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When foreigners join the class. Changes in the university classroom environment – a "cost-benefit" analysis

Summary

The aim of the paper is to examine how university classroom environment changes with the arrival of foreign students, especially those who are participants of international exchange programmes.

The learning environment is an important component of higher education, as adult students are often conscious learners, who want to learn and see the purpose in doing so; also, they are often self-conscious, especially in a foreign language class. A multi-cultural classroom can be a beneficial element of university education, for both the students and the teacher, as it provides an opportunity for students to share experiences and bring their insights to the learning process. Conversely, one of the challenges a university teacher faces is to find a way to actively involve all the students in the class, taking into account their various backgrounds, different language skills and learning experiences, styles and preferences.

The article is designed specifically to examine the effects of student mobility on the learning environment and the challenges, costs and benefits of education in a multicultural class. It also presents recommendations to make the adult learning environment an effective one, especially when it comes to education in a multicultural environment and learning in a foreign language.

Key words: learning environment, adult learners, higher education, university, student exchange, multicultural classroom.

Introduction

Higher education in Europe and around the world is becoming 'inter-nationalised'. It means that classes consists of a mix of domestic and international

students. For example, at the Faculty of Education at the University of Warsaw, classes conducted in English (the so-called English language conversation classes) attract many foreign students – participants of the Erasmus programme.

In their article on international student mobility, Philippe de Villé et al. (1996: 205) wrote that "spontaneous student mobility is still a marginal phenomenon". Nowadays, eighteen years later, with the popularity of the Erasmus Programme, this statement is no longer true. Therefore, the phenomenon should not be ignored. Let me quote some numbers. In the 15 years of the Polish participation in the programme, over 123 thousand (until 2010/2011 – 108,041) Polish students benefited from Erasmus study periods and company placements (3–12 months). The number has been steadily growing since 1998. For example, in the year 2010/2011, 14,234 Polish students went to study abroad. In the same period, in total, (in the years 1998/99 – 2010/11), more than 36,000 Erasmus students came to Poland. Since 1998 their annual number has grown 34-fold. (Członkowska-Naumiuk 2012: 28–31).

There are two terms used to refer to students who are not citizens of the country where they study: international students and foreign students. Although they mean different groups and are defined differently by different countries, in my article I use them interchangeably.

International students are those who move to another country with the objective of studying (definition used by USA, UK, Australia). *Foreign students* are those students who are long-term residents in countries but not citizens that get counted as mobile students (definition used by France, Italy, Japan, Korea). Germany distinguishes mobile and non-mobile foreign students (Verbik & Lasanowski 2007).

Adult learners

Since working in the university classroom entails working with adult students, it is worth discussing the characteristics of adult students, especially when it comes to learning a foreign language (or, to be more specific: learning in a foreign language).

First of all, adult learners (i.e those who are over 18 years old), unlike children, are autonomous, self-reliant and independent (Cercone 2008: 143). Being also goal-oriented, they decide for themselves what they would like to learn, and therefore can set and attain their own educational goals. Since learning is not

forced upon them, they know what they have already learned and what knowledge and skills they want to acquire. Secondly, adult students are often conscious learners, who want to learn and see the purpose in doing so; also, they are often self-conscious, especially in a foreign language class.

The word *self-conscious* has a double meaning. The first one is the meaning which can be found in dictionary definitions: timid, shy, reserved, introverted or uncomfortably nervous about what other people think about you. This meaning often relates to the situation in which learners are quiet most of the time, and therefore are too shy to speak in public, especially when they have to do so in a foreign language. The other meaning is quite an opposite one, in which self-conscious learners are conscious and reflexive. It seems that this meaning is a development of the word *conscious*.

In the first meaning, self-conscious learners have more difficulties, are quiet, inhibited, self-critical and become easily embarrassed. In the second meaning, self-conscious learners are those who are rich in experiences, reflect on their learning experiences and adapt to new requirements (Chaib & Chaib 2010: 129).

I believe that a university teacher in a multicultural classroom should take into account both meanings of that word. Especially, if the teaching is done in a foreign language. On the one hand, as was written before, the students know what they would like to learn, they possibly also have some idea how they are going to achieve their goals. On the other hand, when it comes to foreign language learning, learners may experience an invisible barrier which prevents them from learning. It is called the *affective filter*, which screens the amount of input in learners' brains and makes it difficult for them to take in new linguistic knowledge. I suppose this can be applied to other formal situations, not only language learning. For example, when learning in a language other than their mother tongue, this barrier may prevent the students from taking active part in classes, as they are often too shy to speak in a different language, not being confident about their foreign language skills.

The affective filter hypothesis, first put forth by Dulay and Burt (1977) and developed by Krashen (1982, 1985), recognises personal variables which have an impact on the foreign language learner's failure and/or success. These are: attitude, self-confidence, anxiety and motivation. For success in language learning, the affective filter needs to be low, thanks to which learners will be less likely to feel bored, angry, frustrated, tense, unmotivated or nervous and, consequently, more likely to learn new things. Otherwise, they might "filter out" input and make it unavailable for acquisition (Lightbown & Spada 2006: 37). In a situation when students receive comprehensible input, i.e. the one they understand or slightly

above their level (for intellectual challenge), their affective filter is low, allowing the input 'in' and enhancing learning / language acquisition (Du 2009). What is interesting, the affective filter is not present in children (Krashen 1988).

Even in an international group, intercultural understanding, skills development, including language learning, will not happen without assistance. In general, foreign students spend most of their time with other students who speak the same language or who come from a similar cultural background (Dalglish 2002: 3). They come to the classes together, sit together, when there are pairwork activities – they work together etc. Instead of practising English, they speak their own language. There is no space for international integration. It seems that those students who come to study in another country alone, not in groups, will probably benefit more – and are more likely to meet new people and make new relations. So, it is the instructor's role to prevent that, by using various methods to facilitate learning and create an effective learning environment.

Effective adult learning environment

The learning environment consists of several dimensions, which are interconnected and influence each other. The physical learning environment refers to the context where learning takes place (e.g. in the classroom) – the arrangement of desks and chairs, lighting, equipment etc. The learning environment also has social and psychological dimensions – personalisation of discussion, classroom participation (Yap et al. 2011).

The adult learning environment is also characterised by collaboration among students and between the teacher and students, as adults may themselves be a rich resource for learning and therefore they can contribute to the learning of other students (Knowles 1980: 50).

In the following part I would like to present an overview of studies concerning the adult learning environment and motivation. These are studies by Dorothy D. Billington (1988), Zoltan Dornyei (1998), Carol Dalglish (2002), and Jane Vella (2002). They all presented similar conclusions and recommendations for teachers who work with adults – how to create an effective learning environment.

Billington (1988) conducted a four-year study on learning environments to see what type of learning environment facilitates adult growth and development. In her doctoral dissertation, *Ego Development and Adult Education*, she presented seven factors, which she considered to be the most important in this process.

These are: 1) a safe and supportive environment, in which students feel that their individual abilities, needs and life achievements are respected and acknowledged; 2) an environment fostering intellectual freedom and encouraging creativity and experimentation; 3) an environment in which adult students are treated as equal partners from whom teachers can also learn something; 4) self-directed learning, where students take responsibility for their own learning; 5) intellectual challenge at just beyond their present level of ability; 6) active involvement in learning: interaction and dialogue between the learners and the teacher; 7) regular feedback mechanisms for students, so that they can talk about their needs and expectations.

Dornyei (1998: 131) presented “ten commandments” for motivating foreign language learners. He suggests that the teacher should set a personal example with his/her own behaviour and also stresses the importance of a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and a good relationship with the learners. Moreover, to increase the learners’ goal-orientedness, the instructor should promote learner autonomy and focus on personalising the learning process.

Similarly, Vella (2002: 3) notices that adult learning is best achieved in dialogue. Vella makes a list of twelve principles for effective adult learning. Among them are: participation of the learners in determining what will be learned, safe learning environment, sound relationships between teacher and learners and among learners, action with reflection or learning by doing, respect, clear role development, working in small groups and engagement of the learners in the subject.

Dalglish (2002) carried out a one-year project in 2002, related to effective teaching in multi-cultural business classrooms at universities in Australia. In her paper, Dalglish presented practical strategies which are effective in culturally diverse classrooms. Although some of them seem very obvious, it is worth mentioning them, as they may have practical application.

Firstly, teachers should avoid stereotyping and prejudging others’ knowledge or ability, even their language skills. The fact that students are registered for the course does not necessarily mean that they have the desired level of English, for example. Secondly, the material should be relevant to all the students and context should be provided, and examples from different countries will enhance the learning process and all students can contribute and might be more willing to take part in a discussion. Also, asking the students for help in pronouncing names and asking them how things are done in their countries indicates that the teacher is genuinely interested and creates a friendly atmosphere.

Moreover, encouraging participation and cross-cultural group work is important for both the domestic and foreign students. Teachers should also give their students time to process instructions and information when they are asked to answer a question. Some people may have language difficulty, and such international groups are rarely uniform as far as the language ability is concerned. Dalglish also suggests that, if necessary, handouts and a glossary of terms for the students should be provided.

Billington (1988) observes that students develop best in student-centred programmes, where they feel safe and are actively involved in the learning process, whereas in situations when they feel unsafe and threatened, students tend to regress in self-esteem and self-confidence. To illustrate this, she gives an example of English as a second language classes for immigrants – in a friendly and safe environment, full of laughter and congeniality, students learn fast and well, whereas in classes where students feel inadequate and threatened, little is learned.

One element of effective learning environment is an atmosphere in which adults feel both challenged and safe. If learners have any anxieties about exposing themselves to failure or are afraid that they might appear foolish, the teacher should do everything to make them feel safe, but not too safe, as it might lead to the situation in which they are not learning. Teachers need to find balance between being friendly and challenging learners (Rogers 1989, Imel 1994). An ideal adult learning environment has a "non-threatening, non-judgemental atmosphere in which adults have permission for and are expected to share in the responsibility for their learning" (Imel 1994).

The abovementioned researchers suggest that factors that can contribute to effective learning environment and a sense of support are: furniture arrangement, group work, study groups, breaking the traditional classroom routine (e.g. snacks during a class break create opportunities for interaction and break down barriers between learners and instructors), using humour (which can break routine and provide novelty and help the learners see the "human" side of the teacher – provided it is used properly, without sarcasm or ridicule). Moreover, adults seem to learn best when they can build on the previous knowledge and experience, when the learning (class, lecture etc.) is divided into shorter segments and visual aids are used, when they ask questions without fear of embarrassment and their viewpoints are respected, when they have the space and time to come to their own conclusions, when they can apply the topics of classes immediately to real situations in their own lives and when they have a good relationship with the other learners.

Costs and benefits

What are the costs and benefits of the presence of international students in the university classroom? Apart from the most obvious financial benefits, there are also other kinds of benefits, i.e. individual and socio-cultural ones.

The first and foremost argument connected with international mobility is the financial one. For the individual students, there are many costs connected with moving to another country: travel, accommodation, the everyday life, and language training. However, we should not forget about the benefits. Very often, individual faculties are very happy to receive foreign students, as with each foreign student the faculties receive funds.

The individual benefits from education, because "education also enhances the individual's ability to socialise and to be a member of society, thus contributing to social cohesion" (De Villé et al. 1996: 207). We can look at this factor from a more "global" perspective. It can be applied to education in a multicultural environment: students of various backgrounds can get to know each other better and make new friendships which might last longer than the duration of the course and be useful in the professional life. As De Villé et al. (ibidem: 208) observed, students following undergraduate courses are "seeking to make intellectual and social and cultural contacts, and gain new and different experiences in a foreign country and culture". Those who study at their home institution which receives foreign students benefit in the same way, although probably not to the same extent.

Furthermore, from the point of view of an individual student who comes to study in another country, the reasons for a decision to study abroad might be connected to the educational offer – the host country may offer different courses and disciplines or maybe simply education of better quality and better pedagogical support (ibidem).

The socio-cultural benefits are the benefits to both the individual and the society. Student mobility helps to broaden the ways of thinking and overcome prejudice and stereotypes (De Villé et al. 1996: 209; Członkowska-Naumiuk 2012: 25). Again, not only do the students gain new knowledge and skills, but the society may also benefit, especially when the students come back from the exchange programme and decide to work in their own country, where they can use the experience, knowledge and skills gained abroad. The benefits for the host country and students in their domestic institution are similar, due to the exchange

of expertise and experiences. Moreover, students seeing the benefits of an exchange programme, may be encouraged to participate in one themselves.

Conclusion

The potential benefits of cultural diversity in university classrooms are numerous. Of course, the financial argument seems to be a strong one, as foreign students bring revenue to their home institution, but they also "provide an opportunity for intercultural learning, for a sharing of knowledge and perspectives that could be so important for success in today's global (...) environment" (Dalglish 2002). Additionally, a multi-cultural classroom can itself be a beneficial element of university education, for both the students and the teacher, as it provides an opportunity for students to share experiences and bring their insights to the learning process.

To conclude, one of the biggest challenges a university teacher faces is to find a way to actively involve all the students in the class, taking into account their various backgrounds, expectations, different language skills and learning experiences, styles and preferences. However, there is no universal recipe for success, apart from some tips from the studies presented above and each instructor has to work out his/her own ways with each group.

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