Effective educators are culturally competent communicators

JOHANN LE ROUX

ABSTRACT  Effective formal education or schooling is not simply a matter of teaching and learning curriculum content. It is also about values, assumptions, feelings, perceptions and relationships. No education can take place without interpersonal communication. Effective teaching can thus be qualified in terms of relating effectively in the classroom. Effective education thus also presupposes effective communication skills. Communication as the means and indeed the medium of education is therefore crucial to school success in culturally diverse education. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse class. Communication may be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher. Otherwise, it could be a source of frustration, misapprehensions, intercultural conflict and ultimately school failure. Effective and successful communication is difficult to realise even in the most favourable circumstances. Intercultural factors, therefore, create the potential for numerous communication problems and intercultural conflict. Communication, both verbal as well as non-verbal, is critically important in cross-cultural competence. As language and culture are inextricably bound, cross-cultural communication is complex and potentially problematic. In this paper, it is argued that effective educators are effective communicators and thus culturally competent in cross-cultural encounters.

Introduction

Education can never be culturally neutral. No educational system anywhere develops or exists independently or remains unaffected by its social or historical roots. The policies, practices and perspectives of the prevailing dominant culture influence educational content and approach. Because no social structure is homogeneous, often minority “cultural goods” are sacrificed for the sake of maintaining and fostering the dominant culture. A multicultural approach to education aims to reflect reality in its entirety, and not merely represent a limited mono-cultural perspective of reality as being real and of importance to the dominant group in society.

It is a well-known fact that education and thus all teaching and learning in school classrooms are actualised in and through communication. No education can take place without interpersonal communication. Effective teaching can thus be qualified
in terms of relating effectively in the classroom. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse classroom. Communication may be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher. Otherwise it could be a source of frustration, misapprehensions, intercultural conflict and ultimately school failure. Effective and successful communication is difficult to realise even in the most favourable circumstances. Intercultural factors therefore create the potential for numerous communication problems and intercultural conflict. This represents a reality by which all teachers will be directly confronted at some time or other. In this paper, it is argued that effective educators are effective communicators and thus culturally competent in cross-cultural encounters.

Effective education thus also presupposes effective communication skills. Communication as the means and indeed the medium of education is therefore crucial to school success in culturally diverse education. Students from different cultural backgrounds may view, interpret, evaluate and react differently to what the teacher says and does in the classroom. Teachers therefore have to constantly bear in mind that the more substantial the differences in cultural background between sender and receiver involved in the communicative process, the more substantial the differences in the meaning attached to the message and social behaviour will be.

Effective Education for the 21st Century

Effective education is a vital source of personal opportunity as well as a means of supporting economic development. In the future, access to work will depend predominantly on the individual’s interpersonal skills, skills at networking and digital literacy, ability to successfully engage in critical decision making and problem solving and the ability to organise and sustain flexible life and career contexts. We are entering an era where knowledge supersedes information and technology transforms longstanding relationships of time and space. School education needs to introduce the youth to a process of lifelong learning within a learning society. In a post-industrial knowledge-based world the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) should be expanded and not replaced. Equally important are critical and creative thinking, problem solving, the capacity for lifelong learning and civic literacy. More than ever before teachers’ responsibilities are extended to the social development of students in an environment where traditional values and cultures are challenged on a daily basis. Effective education will ensure a socially just, egalitarian society, based on economic prosperity, equality of opportunity and access to available resources for all its citizens (Beattie, 1999). True multiculturalism is indeed realised through quality education for all students, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds.

While effective education for the 21st century should constantly adapt to needs and changes in society in order to stay relevant, it cannot fail to pass on to the next generation the attainments, foundations and benefits of human experience. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century in its Report to UNESCO (see Delors, 1996, pp. 22–23, 85–96) has identified such foundations:
Learning to Live Together.

The contemporary world is often one of violence that belies the hope people place in human progress. In a highly competitive world, the omnipresence of conflict is accentuated and actually manufactured through 20th century scientific capacity and the resulting inventions that cause destruction. Effective education has to develop a sense of respect for and tolerance towards other groups different from one’s own. In combating existing racial and culturally based prejudices, conflict might be minimised or prevented. Effective education for the 21st century will introduce students to the reality of a diverse human race, emphasise similarities between and the interdependence of all humans globally. But if students are to understand others, they must first be aware of their own group’s cultural identity. Encountering others through dialogue and debate is one of the tools needed in 21st century education. This could be supplemented by social activities such as assisting the underprivileged, humanitarian work, neighbourhood assistance, community projects, etc.

Effective education develops an understanding of others and their backgrounds, values and traditions. It creates an intercultural awareness and sensitivity, and a realisation of our interdependent local, regional and global existence. It recognises that our future as a global human nation(s) largely depends on our ability to manage potential and inevitable conflict situations peacefully and on working together towards a better dispensation for all in society. Although this might sound like an idealistic Utopia, it is a necessary one if we wish to survive this century on planet Earth. Education during the 21st century in some way or other will have to make concerted efforts to accommodate diversity in schools effectively. Effective education will have to secure equality of opportunity for all students and will also have to start from where the learners are. Diversity needs to be viewed as a valuable learning source for all students involved in multicultural classrooms and not as a handicap to effective education for all.

Learning to Know.

In a knowledge-driven society education has to transmit knowledge and know-how skills to manage constantly increasing masses of information. Education therefore has to provide the “maps” or directors for a complex world in constant turmoil, as well as the “compass” that will enable people to find their way through it. Traditionally, formal education has focused almost exclusively on “learning to know” and to a lesser extent on “learning to do”. Learning to know presupposes learning to learn, calling upon the power of concentration, memory and thought. Initial school education can only be regarded as efficient if it has provided the impetus and foundation that will enable individual students to learn throughout life, within a work context, but also outside the occupational sector.
Effective education needs to provide students with a passport to lifelong learning. It has to provide the initial introduction, foundation, preparation, but most importantly, also the desire and incentives for a process of lifelong learning. Education has to motivate the youth to grasp new opportunities and to build onto them. Effective education emphasises the acquisition, renewal and responsible use of knowledge. In an “information society”, access to data and facts should be increased through the constant adaptation of relevant and effective education. Unless we remain in control of scientific development in a broad sense, we might become controlled by it. Students not only need to know and be acquainted with information sources. They also need to know the most effective ways of electronic knowledge retrieval and responsible use of such knowledge. Knowledge will assist us to live together, to do what is appropriate and right, but also to be what we are and can, in terms of latent potential possibilities (see description of the other foundations in this section).

*Learning to Do.*

Learning to do is often more specifically linked to vocational training: How can what has been learned be put into functional practice? Instead of practical know-how skills, employers are today more than ever before seeking competence in the area of electronic, technical and vocational skills, social behaviour, teamwork and aptitude in an ever-changing work sector. Such so-called “life-skills” in the workforce combines knowledge with social, managerial and personal competencies. Intuition, flair, judgement and the ability to hold a team together are not necessarily paper qualification related. No more can learning to do have the simple meaning of preparing someone for a clearly defined practical task in the vocational sector. Another tendency in contemporary developing countries worldwide is the increase in work in informal economies. Here wage-earning occupations are not the rule, but specifically the know-how skills of negotiation, entrepreneurial skills, managerial qualities and creative input and planning.

This implies the acquisition of competency that will enable people to effectively deal with a variety of situations, often unforeseeable, and to cooperate and work effectively in different and varying team contexts. “Learning to do” requires skills to be acquired through effective goal-directed and outcomes-based education. These include (among others) communication and communal skills, life skills that include intercultural skills, cognitive-oriented skills, as well as more pragmatic and specifically focused problem-solving skills needed in everyday living. Effective education is directed towards competency and skills acquisition, as well as the inculcation of norms and values necessary to do justice to others similar or different from us in a culturally diverse society.
Learning to Be.

Education must enable each individual student to solve his/her own problems, make one’s own independent decisions, develop independently, form one’s own judgement and shoulder one’s own responsibilities. Education has to provide students the freedom of thought, judgement, feeling and imagination they need in order to develop their talents and remain responsibly in control of their lives. Education also has to provide with and introduce students to all possible opportunities: aesthetic, artistic, sporting, scientific, cultural and social. In order to optimally actualise all latent potential, effective education will not disregard any aspect of student potential: memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical capacities, social skills, problem-solving abilities, creative and innovative potential. Only then will education successfully facilitate “learning to be”.

Each person in the 21st century will have to accept a stronger sense of personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals. No talents should be left untapped or underdeveloped. These include things such as memory, reasoning power, creativity, innovative thought and action, imagination, aesthetic sense, leadership potential, communicative aptitudes, etc. Young people will have to learn that “happiness lies in belonging and not belongings” (Harvey, 1979, p. 49): to be available and sensitive to the needs of others and indeed learn to be at the service and assistance of others. This implies a total mind shift from “having” to “being”, the inculcation of social and societal empathy and a demonstrated willingness to assist others in need.

Cross-cultural Competence

Cross-cultural competence is important in all social encounters in culturally diverse situations. In fact, it is a social skill required almost everywhere and in all situations other than in mono-cultural settings. Even in so-called “mono-cultural” situations various sub-cultural variations necessitate the ability to relate to and communicate with others different from oneself. However, defining cross-cultural competence is rather complex and difficult. Whilst Cross et al. (1989, in Lynch 1999, p. 49) describe cross-cultural competence in terms of behaviours, attitudes and policies that are congruent, converge and which result in effectiveness in cross-cultural situations, Barrera and Kramer (1997, p. 217) use the term broadly to “refer to the ability of service providers to respond optimally to all children, understanding both the richness and the limitations of the socio-cultural contexts in which children and families as well as the service providers themselves may be operating”. Lynch (1999, p. 49) qualifies cultural competency as the ability to think, feel and also to act in ways that acknowledge, respect and also build upon ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity in multi-ethnic and/or multicultural situations.

Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is critically important in cross-cultural competence. As language and culture are inextricably bound, cross-cultural communication is complex and potentially problematic. Even speaking the same
language does not guarantee effective intercultural communication. The following important point needs to be kept in mind when inter- or cross-cultural matters are studied: within-group differences within a cultural group are often as great or greater than inter- or across-group differences. Often the mistake is made to assume that people who share a common culture or language also share the same attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors. It must be emphasised that culture is not the only, and in many instances not even the most, important or salient variable when differences or potentially conflicting situations arise in diverse settings. Socio-economic status, educational background, religion, gender, age and world-view are some of the determinants that influence who and what we are, but also why we react in a particular way in certain situations.

Despite different theoretical approaches, paradigms, definitions and philosophical foundations, researchers (compare Lynch, 1999; Giles & Franklyn-Stokes, 1989) are in consensus about some characteristics shared by most people who are capable and skilled in the art of cross-cultural communication. It is generally agreed upon that communication effectiveness is significantly improved when the interventionist (Lynch, 1999, p. 77):

- respects individuals from other cultures;
- makes continued and sincere attempts to empathetically understand the world from other's point of view;
- is open to new learning;
- is flexible;
- has a healthy sense of humour;
- tolerates ambiguity well;
- is sensitive to own prejudices;
- approaches others with a desire and an openness to learn;
- is genuinely interested in others;
- sees differences not in terms of inferiority but as learning opportunities.

Often cross-cultural competence as a concept is used interchangeably with concepts such as intercultural effectiveness and ethnic competence. All these concepts refer to ways of thinking and behaving that enable members of one culture, ethnic or linguistic group to work effectively with members of another. Ethnic competence includes (Green, 1982, in Lynch & Hanson, 1999, p. 493) among other things the following facets:

- an awareness of one’s own cultural limitations;
- an openness, respect and appreciation for cultural differences;
- regard for intercultural diversity as a source of learning opportunities;
- ability to use cultural resources in interventions;
- an acknowledgement of the integrity and value of all cultures.

But it is also important to note what cultural competence or inter-cultural efficiency is not: It does not imply becoming a member of another culture by adopting another group’s values, attitudes, beliefs, customs, or manners of speech, dress or conduct. According to Green (1982, p. 52) such over-identification is none other than
patronising and manipulation. Abandoning one’s own culture and substituting another is, on the contrary, a sign of disrespect for one’s own culture. Nor does cultural competence imply that individuals can easily be grouped and categorised without variability amongst such groups. Cultural identification incorporates many dimensions and represents but one aspect of one’s way of life. Cultural competence also does not imply knowing everything about all different cultures. It is rather an active demonstration of respect for differences, an enthusiastic eagerness to learn about other cultures, an acceptance of different viewpoints on reality and a flexibility and willingness to adjust, change and reorientate where required (Lynch & Hanson, 1999, p. 493).

The “Language” of Non-verbal Communication

The “language” of non-verbal communication as an interwoven and inseparable aspect of verbal language use is perhaps just as important for classroom teachers in culturally diverse classrooms. All sensory modalities are used in communication: gestures, postures, facial expressions, voice volume and tone, eye contact; in fact all forms of communication other than spoken or written words. Leubitz (1973, in Gollnick & Chinn, 1986, p. 149) emphasises the importance of non-verbal communication, especially for teachers in multicultural classrooms. As language is a function of culture, non-verbal messages that are conveyed in culturally diverse classes also need to be understood for their significance and impact on social processes and learning effectiveness. Teachers need to realise that more than 60% of social meaning is conveyed through non-verbal communicational means. This fact becomes increasingly relevant and important if non-verbal messages tend to differ from one culture to the next. Often, non-congruence between verbal and non-verbal messages cause misunderstanding and confusion between different parties involved during interaction. Therefore, in order to manage effectively and facilitate effective teaching and learning in culturally diverse classrooms, teachers need to remain sensitive to the following important functions of non-verbal messages conveyed in diverse classroom settings:

- Non-verbal communication relays messages through different sensory modalities.
- Non-verbal communication can augment or reinforce verbal communication.
- Non-verbal communication can contradict verbal communication and cause confusion.
- Non-verbal communication can replace verbal communication, especially when communicating in a language other than the native language.

Impressions often represent functions of the observer’s cultural background. Gollnick and Chinn (1986, pp. 151–154; compare also Lynch, 1999, pp. 70–73) have identified the following non-verbal aspects that may result in prejudice towards others from cultures other than the own. Educators working in culturally diverse settings have to be particularly aware of the effect of the following facets of non-verbal communication on intercultural interaction, impressions, expectations and subsequent learning in multicultural classes:
Hair

Hair represents a physical characteristic, which can create positive or negative impressions and has considerable cultural implications. Within a particular culture, particular hairstyle fashions may be the result of peer group pressure or attempts to conform to be acceptable among the own group. Often, hair is styled to be socially acceptable in a particular cultural group. In other cultures, individuals could be expected to style their hair in culturally acceptable ways. Often, these are taught from infancy within family situations. Thus, a hairstyle can send subtle messages: within a particular cultural group, but it can also be a determining factor in varying degrees from one culture to the next.

Dress

Often, clothing habits communicate sex, cultural background, attitudes and particular culturally related values. It may purposefully or unintentionally convey culturally determined messages to others. Whilst dress code may be culturally controlled and regulated in some cultures, it could also be an attempt to make a particular statement by other students. It could furthermore be indicative of a particular student’s socio-economic status, which could impact on social acceptability among peers and the individual’s self-image that regularly are reflected in social behaviour and ultimately culminate in academic achievement.

Kinesics

Kinesics, or the study of body language, includes facial expressions, posture, gestures and other body movements that may convey communicative messages to other parties involved. Body language of students always demonstrates feelings and attitudes and may thus communicate innate feelings of acceptance or rejection in the classroom context to the teacher. Compare the bodily posture of students in class who are attentive and others who may be bored or daydreaming. Unintentionally, bodily posture may convey different messages to the alert and sensitive teacher who is constantly on the lookout for these subtle clues and non-verbal communicative messages. Standing with one’s hands on one’s hips can be viewed as extremely hostile in some Asian cultures, whilst it is taken as natural in European ones. A teacher sitting on top of a desk or perching on the arm of a chair in class is seen as extremely rude by many Muslim cultures, whilst sitting in a position where one’s head is higher than an elder (such as a teacher) is totally unacceptable by Samoans (Lynch, 1999, p. 72). In Thailand, one’s feet should also never point in the direction of someone else, and touching a child’s head is extremely degrading and insulting.

Proxemics

Proxemics, or the language of social space, is concerned with spatial distance between people. Some cultures can be classified as “contact cultures”, whilst others
Effective Educators 45

may be defined more as “non-contact cultures”. Anglo-European cultures tend to maintain a distance of about three feet between themselves and others during conversations, whilst Latinos, southern Europeans, Middle Easterners and most African cultures are comfortable with closer conversational distances. Asians on the other hand, usually prefer more space between speaker and listener (compare Lynch, 1999, p. 71). In some cultures, physical contact may convey warmth and affection, whilst other cultures that are culturally more inclined to non-contact behaviour might even see it as an intrusion of one’s personal space. Hugging, back-slapping and even handshaking are not typical gestures of non-verbal communications in most Asian cultures of the world. Physical distancing between people is often culturally determined. Intrusion of individual physical space (or larger conversational distancing in other cases) may be experienced as threatening and result in behavioural patterns of social avoidance or withdrawal in some instances.

Facial Expressions

The face is sometimes regarded as one of the most predominant channels of expressing attitude or behaviour or conveying particular emotions. Often, the ability to interpret facial expressions is determined by the degree to which a person is acquainted with another person or a particular situation’s emotional or social context, which is usually culturally influenced. In some cultures, facial expressions tend to complement verbal speech more than in others. Despite the importance of facial expressions in the total communicative context, individual teachers and students must guard against unsubstantiated generalisations or to react merely on facial expressions alone. Facial expressions can convey messages to complement or contradict verbal messages. The importance thereof lies particularly in the congruence or incongruence between the two modes (e.g. verbal and non-verbal) of communication. It also needs to be emphasised that facial expressions tend to be more prominent to convey messages in some cultures than others. However, this cannot be generalised, as social skill aspects such as extroversion and socially isolating behaviour tend to vary also within cultures.

Eye Contact

Whilst eye contact may give an indication of the audience’s receptiveness or lack of attention in Western European and Anglican cultures, avoidance of eye contact can be an indication of respect for the speaker in other cultural contexts. In some of the aforementioned cultures, trustworthiness, sincerity and directedness are communicated through eye contact, whilst eye contact may be viewed as shameful in Asian cultures or disrespectful in some African and Latino cultures. It can thus be a cause of misunderstanding between the teacher and/or among students from different cultural backgrounds. Teachers from predominantly westernised cultural backgrounds typically insist on eye contact in order to keep their students’ attention and involvement in class. This, however, could result in intercultural conflict, especially if students of a particular cultural group were taught that eye contact is indicative of
disrespect for elders or symptomatic of challenging and rebellious behaviour. The incongruence of eye contact messages in multicultural classrooms should therefore be a cause of great concern to any multicultural classroom teacher. Any culturally responsive teacher will realise the need to interpret any communicative message within that particular cultural context.

Paralanguage

Non-verbal messages are not necessarily non-vocal. A single verbal response can carry varying messages, depending on the context or voice tone. Paralanguage includes all production of sound that is vocal but not verbal. Vocal qualities and vocalisations are two categories of paralanguage. Whilst the former type includes aspects of resonance, tempo, articulation control and rhythm control, the latter represents sounds and noises that are not words (e.g. uhm-uhm-uhm-uhm = agreement; hu-uh-hu-uh = disagreement). Two different vocal qualities could therefore convey opposite meanings, despite the fact that it may accompany exactly the same verbal message. In some cultures, vocal cues may even distinguish between male and female responses, educational level or social status. In some cultures, verbal communication is readily supplemented by vocalisations, in order to demonstrate sincerity, politeness, good manners or to emphasise verbal messages conveyed. The danger of generalisations or cultural categorisation on account of non-verbal communication needs to be emphasised, although it often sets the context in which verbal communication takes place.

Codes

Codes represent another form of “language” or non-verbal communication that is often also culturally determined (compare Tiedt & Tiedt, 1990, p. 155). An example of this is the way people are greeted in different cultures. Even something simple like a handshake might be different from one group to the next. Examples of codes include, for example, the internationally used Morse code, semaphore (or flag signalling), and the language of flowers (secret love messages, Valentine’s Day, etc.). Some cultures have special codes, such as drum messages or smoke signals, or special ways to indicate whether a woman is married or not (signal on forehead, ring on a specific finger). Teachers in multicultural classrooms therefore also have to be particularly sensitive to and aware of the significance of culturally relevant codes and their impact on social interaction. It could be used as a fruitful source of mutual enrichment and cross-cultural interaction in cultural diverse classrooms by innovative teachers.

Gestures

Often, gestures are used to substitute, supplement or emphasise verbal communication. Since gestures are culturally determined, the interpretation thereof often results in misunderstanding during intercultural encounters. “Gestural” language
therefore often contributes more to misunderstanding than to effective communication. Different cultures use body movements to a different extent when communicating (compare Lynch, 1999, pp. 73–74): Some Latinos, Middle Easterners and southern Europeans use considerable arm waving when they communicate, whilst this is interpreted as too emotional in Anglo-European contexts. In most Asian cultures, dignified and controlled communication involves a minimum of bodily gestures. A golden rule for effective cross-cultural communication is to always consult with other parties in order to determine what is acceptable and what is not. This may avoid much misunderstanding, embarrassment and miscommunication among people from different cultures.

**Conclusion**

The reality of cultural diversity in school classrooms today presents tremendous and demanding challenges to teachers. All students must be taught to develop to the fullest of their potential. Effective education is specifically directed at the learning needs of all students. The provision of equal educational opportunities to all students by a classroom teacher, who regards differences as useful learning resources and who views differences as cultural strengths rather than as deficiencies, could be qualified as the ultimate goal or aim of multicultural education (Golnick & Chinn, 1986, p. 29). In achieving this, differential approaches and methodologies are important. Effective teaching also means to enhance existing teaching strategies. One needs to move beyond existing teaching approaches and purposefully attempt to instil an ethos and spirit of spontaneous cooperation in the culturally diverse classroom. The effective teacher is continuously trying out something new, critically reviewing existing practices and is sensitive to the way in which existing teaching methods and approaches meet the diverse learning needs of all students and not only those needs of the dominant culture present in the classroom.

The effective teacher is the one that directly addresses students’ needs. This is the person who is aware of, and sensitive to, the reality of diverse backgrounds, viewpoints and needs in the classroom. Central to effective teaching and learning in any classroom is the communicative relationship between the teacher and the students individually, but also his or her relationship with the class as a group. What complicates this matter further is that there are often different cultural or ethnic groups present in the same classroom. Effective formal education or schooling is not simply a matter of teaching and learning curriculum content. It is also about values, assumptions, feelings, perceptions and about relationships. Often students achieve and behave according to how they perceive themselves to be through the eyes of others. The teacher is such a significant person in the lives of students.

Significant educational leadership needs to move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” mentality. A flexible managerial attitude will lead to an appreciation of differences, whilst realising that equality does not mean sameness. This accommodative ethos is not always easy, since radical changes are often threatening. They can often provoke anger, anxiety, stress and defensive attitudes and actions.
References


