

# Teaching in multilingual classrooms

[Education](#)



The paper "Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms" is an outstanding example of an essay on education. My parents immigrated to Canada five years ago from South Korea and I was placed in an ESL class when I entered high school; this meant that I had to improve my English while continuing with my other studies. I studied English in Korea but I had only learned basic vocabulary, and because of the Grammar-Translation approach to teaching language, the focus was on grammar with no practice in speaking and listening. Although I was able to put a few sentences together orally, I was aware of my limited vocabulary and grammatical errors, as well as poor pronunciation. It did not take me long to realize that the teaching system, approach, and methods are very different in Canada and when teaching and learning English the focus is on all four major skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking; the teaching is also more student-focused rather than the teacher providing all the input and the student being a passive learner. Here in Canada, I have become more of an autonomous learner and able to understand how I best study and learn. In other words, I am more aware of my learning styles and the learning strategies that best work for me. ESL instruction should, therefore, emphasize training in language learning strategies and help students to be more aware of how they learn. As a teacher, I would ensure my awareness of the different ways in which students learn and try to develop lessons that take visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners into account.

On reflection, I realize that my first strategy was to imitate. Although I did not completely understand the teacher's instructions, I was able to follow by imitating and taking the lead from peers. The English teacher would usually teach a new language point and then start with class choral work before

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moving on to the small group, pair work and then individual responses. This allowed me the opportunity to imitate the other students and thus not only improve my language knowledge but to improve my pronunciation. My experience, therefore, provides evidence to Skinner, (cited in Coelho, 2004) who states that imitation through repetition is important in the early stages of acquiring a first language and learning a second language.

I learned and acquired English not only by study but by social interaction with teachers and peers (both local and ESL students). Different cultures and curriculum proved difficult for me at first but I was able to catch up with other studies because my ESL teachers and other proficient English speaking peers helped me to adapt to the new curriculum. The school also provided similar conditions for me to work with more proficient peers in the classroom and I know that this interaction helped me in first learning and then acquiring my second language. Vygotsky (1978) (cited in Coelho, 2004) states that when a child is acquiring their first language they learn best by interacting with peers that are at a higher level in language development than themselves they will learn better. He calls this the child's proximal development zone, which is defined as the level just beyond where the child is at. I now know that a similar process is evident in acquiring a second language. If a learner receives comprehensible input (Coelho, 2004) within their proximal development zone and the teacher provides scaffolds to help then they will acquire the second language more easily. This was obviously the case for me.

My language learning experiences have been very positive and other students, both local and ESL, did not consider me as different to them and were eager and happy to include me in all activities. The ESL teacher was

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also very patient and helpful. I was a shy student and did not want to lose face by making mistakes but he responded to my errors in a respectful manner by providing feedback without embarrassing me. I now know that this teaching approach and peer respect is considered a means of a student's development of integrative motivation and helped me to overcome my shyness, embarrassment at making errors and increased my confidence in both learning and using English.

In my ESL class, I was only allowed to speak English, so I thought that insisting on English was the best way to learn it. I did not know that a learner's second language is an important foundation for learning a second. I also did not know that my knowledge of and ability in my first language helped me to work and think at a higher level in English. This realization has taught me that first language development is an advantage to learning vocabulary and grammar in a second language because of higher cognitive development and is thus important for teachers to take this into account.

In acquiring my second language I am now more aware of what language is. I now know that knowing a language is being aware of its phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax; all of which I have acquired to some extent and still learning in others.

I also realize by learning a second language that because of my knowledge of a first language I unconsciously looked for patterns or paradigms and in doing so I very often overgeneralized (Coelho, 2004) with rules, such as past tense patterns and comparative rules. I also went through different stages of interlanguage – a term I did not know at the time and was therefore unaware of the process. I found myself making errors and using words or structures that were not correct in my first or second language. I kept

making the same certain grammatical or semantic errors for a long time and in fact, I know I may have fossilized with some.

Some linguists purport that after puberty a person's instinctive capability to acquire language weakens. This time in a person's life is considered to be a 'critical period' (Coelho, 2004) for language acquisition. Although younger people may acquire a language more easily than older people I believe that the environment plays a major role in their acquisition. Young people have better and more opportunity to interact with native speakers in school.

Students after puberty, however, can also succeed in acquiring English not only because of their first language development but because some may have a talent for learning languages. As stated earlier, I have an accent when speaking English but my Korean friend, who also came to Canada after puberty has no accent at all and she is very fluent.

In summary, my experiences in Canada as a second language learner of English have impacted on the way in which I would teach and therefore have pedagogical implications for me. I would certainly be aware of different language learning styles and strategies of my students; I would encourage autonomous learning, peer interaction, especially lower students with higher-level peers, environments that are conducive to learning, and encourage students to use their first language as a foundation for their second language learning experience.