Salvadoran Educational Discourse

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Abstract

This research project sought to describe the learning culture of El Salvador, a tiny Central American nation that has produced millions of immigrants to the United States over the past two decades. Ten Salvadoran immigrants living in the Washington, DC, area who attend a public school for English as a Second Language instruction were interviewed using a questionnaire designed to examine cultural features of classroom discourse, student and teacher responsibility, and English language learning in their educational experiences in El Salvador. The results of the survey project have implications for group work, student/teacher relationships, composition instruction, parental involvement, and conversation tasks in the ESL classrooms these students are now in.

Resumen

El propósito de esta investigación fue describir la cultura de aprendizaje de El Salvador, un pequeño país centroamericano que ha tenido una gran afluencia de inmigrantes hacia los Estados Unidos en las últimas dos décadas. Diez inmigrantes salvadoreños, que viven en el área de Washington DC y asisten a una escuela pública para cursos de inglés como segundo idioma, fueron entrevistados usando un cuestionario diseñado para examinar el discurso del aula, las responsabilidades de alumno y maestro, así como el aprendizaje de inglés durante sus experiencias educativas en El Salvador. Los resultados de la investigación tienen implicaciones sobre el trabajo colaborativo, las relaciones entre estudiantes y maestros, la instrucción de la composición, el involucramiento de padres, y las actividades de conversación en las aulas en las que se encuentran estos estudiantes actualmente.

Introduction to a Learning Culture

This research project seeks to describe the learning culture of El Salvador, a tiny Central American nation that has produced millions of immigrants to the United States over the past two decades. I have sought to investigate the Salvadoran educational experience by interviewing a small pool of Salvadoran immigrants with somewhat comparable levels of education, 10th grade through some university. These immigrants vary in age from 25 to 45 with most falling between 25 and 35. They represent various regions of El Salvador and also different types of schooling: public, private, vocational, university, etc. Using prompts, we had general conversations about the atmosphere and conventions of their school experiences. Probably due to the different types of education and perhaps just some of their personal opinions, their answers were at times highly juxtaposed to one another. However, there were resounding similarities in their responses to some questions and I will highlight those as much as possible in order to create a general idea for English language teachers (particularly American) who can benefit from knowledge of these cultural characteristics in their classrooms.

Methodology

Ten Salvadoran immigrants living in the Washington, DC, area who attend a public school for English as a Second Language instruction were interviewed during the spring semester of 2007. They were individually surveyed using a questionnaire designed to examine classroom discourse, student and teacher responsibility, and language learning in their experience in El Salvador (see Appendix 1 for the questionnaire). The interviews were conducted by the researcher and the participants orally in Spanish, with the researcher making notes of their responses.

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Features of Classroom Discourse in El Salvador

The group of Salvadorans I spoke with individually described Salvadoran classrooms and educational activities that at first impression do not differ markedly from traditional American classrooms. They reported of textbook readings, worksheets, games involving the subject matter and material at hand, and field trips, among other activities. Many mentioned the common teacher presentation and/or textbook reading followed by oral questions to reinforce or check comprehension of the material. In these respects, their Salvadoran educational system seems to parallel that of the traditional American classroom.

Upon further probing, they divulged no, or only rudimentary, technology was available. Several participants said their classrooms had no technology at all; others said cassette players or radios were available. None mentioned computers or televisions. One participant described the school reading as an experience as being 'forced' to read textbooks; however, students did not have individual textbooks or any opportunity to interact with the text beyond the classroom. In addition, literature, such as story books, novels, or newspapers, was not incorporated or emphasized for practicing reading skills. Furthermore, writing assignments were not a particularly prominent part of their education. Writing assignments were described as "dictation" or "copying," indicating that they were not encouraged to compose using their own thoughts and ideas, but only passively regurgitate material being presented to them in some format.

Another activity that was reported by all of those surveyed was presentations of material. According to these students, a very prominent learning activity in Salvadoran classrooms is for small groups of students to carry out projects together and then report back to the class. Each participant mentioned, without fail, the use of group work. Groups of students work together and are evaluated together, each receiving the same mark. This differs from some other cultures, which may incorporate group work into the classroom, but may not be evaluated on it, or each participant may be evaluated separately. In this manner, Salvadoran students may come to rely on the group to carry them through difficult material, or depend on the group for an evaluation, devaluing their own individual contributions.

Teacher's Role and Duties in El Salvador

All participants reported that there is no clear demographic pattern constituting the population of teachers. Men and women alike are teachers, and while some said that they were also a mixture of young and old, others reported that as a whole, the teacher population tended to be "young," or in their 30s. There were some interesting divergences in the responses depending on whether the participant had attended public or private schools. I will generalize their responses according to these categories.

Two women I spoke with had attended private schools, one in an urban and the other in a rural area. Both of these women claimed that teachers were dedicated primarily and above all to their teaching roles; they encouraged participation in appropriate and creative manners and classes were very interactive. Behavior issues were of secondary or minimal concern. According to the respondents, classroom management was not a problematic issue, or in other words, there were no real behavioral problems to be dealt with. Teachers were able to and did dedicate themselves to instruction a large percentage of the time.

On the other hand, the public school respondents described a much more traditional model of teachers covering material in a lecture style and also dealing with classroom management problems. Some claimed significant interaction and participation with the teacher, but not all. This could be due to a number of variables: teacher preferences, type and location of school, student population, personal perception of what constitutes interaction and participation, etc. But overall, these participants were more likely to bring up the lecture-repeat-respond-evaluate model. All mentioned some classroom management techniques. They all brought up the possibility of expulsion as a real threat to those students whose behavior arrived at such a level

as to warrant it. Some described a full-fledged 'culture of fear' in the classroom, complete with physical punishment for minor offenses such as not paying attention while others claimed they were expected to behave according to specific standards but did not go so far as to graphically describe corporal punishment.

In sum, everyone perceived the teachers' role to impart knowledge in some way—lecture, open discussion, etc.—and then evaluate students' new ownership of that knowledge through testing, presentations, question and answer sessions, etc. The classroom management factor was a definite contribution as well, but to varying degrees depending on the participant's specific background.

Students' Role and Duties in El Salvador

Those surveyed described students' duties as showing up, listening and paying attention to the teacher, completing assignments satisfactorily, following standards of behavior, completing each grade level, and performing according to expectations on evaluations of various forms. Ways to succeed that were described included doing group presentations, responding to oral questions, reading, not interrupting, and participating. Participation was mentioned by all of those I spoke with, and was generally described as a way to demonstrate learning gains to the teacher.

Students said they were given outlines of expectations similar to those used in the U.S. and other systems, somewhat like a syllabus. For example, they received a breakdown of how they would be evaluated, assigning a certain percentage of their grade to specific activities. They could be successful in a class by completing these activities through various pathways including those named above.

Language Learning in El Salvador

All participants said they had received some English instruction before coming to the U.S. With the exception of one, they all discussed the importance of the listening and speaking components of language instruction. They felt these classroom activities as well as others, such as watching television on their own, were the most beneficial for language learning. While they said their English classrooms tended to be less interactive and more focused on activities such as reading, writing, and grammar, they did not feel this was a particularly useful way of preparing them for life in the English-speaking world. They all expressed a desire to have received more listening and speaking practice. Now, as U.S. residents, they are able to practice English easily by watching television, interacting on a daily basis to carry out their chores, and working in a predominantly English-speaking workplace. However, they said the English instruction they received in El Salvador did not afford them these valuable opportunities for communication practice. Rather, the classes were conducted as many foreign language classes are, including reading, writing, and grammar drills.

Traditional Culture and Classroom Discourse in El Salvador

The major influence of traditional Salvadoran culture on classroom discourse seems to be the collectivity factor. Zaman (2006) points out that: "Hispanic culture is relatively more social and affect driven and interdependence is valued more so than in the Anglo-western culture" (p.77). Salvadoran society is extremely collective; sharing and working together are stressed. This shows up in the classroom through the heavy use of group projects and presentations, where groups of students work together and are evaluated together.

From the sample of survey participants, there does not seem to be a distinguished hierarchy in Salvadoran classrooms. Power division and/or sharing is unclear from the questions asked and responses given because the latter were so diverse. While some students perceived a complete authoritative power held by the teacher, others saw teachers more as friendly and concerned without that authoritarian atmosphere. Again, this could be due to the public/private divide or it may also have something to do with the civil war and the general atmosphere of power and fear

that reigned during the time some of those surveyed were in school. Still, there was a general consensus among those surveyed that the teacher is in charge of the classroom, however he/she prefers to maintain that position. The students also know their places as students and the consequences for acting outside of the boundaries.

Another interesting point that emerged from the survey was the perceived importance of oral communication and conversation skills. None of the participants was particularly fond of, or found much use for traditional reading, writing, and grammar activities for language learning. This may reflect a cultural emphasis on oral communication. Although far from the worst in the hemisphere, Salvadoran literacy in the traditional sense of being able to read and write is not exactly stellar. In 1971, the literacy rate was only 59.7%, a figure that increased approximately 10 percentage points over that decade to 69% in 1980 (Haggarty, 1988). By 1992, it had reached 85%, and continued to increase into the twenty-first century, with current rates reportedly hovering around 95% (Index Mundi, 2013). It is not such a far stretch to imagine that with overall poor literacy rates earlier in the twentieth century and before, oral skills became the major mode of communication. While literacy rates have continued to improve, this historical emphasis on conversing remains unchanged.

I also asked the survey participants about parental involvement in their children's education. The most common answer was, "Oh yes, parents are involved," but when asked how parents get involved, the most common answer referenced attending parent-teacher conferences at designated intervals. They said parents came to these conferences to see how their children were doing as far as grades and behavior but did not mention any follow up action if these were not up to *par*. One participant did describe how his mother demanded he behave in an appropriate manner at school, including following the teacher's instructions, but also said she did not expect much more than passing grades of 60%.

Applying this Knowledge to the Classroom

I have tried to make this section as applicable to as many types of students as possible, but at times I may veer off toward the adult education population that was surveyed for this project. The last section on parental involvement is specifically geared for those working with children.

Group Work

Knowing that the Salvadoran society is a collective one, it would be most fruitful to work with this cultural norm rather than trying to emphasize a different philosophy, such as American individualism. Teachers should try to use group work more in the classroom, and consider it collaborative learning in keeping with social norms. Options for engaging all of the students, such as individualized tasks to contribute to a whole, or individual evaluations of group work, could be incorporated to ensure maximum participation and results. For example, given a chosen topic, they could create reports, projects, presentations, etc. to share with classmates, with each student responsible for a particular piece of the whole. With more proficient levels, this is not a difficult activity to create or imagine, and it could even be adapted to the lower levels using simple groups of vocabulary words. Some use of the L1 might even be in order while completing these assignments and teachers can consider it is a sign of help, support and sharing comprehension among students. Classroom solidarity should be considered an asset with Salvadoran learners, even when it presents a challenge to teachers' typical approach to planning.

Power Structure of the Classroom

From the results of this survey, it does not seem necessary for teachers to worry about a power struggle with Salvadoran students. The teacher should use his/her usual tactics for classroom management, but he/she should not have to go out of his/her way to emphasize their authority

or equality. Salvadorans seem to understand their role as learners who will be evaluated by the teacher as an imparter of knowledge.

I asked several respondents if they had a preference for, or believed, that one gender makes better teachers than the other and no one did. They responded that both men and women can make good teachers, although they did seem to have a preference for 'modern' teachers. From this, I understood that they liked the communicative classroom activities described in part II and the previous section of this paper and did not want to return to a lecture model classroom.

Conversation

This may be a difficult point to tackle because the American emphasis on reading and writing skills is opposed to the Salvadoran emphasis on oral communication. Gee (2004) mentions: "Children who learn to read successfully do so because, for them, learning to read is a cultural and not primarily an instructed process. Furthermore, this cultural process has long roots at home—roots which have grown strong and firm before the child has walked into a school" (p.13). While conversation is important and apparently well-received, teachers need to make their students understand the importance of other literacy skills and invent creative ways to practice those so that they become welcomed assignments rather than torturous episodes. This can be a daunting task with older and adult learners, but may be more easily incorporated into children's instruction.

Nonetheless, exercises such as audio taping conversations and having students then transcribe the exchange (in a more or less controlled manner depending on level) might prove useful, as it accomplishes many things. It essentially constitutes listening practice; students become more familiar with natural conversational exchanges, and they make the connection between spoken and written language. Of course, eventually students will have to learn to distinguish between appropriate spoken and appropriate written language. By getting them involved in some way that is a compromise between what they perceive as their important needs and what their target culture perceives as important, hopefully common ground can be reached in a manner that benefits them.

Teachers could also make tape recordings of student oral exchanges at the beginning of a term and create a syllabus based on the needs determined from those exchanges. Throughout the term, the teacher could work on the skills needed, like verb tenses, prepositions, vocabulary, etc. using a variety of reading, writing, and oral activities and then rerecord the exchange at the end of the semester. Students would then listen to their recordings and the progress they have made. This gives the instruction a conversation base, which is valued, but also allows the teacher to stealthily incorporate reading and writing into the class.

Another compromise teachers could use would be using class time more for listening and speaking practice while allowing the students to do reading and writing activities outside of the class, such as reading excerpts and responding to them in journals. Students will therefore get the practice they need for communication in the classroom, but also have contact with the target language outside of the classroom with valuable extra time to grapple with reading and writing skills, which are often what they need the most practice with and get the least.

Tackling Composition and High Context Tendencies

Apart from being collective, Salvadoran society is also high context. Spiral logic is the norm and much faith is placed in traditions passed down through generations. To American teachers, this presents a problem because two salient points of American culture are original thoughts and linear logic. McGroarty (1993) explains:

> *If the American adult ideal is to be self-reliant, at ease in expressing and defending personal opinions, and interested in personal advancement, teachers will expect to provide instruction addressed to these*

> *goals and may unconsciously attribute these same goals to their students. The potential for conflicting expectations and evaluations of behavior between teachers and learners is evident. (p. 2)*

This is something to be dealt with over time because students have been socialized into not doing these things. Faltis (2001) mentions: "Children hear adults' interpretations of events and hear them negotiate meanings through questions, but they are not invited to participate in the building of meaning or in presenting their view of the event" (p. 25). Students likewise may depend on teachers for spoon-fed thoughts and meaning if not instructed to do otherwise.

Teachers will have to slowly make the linear logic and importance of freedom of expression clear to students and practice getting students to think in the same terms. This is a monumental task and will take a lot of patience and perseverance on the part of the teacher. It will help if he/she emphasizes an appreciation for the Salvadorans' tendency to travel the well beaten path, while at the same time explaining the importance of being able to express one's original opinions and use linear logic. Perhaps activities that practice distinguishing assumptions from 'reality' would help students to step outside of their high context world and into a low context one where we need explicit communication and less ambiguity. Also, having students share awkward communication or breakdown in communication experiences they have had in which they have interacted with a foreigner (from a low context society) could help illustrate the different logic patterns being used. Pragmatics instruction is also a must when grappling with these sticky issues of culture and world view in the classroom.

Parental Involvement

For elementary, middle, and high school teachers, getting Salvadoran parents involved in their children's education beyond simple behavior problems may present a challenge. Teachers might be able to devise particular homework or outside projects specifically aimed at getting the parents involved. They could ask students to do oral family histories with their parents and record those or assign cooking/baking activities that the children would need the parents' collaboration on. Other simple things, like assigning children books to read at home, with specific instructions to read with their parents and then report back to the class could also be used. Wright also recommends educational or bilingual television programs be used as a parent and child activity (as cited in Zaman, 2006, p. 76).

Conclusion

Teachers working with Salvadoran students should keep the aforementioned cultural norms and expectations in mind when designing lessons and planning tasks. They may need to dedicate a bit of extra time to considering how lessons might be perceived through the Salvadoran cultural lens and alter it to conform. This is not to stifle their own creativity or goals for the students, but to successfully pass the first hurdle, and gain respect of the class and build confidence. Over time, these classroom routines can change if they need to. Teaching in a different cultural context from one's own can be challenging, if not downright maddening. However, by asking the types of questions such as those examined in this survey, and keeping the cultural context that emerges in mind, everyone can go home content with a job well done—teachers and students alike.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. What region of El Salvador are you from?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. What kind of school did you attend—public, private, vocational, etc.?
5. What were some common classroom or learning activities at your school in your country?
6. How did teachers present lessons?
7. How did teachers evaluate students' learning?
8. Was any technology used? If so, what kind?
9. Was reading an important part of lessons? If so, what did you read?
10. Was writing an important part of lessons? What types of writing assignments did you have?
11. Describe your teachers. Were they male, female, young, old, etc.?
12. How did teachers control their classrooms? Did they typically have any behavior problems with students?
13. Describe teacher/student interaction in the classroom. Were you expected to actively engaged in conversation and discussion with teachers, only listen, or some mix of those two?
14. What were students' responsibilities in the classroom? How could they be successful in school?
15. Were parents involved in their children's educations? How?
16. Describe your English classes. What activities do you remember from English class?
17. Which activities from English class have been most helpful for you?