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Article 26

Creating a Culturally Sensitive Environment for Second Language Learners in Counselor Education Programs

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In counselor education, we ask our students to be culturally sensitive and competent when working with culturally different clients, but do we model this behavior for our students? As educators, we ask our students to be sensitive to their clients on a variety of cultural issues such as language, religion, size, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and so forth. We spend considerable time and energy infusing such concepts into our curriculum, evaluating our trainees on their abilities to build cross-cultural relationships, and on student ability to understand deeper client meanings, especially with clients who are not culturally similar (Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, & Ortega, 2005).

However, are we, as counselor educators, practicing what we preach in the classroom? Are our interactions with our students following a similar paradigm or are we holding culturally different students to the prescribed standards of the dominant North American Western culture? For example, are we, as counselor educators, culturally sensitive to second language (L2) learners in our classrooms?

This issue is an extremely important topic because there are more students in U.S. colleges and universities who are non-native English speakers than ever before in our history due to increased immigration rates (Part-Taylor, Walsh, & Ventura, 2007). It is estimated that by the year 2050, there will be a 213% increase in the population of Asian Americans, a 188% increase for Hispanic Americans, and a 71% population increase for African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Because counseling is primarily a verbal profession, language is important in counselor education programs. The primary language of counselor education students is also an important cultural variable that seems to be overlooked in counselor education

programs, as it is not being addressed in the empirical literature. The purpose of this article is to (1) highlight the lack of attention to this issue in the counselor education literature, and (2) offer a research-based rationale that instructor attention to this issue can increase the success of second language learners by modeling the cultural sensitivity needed by counselor education students.

Importance of this Issue

There are an estimated 28.4 – 31.1 million foreign born individuals within the U.S. (Drucker, 2003; Gunde, 2003). According to the 2000 census, 34% of college students residing within the U.S. have a first language other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This figure includes both foreign-born students and those who were born in the U.S. but who were not speaking English in their homes (Malia, 2006). If this trend continues, the number of college students in the U.S. whose first language is other than English can be expected to increase exponentially.

The English speaking abilities of non-natives will differ from student to student and within different students' families. For example, among Spanish speaking people in the U.S., 28.3% possessed only minimal English speaking skills or could not speak any English at all. For people who speak an Indo-European language, 13% have minimal English speaking skills or cannot speak English, and for those who speak an Asian or Pacific Island language, the percentage is 22.5 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Whether a student's family speaks English at home can be presumed to have an impact on the student's speed of English language acquisition.

Students who are second language learners have been defined in the literature in a variety of ways. In pursing the literature of other academic domains including early childhood education, nursing, teacher and physical education, adult literacy, multiculturalism, linguistics, and English as a second language, we can see a variety of definitions to include English as a Second Language (ESL), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Language-Minority Students (LMS), Limited English Proficient (LEP), English Language Learner (ELL), Potentially English Proficient (PEP), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Second Language Learners (L2; Clancy & Hruska, 2005; Seungyoun, Butler, & Tippins, 2007). We prefer the acronym of L2 and this will be the definition to be used throughout this paper. The L2 status, as defined in this paper, designates students who are non-native English speakers and who are learning English as their second language. It also denotes those who have some degree of English literacy but who are not completely bilingual in their English language acquisition and linguistic ability.

Suggestions for Creating a Culturally Sensitive Environment

Pursing the literature from the above-mentioned disciplines yielded a number of suggestions for working with second language learners that can be adapted for counselor education programs. The issues discussed will pertain to (1) increasing instructor knowledge of L2 language acquisition, (2) creating a culturally fair learning environment, and (3) creating a culturally fair grading environment.

Increasing Instructor L2 Knowledge

Instructors need to develop knowledge of L2 learning and language acquisition (Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Research indicates that that as many as 75% of L2 students are in classrooms with instructors who lack training or knowledge in second language acquisition (Curtin, 2005). These are woeful statistics especially for the education field.

Importantly, language acquisition is a process that is individualized and L2 students may develop second language at different rates. For example, some adult L2 learners may never completely achieve English language acquisition (Montrul, Foote, & Perpinan, 2008). These students may be able to express some concepts in English, but may need to express others in their native language. There may also be certain features of the second language that will be difficult for the adult learner to master depending upon the age at which they first began to acquire English. Research indicates that mastering a second language is age-dependent in that it is easier to learn the younger that one begins. According to Esau and Keene (1981), this age is around the onset of puberty. The challenge for many L2 learners is that not only do they have to learn new words in a new language, but they must also master the concepts, and ways to express those concepts at the same time (Brown, 2007; Haneda, 2008).

Instructors who are either native English speakers, or completely bilingual, may not understand that language is a culture that needs to be navigated (Hagan, 2004). Commins and Miramontes (2006) suggest that instructors ask themselves "what are the features of language that students need to understand and be able to use to accomplish this activity successfully? (p. 244)" This is important, because errors in communication between instructors and students can not only cause a lack of understanding, but also can cause misunderstanding, which is detrimental to L2 student learning (Beaman, 1994; Sandhu, Reeves, & Portes, 1993). Instructors need to assess where each L2 student is in his or her English language acquisition and proficiency to tailor learning environment interventions to meet individual L2 student needs (Clancy & Hruska, 2005). (Note: for a guideline for assessing beginning, intermediate, and advanced L2 English learners and associated abilities and skills see Clancy & Hruska).

Instructors should also know the language backgrounds of their students (Beaman, 1994; Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Research suggests that the instructors having background cultural knowledge can lead to enhanced educational experiences for L2 students (Curtin, 2005). For example, different languages have different rules and students are apt to make errors in English common to their native language rules. For instance, native Spanish speaking students may place the adjective after a noun (e.g., car red) instead of before it as indicated in English (e.g., red car). These common differences between languages should be viewed as a cultural variable, not simply as a grammatical error. However, instructors should correct English language errors to help the student learn the differences between their native language and English more quickly. Instructors can be aided in their education regarding their students' native languages by consulting faculty in the foreign language departments of their institutions.

Haneda (2008) argues from a sociocultural perspective that instructors are crucial to how much L2 students learn regarding content. She states the degree of learning for L2 students is dependent upon the instructor's awareness of the L2

learner's needs, how these instructors conceptualize their role in meeting these needs, and the larger environment of the institution as to whether it is supportive or unsupportive. L2 students need support and their language ability needs to be viewed as a cultural variable. Instructors are on the front line in making this happen.

Creating a Culturally Fair Learning Environment

This can be accomplished by modifying instructional style, lecture content, skill demonstration, and grading criteria to incorporate student cultural dimensions in the learning environment, specifically as it relates to language attainment (Seungyoun et al., 2007). All students should have equal access to success. If instructional strategies and environmental climate are based on the needs of Euro-American learners, then linguistically different students will not have equal access. Therefore, instructors may need to move out of their comfort zone and differentiate their methods to be more inclusive of L2 learners (Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Accordingly, learning environment modifications should be conducted on an individual basis and should be dependent on each student's English language abilities and other factors, such as their acculturation status.

Improve instructor communication. Instruction in linguistically heterogeneous learning environments can be a challenge because instructors need to express themselves in a manner that is comprehensible to a wide range of student English linguistic skills (Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Instructors need to be mindful of their word choices, rate and rhythm of speech, in providing wait time for students to process information, and using multiple examples to back up main points. Instructors need to pause between statements or conceptual points, face the students, give contextual cues if applicable, enunciate their words, model behaviors, and avoid slang terms or colloquialisms (Brown, 2008; Ching & Chang, 2008; Clancy & Hruska, 2005). Commins and Miramontes (2006) suggest that instructors "mediate understanding by relating text, visual imagery, and oral instruction about important concepts (p. 245)." Materials that may be helpful in creating visuals to aid in understanding and provide contextual cues are whiteboards, diagrams, videos, and PowerPoint's (Clancy & Hruska, 2005). Instructors should also be sensitive to issues of comprehension and check frequently for student understanding (Brown, 2008).

Clarify expectations. Instructors need to clarify the U.S. expectations for counselor behaviors or duties. Differences may exist in different cultures regarding the perceptions of what constitutes counseling. The counselor education literature is prolific in comparing different cultural attitudes and beliefs regarding culturally different clients' help seeking behaviors, preferences in counselors, expectations of counselor behavior, as well as on many other variables (Wei-Cheng & Jepsen, 1988). Therefore, it will be important for instructors to make sure each student understands what is expected regarding the dominant culture's ideas about counseling (note: dominant culture can mean the culture of the program, university, or regional expectations and beliefs, as well as Euro-American or dominant U.S. culture).

There may also be differences between cultures regarding factors pertaining to written work. For example, there may be differences in sentence structure, essay structure, or other aspects of written communication. Instructors may be well versed in Western or U.S. ways of writing and may not appreciate cultural variations. Therefore,

expectations should be clarified (Brown, 2008). Instructors can give L2 students sample papers written by students in previous semesters that demonstrate instructor preferences representing the instructor's idea of a "good" paper.

Clarifying expectations might also include educating native-English speaking students in the classroom regarding issues that affect L2 learners. It is not uncommon in collaborative efforts for native-English speakers to complain about the quality of written work contributed by L2 learners. Therefore, all students need to be acclimated to the issues affecting L2 learners and expectations for student behavior identified.

Give feedback and positive reinforcement. Instructors need to give genuine feedback and positive reinforcement regarding L2 English skills and as to how L2 status is affecting acquisition and practice of counseling skills (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001). Haneda (2008) stated, "It is important to help L2 learners to make connections between language form and meaning through academically challenging tasks and contingently appropriate feedback" (p. 70). Barnes (2004) posited that positive feedback, both strengths based and corrective, could lead to greater counseling self-efficacy (CSE).

Counseling self-efficacy (CSE) has been adopted from Bandura's general social cognitive theory and is becoming an increasingly important consideration in counselor training (Lent et al., 2006). Self-efficacy can be described as a belief that one has the knowledge, ability, or skills to succeed at a given task or behavior and that given behaviors, knowledge, skills, or abilities will lead to positive outcomes (Levitt, 2001). In this case, it is a counseling student's belief that he or she can successfully use the skills required in counseling (Barnes, 2004). Tang et al., (2004) state that perceived self-efficacy is dependent upon skill performance, assessment, and evaluation by the student, peers, and instructors. Instructor appropriate, credible, and positive feedback is especially important when student self-efficacy is low. Such feedback can increase student motivation and self-efficacy resulting in a more realistic self-assessment (Al-Darmaki, 2004; McCabe, 2006).

Brophy (1981) developed guidelines for effective feedback. A summary of these guidelines is that feedback must be genuine, specific, and must attribute success to the student's effort and not to something external to the student (e.g., luck, timing, or a collaborative process). The task must also be sufficiently difficult to generate praise, otherwise the instructor may lose credibility, and both feedback and praise will be ineffective, perhaps further debilitating the student (McCabe, 2006). In addition, instructor encouragement and assistance in helping students evaluate their language and counseling skills from a positive framework can help L2 students increase motivation, effort, self-efficacy, and accomplishment (Angell & Bates, 1996; Lent, Hill, & Hoffman, 2003; MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997).

Use scaffolding and modeling. Vygotsky (1986) discussed the theory of the zone of proximal development, which suggests there is a difference between what a student can learn by himself or herself and what he or she can learn with help. Instructors can use scaffolding to help students learn more. Scaffolding is a process where more aid and instruction is given in the beginning of the semester, and as the student begins to master what he or she is attempting to learn, the instructor begins to pull back and let the student do more and more on his or her own.

Rather than modifying assignments for L2 students, Malia (2006) asserts these students need to be challenged with support. One way of helping students learn academic

writing is to give them examples of "good" papers that meets the instructor's standards for the given assignment**.** In this manner, students can see a model of proper English grammar, sentence structure, APA style, and so forth that the instructor expects. As the students begin to master academic writing, more of the work can be accomplished without a model to follow. In this way, students may assimilate grammatical rules over time (Liaw, 2007).

L2 students can also be encouraged to turn in rough drafts of their work for instructor feedback as a scaffolding tool. This can be done for each assignment in the beginning of the semester and then taper off as the student begins to improve. Instructors should give the student copious supportive feedback regarding English errors to help them improve.

In addition, instructors can initially give L2 students copies of the instructor notes and PowerPoints as a scaffolding tool. This can help L2 students learn course content and can take away anxiety regarding having to listen to instruction in English and take notes (Gunde, 2003). If the instructor gives these students the notes prior to the lecture, L2 students can follow along and this can aid in comprehending the material. Students can read these notes prior to class and make notes on content they do not understand. This can help prepare them to ask questions in class.

Honor student culture in the classroom. L2 student learners are bilingual or on their way to achieving this status. They often live with one foot in each world. Instructors can organize lectures and materials to build upon L2 students' experiences in both cultures and use this to develop knowledge and skills in working with culturally different clients (Commins & Miramontes, 2006; Malia, 2006). For example, linking class material to cultural and social issues can help these students integrate diverse cultural information more quickly. This can be particularly helpful if students are asked to write about these issues or concepts. In this manner, instructors can encourage the transference between the student's native language and English (Malia, 2006).

In addition, instructor attitudes can make a profound difference in L2 learning. For example, instructors who celebrate diversity and view L2 learners' linguistic diversity as an asset to the class can create an environment of safety and can enhance L2 learners' abilities to take risks in class and with class material (Drucker, 2003). Students need to feel valued, understood, and that they can succeed (Commins & Miramontes, 2006).

Use group work. Instructors can create a safe environment for L2 learners by using group work (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Commins & Miramontes, 2006). L2 students need a stress free environment for language performance (Clancy & Hruska, 2005). Instructors can help create this type of environment by utilizing groups composed of both heterogeneous and homogeneous language students.

Heterogeneous groups can aid L2 learners with their English acquisition, understanding counseling concepts, and processing information in the English language by working with students who are native English speakers or who have mastered the English language (Brown, 2008). An example of this may be to arrange study groups led by native English speakers**.** In addition, students can work in groups to work on collaborative research papers or other projects. In this manner, native-English students can serve as "cultural brokers." A cultural broker is a L2 student's friend, classmate,

instructor, tutor, or any other person helping L2 learners understand English-speaking culture (Hagan, 2004).

Students can also participate in what Memmer and Worth (as cited in Gunde, 2003) calls a "conversation laboratory" where students can get help with the English language within the context of their academic major, which in this case is counselor education. This can be accomplished with a support group for counselor education students composed of both native-English speakers and L2 learners (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001).

L2 students can also gain from participating in a group with other L2 learners (Gunde, 2003). This type of group can assist L2 learners, as it helps reduce language anxiety and L2 students can learn from each other. Some L2 students will be more advanced in their English language acquisition and those with lesser English language attainment may feel more comfortable getting feedback from a more advanced L2 learner, rather than the professor or a native English speaker. This type of group can also help L2 learners with aspects of English language practice that is not needed by native speakers (e.g., vocabulary, semantics, and sentence structure; Commins & Miramontes, 2006).

A good example of this type of group is to form homogeneous language groups for small in-class group work. Students can process information collectively in these small groups (e.g., discussing issues, class content, reflecting on them as a group, and generating ideas) and then students can rejoin the class for a larger group discussion on the issues or topics (Berlin, 2005). Commins and Miramontes (2006) assert that neither type of group, mixed nor L2 only, is more effective than the other, but that both are needed to achieve different goals. Therefore, both types should be utilized within a single semester.

Increase instructor cultural awareness. Instructors also need to be aware of, and sensitive to, cultural issues that affect the learning environment. For example, Latino students may help each other learn due to their collectivist culture. An unaware U.S. instructor from an individualistic culture might see this as cheating (Thorn & Contreras, 2005). This can lead to another cultural misunderstanding that can thwart the L2 learner's success. This is also another example of making cultural expectations clear concerning the dominant culture's expectations for learning environment behavior.

Educate L2 learners. Instructors can also help L2 students by educating them regarding campus and community resources (e.g., tutoring, writing labs, social groups, support groups). L2 learners can feel isolated and anxious as they master the nuances of the English language and the discourse of the counseling profession. Some have come to the university from their country of origin or from another state. They may feel a lack of support, may have difficulty making friends, and may have different cultural scripts or learning styles that makes it difficult for them to feel like they "fit in" (Schwallie-Giddis, Anstrom, Sanchez, Sardi, & Granato, 2004; Thorn & Contreras, 2005; Williams & Butler, 2003). For example, Williams and Butler (2003) note that in some counties, students are taught by the rote method and must write down what the instructor says verbatim, whereas in most universities within the U.S., students summarize the lectures and write down main points and concepts. It was also noted that the multiple-choice test is mostly a U.S. invention. Since most instructors have a good knowledge of the

resources available within their own institution they can be on the front line in assisting L2 students to understand the U.S. academic atmosphere in which they are now enmeshed.

Creating a Culturally Fair Grading Environment

Seungyoun et al. (2007) posited that treating students fairly does not always mean treating students equally. As counselor educators, we ask our students to modify their counseling approach and perhaps even their theory when working with a culturally different client. Should we as educators not do the same? If we treat culturally diverse students the same as Euro-American learners, are we not then discriminating against these students (Commins & Miramontes, 2006)? If we grade L2 learners' papers the same as native English speakers' papers, are we not then holding a culturally different student to a Euro-American standard? Is the L2 learner not then at a disadvantage? Does this model for our students a culturally sensitive approach in the classroom?

Rubric for grading. One way of combating bias in grading is by using a rubric specifically designed for grading L2 written work. Instructors can create a separate rubric for grading L2 students' papers that reflects their linguistic abilities. A rubric is an instrument used for grading and includes the criteria an instructor will use to grade a paper, assess a skill, or evaluate a counseling session. A U.S. Department of Education grant supports a program called RubiStar, which is free for educators (Rubistar, 2008). It can be accessed at http://rubistar.4teachers.org and gives templates and examples for evaluating a number of student projects. Instructors can use this to gain ideas for creating their own rubrics.

This type of approach can help reduce the amount of bias in grading. The rubric can specify for both students and instructors the criteria regarding grammar, syntax, spelling, and so forth. This makes the process more objective and systematic instead of solely subjective and can help minimize biased responses.

It has also been suggested that instructors grade written work for L2 learners based on content and not as heavily on English grammar, spelling, or syntax. Students can be aided by being encouraged to look at their writing globally (e.g., clarity, organization, focus, referencing statements, and proper APA style) rather than focusing so intensely on English grammar and spelling (Brown, 2007; Malia, 2006). This global focus is thought to speed up academic English acquisition and may reduce L2 learner errors by reducing anxiety (Brown, 2007). It has been noted in the empirical literature that student anxiety regarding grammatical structure can actually impede L2 student English acquisition, which in turn impedes learning and writing success (Liaw, 2007; Malia, 2006).

Timing assignments. Another suggestion is to space assignments so that L2 students have time to process the assignment in both languages (Drucker, 2003). Some L2 learners may need to process the assignment in their first language, then translate and process it in English. This takes time. Individuals not only use language to communicate to other individuals, but they also use it to process, think, and explore concepts (Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Many written assignments of L2 learners show evidence that their paper was first written in their native language and then translated into English and thus contain many translation errors.

Summary

As counselor educators, we must provide L2 students with a culturally supportive atmosphere thus practicing what we preach regarding culturally sensitivity. There is a dearth of literature, empirical or otherwise, regarding working with L2 learners within counselor education programs, which suggests this issue is being overlooked and neglected. This is an extremely important issue for L2 learners who may not be doing as well in our programs if they are in an instructional environment that does not consider this cultural variable. Instructors can do much to improve the learning and education of L2 learners within counselor education programs. Instructors' positive attitudes, willingness to learn about their students' native languages, attitudes of acceptance, and modifying their teaching and grading style and lectures to incorporate the aforementioned strategies can greatly impact the learning environment of these students and accordingly be a powerful modeling tool in teaching our students to be culturally sensitive to their clients' needs.

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