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Promoting Cultural and Language Diversity in World Languages Classes

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, intercultural perspectives in education seeking to foster a sense of understanding around the world have become the norm. This paper examines ideas regarding the meaning and role of language ideology in the quest to promote linguistic diversity in today's world, starting with classrooms. The author offers practical ideas on how teachers in general, and specifically teachers of world languages, culture and literature can cultivate an appreciation for varied languages in their classrooms and underscore ways to help students see the interaction between language, culture, literature through an intercultural education perspective. The author will also highlight challenges teachers are likely to face while offering ideas to address them.

Keywords: Intercultural education, Language ideology, Linguistic diversity, World languages, Teaching methods.

INTRODUCTION

The world today is like a myriad of vibrant colors of a cultural rainbow. Globalization has contributed to easier mobility across countries, and many borders seem to no longer have boundaries. Budiman (2020) shows that in 2018, 13.7% of the U.S (United States)' population was made up of immigrants. Therefore, living and working with people different from us is not only expected, but has become a new standard. All of us have the privilege to live together and thrive together. Wherever we are, whatever we do, and however we do it, we are likely to work with people who come from diverse backgrounds. In institutions of higher education, more specifically colleges and universities around the world, especially in the United States of America; most students come from different countries and speak different languages. Even more, students who come from the same country also come from various cultural background which are shaped by varied economics, social, political, historical, and even religious backgrounds; all of which end up creating a different culture even within the same country.

When the outbreak of coronavirus disease broke at the beginning of 2020, life as we know it was challenged in various aspects. Many believe that globalization contributed to the spread and severity of the pandemic while others are convinced it might incidentally increase the spread of the coronavirus. There has been major economic decline around the world as people increasingly lose their jobs, experience health and safety challenges, and many schools are closing. Schools at all educational levels in the United States (U.S.), are experiencing extenuating circumstances regarding teaching and learning. Even more, a sense of fear and unusual

insecurity emerged among people caused by the quick spread of the pandemic, giving rise to biased responses and social disbarring against immigrants and people of color (Devakumar, Shannon, Bhopal & Abubakar, 2020). A sense of othering and escalation of racism has challenged all aspects of commitment to social justice within the education system.

It is therefore imperative to examine ways in which we, as world citizens, can coexist peacefully. Even more, we need to understand critical ideas and issues that play a significant role and facilitate working and learning environments that validate and welcome various cultural perspectives. More specifically, this article focuses on the role of education, multicultural and intercultural education, to bring understanding of various cultures while cultivating appreciation of linguistic diversity by using language, culture, and literature in world-languages classrooms. First, I will give an overview of multicultural and intercultural perspectives in education followed by the meaning of language and language ideology and its role in promoting linguistic diversity. Thereafter, I present ways in which teachers of world languages can use language teaching to show the connection between language, culture, and literature. The goal is to help students broaden their understanding of each other and appreciate their varying backgrounds. Challenges teachers encounter in their classrooms when implementing this idea are subsequently discussed.

MULTICULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN EDUCATION

We cannot examine multicultural and intercultural education without first and foremost building a foundation regarding the key ideas surrounding our discussion, namely, culture and education; and their relationship. There are multiple definitions of culture. It is a word that comes from a Latin word “cultura,” which brings the idea of interaction between human beings. According to Maganda (2021), “culture is simply the behavior of a specific community that is learned and shared through human interactions” (p.41).Various scholars such as Sir Edward Tylor, Robert Bierstedt, George Lundberg, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, and Geert Hofstede offer numerous interpretations and perspectives on the meaning of culture. The collective and multiple variations regarding the meaning of culture, give us the following definition provided by the Merriam Webster dictionary, “culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, believe and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations and the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; (and) the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.” For most people, however, culture is simply a society’s way of life. As such, UNESCO (1992) defined culture as “the whole set of signs by which the members of a given society recognize…one another, while distinguishing them from people not belonging to that society” (NESCO, 1992, p. 5). Conversely, we can conclude that culture is the basis and foundation that outlines all the factors that shape and pattern people’s way of thinking, feeling, and believing as members of any and every society around the world.

Education is “the instrument both of the all-round development of the human person and of that person’s participation in social life” (UNESCO, 1992, p. 4). Such development can happen at any given age through various institutions such as the community, family, natural environment, and even schools. I have come to believe that school continues to be the most impactful and visible institution to bring about development in societies. Schools seek to develop peoples’ (learners) potential by transmitting knowledge to and through them to create

skills, perspectives and values that consequently result in empowering them to live their lives well within their own societies.

Essentially, there is an intertwinement between culture and education. Culture ignites and shapes what is learned (educational content), and the context, how we process and understand what is learned because it commands how we see the world around us, how we think, how we behave, what we believe and how we feel. Everyone who plays a role in the education system, namely, students and teachers, people who make the curriculum and educational policies as well as others in communities bring their own cultural perceptions, thus, advance their cultural perspectives and goals into "what is taught, and how it is conveyed" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 13). Hence, for culture to survive, a transmission mechanism for its continuation must exist, and that instrument is education.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is an idea, a movement, and an ongoing process focusing on ending various forms of prejudice and addressing issues of social justice (Banks, 2004). Wang and Yu (2021) posit that "multicultural education lies opposition to the deficit thinking about minority groups (e.g., culturally disadvantaged perspectives and assimilation) that continues to be popular in American education. Multicultural education celebrates the concept of cultural pluralism as its basic principle. Multiculturalism criticizes the model minority stereotype and color-blind ideology" (p.81).

The definitions of multicultural education, to say the least, are many. According to Banks (1993), multicultural education started in the United States inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Consequently, and subsequently, much research and interest arose to address multicultural education (Banks, 1993; Banks, 2007; Banks & Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2003, 2006; Perry, Moore, Acosta, Edwards, & Frey, 2006; Sleeter, 2008, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004).According to Banks and Banks (2001), multicultural education is "an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school" (p. 1). Even more, they add, "the term multicultural education describes a wide variety of programs and practices related to educational equity, women, ethnic groups, language minorities, low-income groups, and people with disabilities" (p. 6). Therefore, the changes that would need to be made in one school for a specific curriculum may be different from another school that would need to change their leadership, for example. Multicultural education is also defined as adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy by using instructors who are trained to be the facilitators (Gay, 2000). Multicultural education addresses racism by involving students in the process of understanding and seeking to value all races and thus can be defined as "antiracist education" (Nieto, 1996, p. 307). Other definitions include Jay and Jones (2005) who see multicultural education as describing education that seeks to reach all children pre-K through college (p. 3). Perhaps more importantly is a definition by The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) which centers its definition on ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity; it calls multicultural education a "philosophical concept"drawing from many acknowledged key documents, namely "U.S. Declaration of Independence, constitutions of South Africa and the United States, and the Universal

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Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations"(National Association of Multicultural Education, 2011). As such, Kahn (2008) also brings a somewhat similar observation by his definition of multicultural education as not only a process but also a philosophy and a dynamic concept, that happens to have multiple layers and facets which ultimately makes it polemic.

Based on the varied definitions of multicultural education such as presented above, Gibson (1976) presents an education idea that puts more emphasis on minority learning. Essentially, he combines education and culture as a compound entity and by doing so, he underscores 5 key elements that are to be recognized and acknowledged as critical to multicultural education, namely: 1) Differences among cultures must be acknowledged in ways that make teaching that emphasizes respecting one another's culture obvious; and such teaching should be done for the purpose of bringing cross cultural understanding 2) The inclusion of cultures of the minority students in K-12 curriculum is critical to culturally responsive education and was developed to foster teaching strategies to address and meet their needs and expectations 3) The teaching of languages and the needed skills to enable students to function efficiently in minority cultures are reinforced through the provision of bicultural education curriculum as well as methods used to teach such skill 4) A cultural pluralism education plays an important part in multicultural education; it was first done to encourage minority students to participate within their societies in all spheres including social, cultural, educational, educational, political and economic. Although the cultures do not mix, they find ways to live together by ensuring equal opportunities for everyone in their communities. 5) Multicultural education seeks to foster a harmonious living among individuals within their societies while cultivating a sense of respect for everyone. A close examination of the above definitions of multicultural education can be expressed through Banks and Banks (2001a)'s explanation, they posit multicultural education as:

> *"An idea seeking to create equal educational opportunities for all students, including those from different racial, ethnic, and social-class groups. Multicultural education tries to create equal educational opportunities for all students by changing the total school environment so that it will reflect the diverse cultures and groups within a society and within the nation's classrooms. Multicultural education is a process because its goals are ideals that teachers and administrators should constantly strive to achieve." (p. 1)*

Since no one may claim to have the one and only clear definition of multicultural education, we can all agree on prominent aspects and features that illustrate various meanings of this type of education, and that they are all based on specific contexts. Furthermore, the historical development of multicultural education as illustrated above was to facilitate the coexistence of people who come from various cultural backgrounds to reside in the same physical area. Consequently, multiculturalism is considered to be synonymous with cultural relativism (Van der Merwe, 1999, p. 319) mainly because this theory seeks to address the need for diversity by putting emphasis on the rights of minorities in dominant cultures. Essentially, ideas of postmodern approach to reality favor dominant cultures by questioning national identity, thus contributing to erosion of national, cultural and linguistic cultures; these are the ideas that gave rise to multiculturalism, which is sometimes understood as cultural relativism because it views "every set of morals and customs or way of life is as valid as any other, as the value of cultural

differences cannot be judged a posteriori in relation to a cultural neutral set of criteria and, therefore, all social practices are equally correct while no critique of the values of a culture is objectively justified and independent of that culture" (Vavistas & Nikolaou, 2021, p. 300). I re-iterate these ideas here because they are foundational to understanding the critics of multicultural education as "it responds to the question of knowledge and judgment without giving any universal and impartial reason" (Vavistas & Nikolaou, 2021, p. 299). Multiculturalism alienates different cultural groups and, in essence, hinders intercultural communication. The Chicago Cultural Studies Group (1992) observe that such criticism stem from:

> *"An overreliance on the efficacy of theory; a false voluntarism about political engagement; an unrecognized assumption of civil-society conditions; a tendency to limit grounds of critique to a standard brace of minoritized identities (for example, race, class, and gender); and a forgetfulness about how its terms circulate in "Third-World" contexts, which are often expected to provide raw material for integration in Western visions of multicultural pluralism" (p. 531).*

Consequently, though well intentioned, multiculturalism, as Donati (2009) observes, "despite its promises as a moral philosophy and political ideology that could assure the harmonious coexistence of culturally diverse people, ultimately failed to provide solutions -at least insofar as it "promised" as, on the one hand, it undermines all forms of logic, due to its inherent relativism, and, on the other, it halts at the point where it assumes a coexistence between cultures without, however, seeing how these cultures can interact with each other and how they should or can act in the public sphere, in order to contribute to the formation of a common discourse" (in Vavistas & Nikolaou, 2021, p. 301). As a result, interculturalism was born to address the above concerns.

Intercultural Education

To appreciate the nature and essence of intercultural education, it is critical to understand interculturalism as a theory anchored on the idea that cultural differences exist to be appreciated and understood, therefore, as Barrett (2013) notes, it seeks to unfree cultural practices that go against values accepted universally because doing so is vital to creating a strong cohesive society. Barrett continues, interculturalism therefore rejects moral relativism based on the following objectives and principles (pp. 28-29):

- Appreciates cultural diversity and pluralism;
- Emphasizes social inclusion;
- Proposes the elimination of the structural causes of political, economic and social disadvantages, inequalities, discrimination, poverty and marginalization;
- Emphasizes intercultural dialogue, mutual action and exchange;
- Aims to create a sense of a strong and cohesive society, based on shared global and universal values;
- Considers that all citizens should have intercultural competence;
- Advocates the development of structures and policies, including a culturally neutral legal and institutional framework to be developed to support intercultural interaction and dialogue;

- Advocates that individuals, groups and political organizations must resist hate speech and intolerance;
- Supports the creation of specific meeting places where intercultural dialogue will be promoted;
- Proposes that this intercultural dialogue operates at interpersonal, community, organizational, institutional, and international levels.

Furthermore, interculturality refers to developing relationships between different cultural groups. It is the concept of "the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect" (UNESCO, 2005, article 8). Considering the meaning of interculturality, intercultural education deals with interaction between people with different views and perceptions, religions, speak various languages and have different cultures. This type of education is critical to addressing differences, mainly cultural, in addition to other differences such as economic, social, and gender variances, to name just a few. Intercultural education seeks to "go beyond passive coexistence, to achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of understanding of, respect for and dialogue between the different cultural groups" (UNESCO, 2006, p.18). Central to intercultural education is the training of people so they can appreciate various cultures in ways that enable them to embrace and value diversity as an asset that enriches societies economically, culturally and socially. Therefore, intercultural education has as its primary goal to help learners develop the skills, knowledge, and more importantly attitudes to interact with people cross-culturally. By its nature therefore, intercultural education infers having a goal of interpersonal relationship between members of different cultures. To achieve this goal, interpersonal learning must take place.

In general, intercultural learning deals with "how we come to understand other cultures and our own through interaction, how we learn and communicate in cultural contexts, and how we learn culturally" (Jin & Cortazzi, 2013, p. 1). Otten (2003) observes that intercultural learning leads to intercultural competence, which is related to the ability to have empathy and take a different perspective socially and culturally (Busse & Krause, 2015). Various researchers define this competence in numerous ways but in large, most of them agree that intercultural competence is the ability to have effective and appropriate interaction across cultures (Bennett, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 2012). This competence starts with having the capacity to examine intercultural interactions, foresee misinterpretations, and be able to alter behavior as needed. When this competence is reached, intercultural dialogue can take place. According to the European Commission (n.d.), intercultural dialogue is largely defined as "the exchange of views and opinions between different cultures." This meaning implies both "emic" and "etic" aspects of culture, meaning aspects that are culture-specific: emic and those that are general-etic (Triandis, 1994). Furthermore, inter-cultural dialogue happens between "stable and cohesive units which mutually accept and appreciate one another but which remain closed to mutual influences" (Gropas &Triandafyllidou, 2011, p. 413). Therefore, as found in European policy documents, focusing on the 'etic' aspects of culture as shown in various definitions of intercultural dialogue tends to(Lähdesmäki et al.2020) weaken and sometimes cancels the 'inter' (Portera, 2008) dynamics of dialogue and their implied conversion of information and

learning as part of an emic compromise (Allmen, 2011). The remedy is to merge multicultural and intercultural education through language as an instrument of ideological transformation.

LANGUAGE, LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Language, language ideology, and linguistic diversity are deeply interrelated concepts. Language offers the raw material of human communication, while language ideology forms beliefs and attitudes about specific languages and their users. These ideologies, in turn, have a profound effect on the state of linguistic diversity by either promoting it or causing its decline. Language is a systematic process of communication that uses a rule-bound structure of sounds, grammar, and vocabulary to convey complex ideas. It is not a monolithic entity, but an active, dynamic, and varied phenomenon expressed through different dialects, sociolects, and accents. Language is the backbone of culture; it is the basis of cultural foundation; it shapes human culture, helping people form identities and passing down traditions across generations. It is the source of diversity, forging differences stemming from a multitude of factors, including geography, social class, and historical contact, leading to the formation of different languages and language varieties, which create linguistic diversity.

Language ideology (LI) on the other hand involves shared beliefs, feelings, and norms a community holds about language and its position in society. These beliefs are socially and culturally constructed, often operating automatically, and are profoundly tied to wider social and political systems and structures of power. LI serves as the basis for evaluation; a framework for judging language varieties as "correct" or "incorrect," "good" or "bad". Thus, they are connected to power, implicitly forming assumptions about language to a community's political and economic interests, which in turn can influence who gains authority and who is marginalized. LI are never static; they change over time when challenged in response to social, political, and linguistic factors seeking to promote greater inclusion.

Linguistic diversity (LD) refers to the variation of languages, dialects, and other linguistic distinctions spoken within a community or worldwide. It is an expression of human ingenuity and reflects the adaptation of human societies to their natural and social surroundings. LD includes dialects and accents; it involves variation not only between distinct languages (e.g., Swahili vs. Spanish) but also within them (e.g., Standard English vs. other dialects). LD is declining worldwide. Although nearly 7,000 languages exist, many are endangered. As more people shift to dominant languages caused by prevailing language ideologies, the number of speakers of smaller, indigenous languages is deteriorating significantly.

The relationship between the three should never be undermined. There is a triangular loop between language, language ideologies, and linguistic diversity. Language offers the observable variation; language ideology interprets and judges that variation, and that judgment eventually impacts the state of linguistic diversity. Ideologies interpret and shape language: Language ideology is not a neutral assessment of language. It assigns social value to different language varieties, influencing how people perceive and use language. For example, the belief that "standard" English is superior to other dialects is a language ideology that can make speakers of other varieties feel linguistically insecure. Ideologies determine the fate of linguistic diversity as prevailing ideologies are the most significant factor in the decline of linguistic diversity. The promotion of dominant languages occurs when a society promotes a "standard language ideology," consequently, minority languages and dialects are devalued and suppressed. This

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can be perpetuated through official government policies, educational systems, and media. Stigmatization and discrimination, the negative attitudes that arise from certain language ideologies can cause speakers to feel ashamed of their native dialects. This leads to linguistic discrimination and can result in speakers abandoning their native languages for more "prestigious" ones, thereby reducing linguistic diversity.

Language influences ideology: the structure and social use of language itself can give rise to ideologies. For example, the strategic use of different languages by a community can lead to competing ideologies about those languages. In Dominica, Patwa is simultaneously viewed negatively by adults for hindering upward mobility and used by children as a tool of rebellion, highlighting a complex web of competing ideologies. Linguistic diversity challenges and informs ideologies: when multiple languages and dialects exist within a society, it can challenge dominant language ideologies. The need to communicate in multilingual contexts requires active negotiation of language ideologies and can raise awareness of the social and political stakes of language use. Additionally, movements for linguistic justice actively resist negative ideologies to promote linguistic diversity and equity. This leads to the proposed ideas for promoting linguistic diversity in language classrooms such that students not only see the beauty of such variation but more importantly, seek it, value, and honor it.

CULTIVATING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: CONNECTING LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND LITERATURE

Teachers can cultivate linguistic diversity by intentionally connecting language, culture, and literature to build an inclusive and equitable classroom environment. World language educators have a great privilege and the opportunity to move beyond a single standard of language, to using culturally responsive teaching to make the curriculum relevant to students' lives and validate their rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Below I suggest practical ways to make this a reality, first, using multilingual literature as a cornerstone; creating culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms; providing books in many different languages; facilitating critical discussion and analysis; connecting texts to students' lives and partnering with families and communities.

Use multilingual literature as a cornerstone. Diversify reading materials by incorporating texts from a wide array of cultures, authors, and genres into the curriculum. This offers "mirrors" for students to see their own experiences reflected and "windows" into the lives of others, fostering empathy and cross-cultural understanding by incorporating multilingual and bilingual texts. Utilize texts written in or containing multiple languages. This approach allows students to use their full linguistic repertoire, boosting comprehension and confidence, especially for multilingual learners. Explore folklore and oral traditions by expanding the definition of "literature" to include oral traditions, songs, and stories from students' home cultures.

Create a culturally and linguistically responsive classroom. Learn students’ names: be intentional about learning the names of all students in your classroom. Invest time, especially at the beginning of the semester, to learn proper ways of pronouncing their names. Comment on their names using phrases such as “your name is beautiful; that doesn’t sound like an America name! where are you from?” Such comments ignite dialogues that shape and enhance the visibility of varied languages. More importantly, it welcomes and encourages students to learn and use each other’s names. Such gestures convey a sense of care, attention to their

presence, and honoring who they are. Encourage translanguaging: create a classroom environment where students are welcome to use their full linguistic skills by moving fluidly between languages. This can include comparing language structures using bilingual texts to discuss similarities and differences in grammar and vocabulary. Other examples for various subjects include English language arts whereby teachers can use multilingual texts and note-taking: after reading a poem or short story in English, have students take notes in a two-column format. They can record their thoughts in English on one side and process or expand on those ideas in their home language on the other. Multilingual brainstorming and drafting: when students begin a writing project, encourage them to brainstorm and outline their ideas in their strongest language first. They can then use these notes to help structure and write their draft in English or the language they are learning. Bilingual storybooks: Students can create their own bilingual storybooks, writing the text in both English and their home language. This is particularly effective for projects focused on cultural heritage. I find it very helpful to invite students to share, allowing these authentic texts to be collected by the students themselves and used as classroom resources.

For Social studies, students can do content-area glossaries: a teacher can provide presentations with key vocabulary translated into students' home languages. For example, a presentation on the Industrial Revolution might include translations for words like "political," "economic," and "society". Encourage students to conduct multilingual research by finding sources in their home language and using those to inform their reports or presentations. This allows for a wider range of perspectives and deeper understanding. Another way is to annotate historical images; encourage students to add annotations in their chosen language when analyzing historical photos, maps, or political cartoons. They can brainstorm ideas and captions with peers in their home language before writing a final analysis in English or the language they are learning. For Science, teachers can use vocabulary exploration by asking students how they would say the words in their home language when introducing new science terms. This can be a fun collaborative activity where students add new words to a multilingual word wall. Labeling diagrams can be done when studying human anatomy, the water cycle, or other science concepts, students can label diagrams in both English and their home language. This reinforces understanding in multiple linguistic systems. You can also encourage multilingual notetaking during a science lecture or video, allowing students to use a mix of English and their home language. They may jot down the main concepts in English but elaborate on details or questions in their strongest language. In Mathematics classrooms, activities such as word problem translation translate complex math word problems into their home language. This helps them understand the context of the problem before solving it in English. After solving a math problem, allow students to explain their thought process and strategies to a peer in their home language. Such explaining reasoning solidifies their understanding of the logical steps before having to articulate it in English and the language they are learning. Number sense discussions are a great way for small groups of students to discuss mathematical concepts, like real and imaginary numbers, using their home language to make sense of the new terminology and rules. For a geometry problem, students could create a visual presentation that uses a mix of languages. They might label the figures in English but provide the step-by-step reasoning in their home language to creating problem-solving presentations.

Creating collaborative projects: encourage students to work together on projects where they can use different languages, helping peers learn from one another. You can form intentional

linguistically diverse groups by ensuring each group has someone with a different cultural background based on varied languages inherently present in your class. Build a multilingual library and classroom displays by making languages other than English visible in the learning environment. This includes labeling classroom objects in various languages; having a cultural awareness day, whereby students dress in their native attires and teach each other a word or phrase in their native language or a cultural norm in their community, neighborhood or family.

Provide books in many different languages and facilitate critical discussion and analysis. Be intentional about displaying student-created projects that celebrate their languages. Tap into students' "funds of knowledge" by recognizing that students bring valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge to the classroom. Thus, design units and activities that connect to students' interests and home lives, making their experiences central to the learning process. For example, you may assign students a project of making a family tree starting with immediate and extended family. You can allow them to label each family member using English and any other language or nick name that family member is known for in their family. Facilitate critical discussion and analysis by analyzing language use in literature. This can be done by examining how authors from different backgrounds use language, dialects, and idioms to portray characters and themes. Doing so helps students develop a nuanced appreciation for the richness and diversity of language. Promote critical literacy by using literature to discuss issues of social justice and power, encouraging students to question biases and stereotypes presented in texts. By critically analyzing language use, students can better understand how power and prejudice can influence narratives.

Connect texts to students' lives by guiding and encouraging them to make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. This helps them relate universal themes to their own experiences and broader social issues. A great way of doing this is through songs or specific language themes. For example, when teaching “Swahili greetings”, I use that theme as an opportunity to learn more about my students’ cultural backgrounds, and you can too. Intentionally solicit information about their culture within your lessons: the Swahili have greeting-specific titles, such as brother, sister, friend, ms/mr, teacher, relative or “the mother or father of..” The later title, “the mother or the father of..” implies the parent’ identity is tied to their children’ behavior. A wife’s identity (without children) is tied to her husband’ social reputation. Therefore, a teacher can go deeper on this theme by welcoming students to share by posing questions such as “do you have ways to express various relationships?” If a child has a bad reputation in your community, does it have any impact on the parents and how do people in your community discern or connect a child to his parents? etc.

Partner with families and communities. Involve families in literacy activities by providing opportunities for parents and family members to engage with their children's learning, including sharing stories or reading texts in their home languages. This validates home languages and deepens the connection between school and community. Invite community guest speakers by welcoming community members or elders to share stories, songs, and cultural knowledge with the class. This exposes students to diverse language varieties and cultural practices from real-world contexts. Conduct community ethnographies by engaging students in projects where they document the cultural and linguistic practices within their own families and communities. These oral histories can be compiled and used as rich classroom resources. In one of the villages in Northeast Tanzania, I did a project that encouraged students to ask their

parents and other elders to tell them the history of their school and their village. Students loved the project because it gave them a great opportunity to learn more about their shared history in ways that honored their parents and placed them in the "expert" category. After gathering information, students worked together in small groups to create varied stories about their school and village. Additionally, such stories were written in the indigenous languages, Swahili and English, thus creating multilingual texts that mean so much more than just something to read!

CHALLENGES AND IDEAS

I don't want to paint a rosy picture here and give you false hope! This is hard work. Teachers may face many challenges when trying to promote linguistic diversity, such as language barriers, limited resources, and systemic biases that favor a single standard of language. These difficulties are often deepened by a dearth of specialized training, time constraints, and assessment systems that do not adequately measure multilingual students' abilities. Most of the challenges, however, can be summed up in three categories, namely: instructional and curriculum; socio-emotional and cultural; in addition to systemic and policy challenges.

Instructional and curriculum challenges include language barriers, lack of training, inadequate resources, and time constraints. Teachers may not speak or understand the languages of all their students, making in-depth communication difficult. This creates a hurdle for both students who struggle to engage with material and for teachers who must ensure understanding without a shared language. Many educators lack sufficient training in multilingual teaching methods, such as translanguaging, which involves leveraging students' multiple languages to support learning. This can result in teachers feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to manage linguistically diverse classrooms. Furthermore, schools often have limited multilingual resources, such as books, digital tools, and classroom materials in students' native languages. This can cause students to feel underrepresented and detached from the curriculum. And, if we are honest; most teachers face heavy workloads and strict timelines covering curricula, making it difficult to find the extra time and effort required to develop and implement tailored multilingual lesson plans.

Socio-emotional and cultural challenges include teacher bias, social integration, student anxiety, as well as differing cultural norms. Unconscious bias can lead teachers to equate a student's dialect or accent with their intelligence or academic ability. This can lower teachers' expectations and harm students' confidence. In some cases, linguistic differences can lead to social problems, such as exclusion or bullying, from other students who don't understand their classmates' behavior or communication styles. Even more, the pressure to learn a new language while keeping up with academic content can cause high anxiety and self-doubt in multilingual learners. This "affective filter" can inhibit their language acquisition and participation in class. Also, students from different linguistic backgrounds often have different cultural norms regarding communication and behavior in the classroom. This can lead to misunderstandings between teachers and students if not handled with cultural sensitivity.

Lastly, systemic and policy challenges include outdated policies that often privilege standardized English, which fails to recognize and value the linguistic knowledge that multilingual students bring to the classroom. Such policies comprise assessment issues like standardized tests that may not accurately assess the abilities of multilingual learners. Due to

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English proficiency often being prioritized, students' skills in their native languages are disregarded, leading to a partial picture of their overall abilities. Parent-teacher communication is often difficult due to teachers' inability to communicate effectively with and involve parents of multilingual learners in their children's education.

In this imperfect world, challenges are inevitable. Every challenge, however, comes with opportunities. These challenges should be a call that awakens every educator to start or continue searching for better ways to value the diversity of our valuable languages. The bigger the challenge, the larger the reward. We cannot settle down and allow our students to let their languages become untapped resource, because "linguistic competencies are fundamental for the empowerment of the individual in democratic and plural societies, as they condition school achievement, promote access to other cultures and encourage openness to cultural exchange (UNESCO, 2006, p. 143). Although one person can make a difference; I believe one is too small a number to make a big difference. I suggest educators make intentional meetings that seek to find practical ways to implement some of the ideas I mentioned in this article. They can also use such exploratory meetings to design other solutions.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural education is the key to cultivating linguistic diversity that shows one language is not better than others. Classrooms can be panacea where various languages are loved, appreciated, valued, and honored. Our students can embrace our languages and culture when we show interest in their lives, but we must be language and cultural ambassadors. Love is a universal language - love them.

A poem

To know you is to love you!

Come my sister and my brother

Come my friend though STILL a stranger

Are you a sister or a brother to me? Or are you just waiting to know

Like a blossoming rose, are you beautiful though I can't see that yet?

Can you be my friend, do you want to? Do you try to?

Oh! listen

Please listen

If you ask me who I am to the world; I will tell you what I know

If you ask me what I know about you: I will tell you what I think

If you ask me how I know about you: I will tell you where to go

Like a homeless man lying on the street waiting for someone to stop, I JUST want you to see me

Like a man beaten to death, bleeding in the streets

Please do something! Do something now!

But alas,

You and I have become like doctors prescribing medicine and surgeries that never heal,

You and I are cultural doctors with knowledge of many ailments that destroy peace in this world,

We have made our languages and cultures like diseases to be avoided

We have forgotten that our languages are like medicines to cure our proud souls

We have forgotten that a language, is someone's soul

When you learn another language, you gain another soul

My language tells you who I am- talk to me

My culture shows you how I live- ask me

Do you know I am different?

Do you know you are different?

Do you know we are beautiful?

Do you want to know me?

I want to know you

Because

To know you is to love you

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