning a second language. For the male student, making friends proved to be the most difficult task. The school he attended was not very diverse and his classmates were

weary of him because he looked and spoke differently from them. He recalled being made fun of a great deal early on. However, the thing that improved his social status and led to acceptance from his peers was a passion for basketball. He had learned to play the game from his grandmother, who had played in college. The same kids who had made fun of him in the classroom loved to play basketball with him at recess. He recalled that being good at basketball was the way he earned respect from the other children and overcame the challenge of being accepted by his peers.

As an adult coming to a new country, the female participant experienced a different set of challenges due to the difference in cultures. Coming from Saudi Arabia, she was used to covering up her body in the presence of men outside her family and never wearing makeup in public. Upon relocating to a progressive college town in the United States, she and her family were shocked to see young women jogging in their neighborhood and around campus wearing skimpy clothing. She also recalled the shock of her young boys witnessing a couple kiss while they were shopping at the grocery store. She shared that her boys had never even seen their parents kiss in front of them, so this action came as very alarming to them.

Another difficulty experienced by the female participant upon relocating to a new country was the change in social status that she experienced. Back home in Saudi Arabia, she held a position at a university and lived in a very nice home in a wealthy part of town. She had a driver and a chef and a maid that assisted her with housekeeping and errands. However, upon relocating to the United States, she found the cost of living to be much more expensive. She now has to do all the housework and errands without

outside help, in addition to completing her schoolwork and caring for her family, which has been a major adjustment. In addition, rather than being looked up to as a lecturer, she is now in the roll of student and does not always feel respected. These changes have at times made her want to pack up and go back home to return to her family and her old job. However the drive to earn her education allows her to carry on.

Discussion

The interviews with the two participants elicited several interesting findings. First, there was a stark contrast in the two participants' acquisition of a second language. While English came naturally for the male participant as a child, the female participant experienced more struggles and apprehension learning a second language as an adult. Despite the vast age difference in the two participants, these varying view points are not unlike those encountered in a single classroom, whether at the elementary, middle, high school, or collegiate level. Educators must be prepared to differentiate instruction in order to reach all learners.

One way educators can respond to the varying level of needs in their students is to teach to their strengths (Howard, 2003). In the case of the male participant who was highly visual during his acquisition of a second language, this might mean providing visual cues and associations for new words or when providing instructions. For the female participant, this might mean taking advantage of her ability to dissect words phonetically or letting her share her interpretation in her native language with a peer in order to clarify meaning. While this approach requires the educator to get to know their

students and recognize their strengths, sometimes without being told, it will ultimately lead to better outcomes for students.

Another interesting finding from the interviews is the impact that a single teacher can have on a student. As evidenced by the male student's experiences, his teacher in Uzbekistan had a lasting negative effect on him. For years he avoided math as a result of his teacher's belittling, until he finally realized that he enjoyed math and was quite good at it. In contrast, a teacher can also have a lasting positive effect on a student as well by having high expectations (Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008). In the case of the male student, his teacher recognized that he was bright despite not having mastered the language, and pushed him to succeed.

In addition, the interviews provided insight into the need for educators to have intercultural awareness Baker (2011). Such awareness will provide educators with an understanding of the cultural differences their students may be experiencing upon coming to a new country or when attending a school that has a dominant culture that is different from the students'. In the example of the female participant, an educator would want to be mindful of the shock she experienced in a new community very different from her own. The educator might even be able to point towards resources or provide an outlet to talk about the community and aid in the adjustment. Having multicultural awareness will also allow for better communication as well as knowledge regarding how to interpret the behavior of students.

There were several notable areas not mentioned by the interviewees during the two sessions. Despite its utility for making connections and providing information,

neither participant mentioned the use of technology in the acquisition of a second language. The male participant may have been too young when he first arrived to have made use of technology for such purposes. Although the female participant mentioned using Skype to connect with family, she did not share experiences related to using the computer or other technological devices for learning a second language. One of the courses she took even took place in a computer lab and allowed the students to use dictionary and word processing software as a tool for learning. However, the female participant did not share this as a meaningful learning experience.

Conclusion

The interview sessions highlighted a number of key issues pertaining to culture, diversity, and language. While both interviewees had markedly different experiences, several key themes emerged from the sessions. Both participants had a strong desire to find academic success and to better themselves for their futures. Both participants experienced challenges and successes while learning a new language and adjusting to living in a new and unfamiliar country. Furthermore, both participants experienced difficulties in acclimating to a new culture and way of life that was vastly different from that in their native country.

These themes highlight the need for qualified and knowledgeable educators. As the number of English language learners continues to increase each year, this need only increases. Supportive and knowledgeable educators can ease the transition to a new culture. Furthermore, educators need to be knowledgeable of cultural differences in order to better provide instruction that meets the needs of all students. By doing so,

educators can ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn to their fullest ability.

References

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. How is education viewed in your home country in general?
2. How does your family view education?
3. When comparing schooling in your native country to the US, was it hard to adjust to an American classroom?
4. What is the biggest difference about life in the US from back home?
5. What was one of the most significant educational experiences in your life?
6. What challenges have you experienced with regard to education in the US?
7. Was there a time when you felt discouraged about learning after you moved to the United States?
8. Was English taught in your home country?
9. What were your experiences with socialization when you had limited language skills?
10. In your education, how has being bilingual helped you? Caused a disadvantage?
11. Do you recall specific strategies you have used either during instruction or assessment to help you better understand the content?
12. How did your teachers modify instruction/assessment to meet your needs when you did not speak the language?
13. What cultural differences have you noticed since moving to the US?