



The Importance of Cultural Sensitivity in TESOL

Teaching English as a second language can be a challenging endeavor. There are many obstacles an individual faces when embarking on such a journey, such as language barriers, currency variances, and unfamiliarity with a region or setting. However, one of the most important dynamics one must keep in mind when dealing with another culture is the level of cultural sensitivity possessed by the person teaching. Without a high degree of cultural sensitivity, the teacher will not be able to connect with students, and may have a difficult time assimilating themselves into their new environment.

An individual who is culturally sensitive is aware that there could be differences between their culture and another person's, and that these differences could affect their relationships with people of a different culture, and the way they communicate with each other (Stafford, Bowman, Eking, Hanna, & Lopoies-DeFede, 1997). When traveling to another country, whether for business, leisure, or any other reason, it is important to be culturally sensitive to one's surroundings. However, when engaged in TESOL, the importance of cultural sensitivity becomes even greater.

In order to foster a successful classroom and a productive learning environment, a teacher must attempt to establish some kind of connection with his/her students. If a teacher is culturally insensitive to their students, the students may feel disrespected or misunderstood and apprehension towards the teacher may develop. If the students do not feel comfortable in the learning environment, an impediment to successful learning is likely to be created. What is interesting about this dynamic is not only will it have a negative impact on the students, but on the teacher as well. The teacher could potentially view his/her work as a failure due to the lack of attentiveness, lack of progress, or lack of successful results generated from the teacher being culturally unaware. Likewise, a culturally sensitive person would understand other countries' traditions and ways of life, or attempt to learn and apply new understandings. For example, someone who is traveling to the Middle East for the first time to teach might not clearly understand the meanings behind women covering their faces when in public. However, instead of forming prejudice or expressing negative views towards such practices, one should accept the conditions they are living in and try to educate themselves on the lifestyle of the people they are interacting with.

Abraham Maslow wrote “All humans have a need to be respected and to have self-esteem and self-respect. Also known as the belonging need, esteem presents the normal human desire to be accepted and valued by others (*A Theory of Human Motivation.*) Maslow also stated that if humans do not have this need met, it is likely they will develop an inferiority complex and as a result their self-confidence will be damaged.

Being culturally insensitive in a learning environment has great potential to adversely affect the student’s self esteem. Once again, if students feel that they are not respected, not accepted, or are viewed negatively by the teacher, learning will be greatly impacted. Dr. Maurice Elias, director of Rutgers University Social-Emotional Learning Lab, writes “ the gateway to learning is through social and emotional skills and experiences” (Millbower). If a teacher does not possess good social and emotional skills in the different culture they are teaching, he/she may not experience positive results to their strategies of teaching.

In conclusion, teaching English abroad is about much more than just presenting the English language to students. It is about tailoring the information and the approach taken to sending the information that garnish success in the classroom. Students in India may not benefit from the same style of teaching that has been successful in teaching students in China because they are culturally different. Without a high degree of cultural sensitivity, the teacher will not be able to connect with students, and may have a difficult time assimilating themselves into their new environment.