

Inquiring into Language and Culture

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According to Gay and Kirkland (2003), it is important that education, of teachers and students, seeks to “develop critical cultural consciousness and self-reflection” of which there is an expectation that it can be modeled in the classroom to counteract the potential misunderstandings in diverse environments (p. 181). There are three key strategies for developing intercultural understanding and tolerance in the classroom. First, clearly demonstrating that one respects and has their students’ best interests in mind and explicitly values their cultural differences. Second, exercising and fostering metacognition and critical thinking. Third, humor, which is the sign of a laid back and fun environment that sets a tone for comradery and inquiry over a retreat.

Lao is a tonal language. Uttering the word “gai” with different tones, which are subtle and often unrecognizable to a foreigner with a non-tonal language, can mean very different things. “Gai” can mean *near or far* or *chicken* (“gai gai” is a good way to make sure you say near, and “bo gai gai” for not near...I never say far, it is too hard for me). Usually, context is enough to achieve understanding. In a soup shop, you want the chicken. But, with near and far, it is confusing, if the context is asking directions. I like these language and cultural differences, I find them interesting, so I seek them out, and share them. An educator must actively seek out the particularities and the subtleties of their students’ language and culture. How does one achieve this? Through dialogue, questions, and activities designed to welcome student expression such as multilingual presentations with cultural themes (Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, Sandhu, & Sastri, n.d.). Mainly though, through informal dialogues throughout the day.

Inquiring into language and culture is fun because the differences provide many opportunities for humor. Still, as you can imagine, one can say some pretty off-color and

potentially offensive things if you get the tone wrong. I have a poor student, Muai, (“meu-ai” not moy) whose been called “pubic hair” by so many foreign teachers that she doesn’t even notice or blink an eye anymore. While a strong argument could be made that the foreign teachers should figure out how to say their students’ names correctly by the end of the first week of class, it is a very hard thing to do in Laos. Muai, understands this, she knows that these teachers are not trying to hurt her feelings, so she ignores it along with everyone else, and I have seen her laugh with her friends over it as well. She has made a choice to overlook something annoying and potentially rude, and she *can* make that choice because there is a general environment of respect and safety at our school. “Grammar needs to be seen as a range of choices one makes in designing communication for specific ends,” but a respectful environment is a precursor for this sophisticated outlook (The New London Group, 1996, p. 79). One can choose to not be politically correct or even give up on trying to get a tone right...if all the other tones of the environment are safe and respectful. Can you imagine trying to speak with a perfect accent all day to hundreds of students with very complicated tonal names? Is it worth striving for? Yes. Is it reasonable to take it slow, maybe take a year to get it right? I think it can be.

A pre-requisite for humor, especially where it shines a light on differences, is a pre-established environment of authenticity, trust, inclusiveness, and respect. If you know that your colleagues, friends, family, have your best interests in mind, then issues that in another context might cause confusion, offense, or hurt feelings can be simply seen as funny. Gay and Kirkland (2003) are correct when they describe teaching as a “highly contextualized process” (p. 182). The same sentiment is true for intercultural communication and inclusion. The key to inclusivity is establishing an environment where it is clear that one has the best interests of everyone in mind, so a mistake can be seen as funny, as an opportunity for inquiry and learning, as opposed

to a slight, or some sign of carelessness. When differences and mistakes are opportunities for learning or fun, everybody wins. But that transformation requires a feeling of safety, trust, and the cognitive, emotional, a contextual maturity to know the difference. How does one instigate this in the classroom? Basically, a teacher must simply model being a good person. Be fair, be just, be thoughtful, listen, be helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, and be reasonable. So many teachers think it is acceptable to make unreasonable requests of their students. I would never even think of not letting a student use the toilet when they need to go. I remember teachers constantly trying to control me in this manner, and thinking, what is wrong with you? Are you insane? Before I decide upon limiting or controlling a student in some way, I like to imagine I am back in high school again, would I respect and understand that decision if it was made toward me? Am I making a reasonable request? Have I explained my reasoning?

Like “gai,” the word “ma” means many different things. Ma can mean “come,” “horse,” and “dog.” (it is very unlikely that the “ma” in your bowl is a horse) Due to the few surviving remnants of French colonialism, all foreigners are referred to as “falang,” which means “French.” It is not uncommon for a falang in a market to be hailed as “Ma-dame,” which, with the right tone, means “black dog.” I told this to a French tourist expecting a laugh, and they thought it was terrible, and were visibly upset. There is probably some fear involved, being from the prime colonial power in a post-colonial Laos. But to Lao people, we are all falang, and this tourist’s adversarial paradigm is unjustified. There is more resentment toward the Chinese than any other culture here, as they are the new local power and have a large influence on the economic and structural changes occurring in Laos. Lao people could honestly care less about the French, any more than another tourist.

According to Santi (2010) Americans, never at war with Laos, but attempting to stop Vietnamese supply lines along the border with Vietnam during the ‘American War’

Dropped 260 million cluster bombs – about 2.5 million tons of munitions – on Laos over the course of 580,000 bombing missions. This is equivalent to a planeload of bombs being unloaded every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years – nearly seven bombs for every man, woman, and child living in Laos. (para. 2)

Yet, I feel more animosity for my American accent in New Zealand, a country from which I hold a passport than I do in Laos. In Laos, and in much of Vietnam, there is a wide perception that the American people were protesting the war, and it was their terrible government that dropped the bombs. The lenses through which we view the world are everything, and we must demonstrate this to our students; we must provide them with tools to make sound decisions. According to The New London Group (1996), “we need to be aware of the danger that our words become co-opted” for right or wrong reasons (p. 66). I believe that if people have the cognitive and affective tools, along with a feeling of safety, they will make the correct interpretations and contextual choices. How do we develop the ability to see many sides of a story, to have ‘flexible’ paradigms, and recognize the concepts of subjectivity, context, and alternative viewpoints? Talk about it. Give examples. Physics provides many examples with relativity theory and frames of reference. Are we in motion in this room right now? Relative to what? Is the earth in motion? What about the galaxy? If we were in a train car at constant velocity with no windows, no sound, no bumps in the road, would we know it? Is it wrong for me to say that you are at rest right now? In some cases, I might want to choose to consider you to be at rest; in others, I choose to examine the fact that you are moving along with the earth as it orbits the sun. We choose based on context, based on utility, and reason, sometimes, simply to not rock the boat and get along.

I don't need to argue with everyone I pass on the street over their perceptions, likes, dislikes, or tastes. Sometimes it is called for or will be fun. Other times we must put our value on achieving different aims. This is an important subtlety of multicultural collaboration. I see tourists flouting local traditions, ones they may feel are unjust or unfair, and I think there are a time and place, but it isn't always right now. I model this for my students.

By nurturing critical thinking and self-reflection in a respectful and safe environment, one can actively choose consensus, intercultural communication, and tolerance. Make the environment fun, friendly, and a pleasant place to be, and everyone *will choose to keep that vibe*. If not, find out why, and fix the problem, or mitigate it.

Choosing a collaborative and benign perspective is preferred by anyone who is not experiencing some discomfort, in my opinion. When there is an expectation set, of metacognition from everyone in the room, along with earnest attempts at correction and reconciliation of misunderstandings or conflicts, a problem transforms into something to attend to, as opposed to a barrier and we can all just have some fun learning and connecting, and laughing together.

References

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