

Diversity: Language, Race, Culture Among English Language Learners

Questions to Enid Lee—Mining the Gold

Teacher’s question: How can I teach students who come from a culture different from my own and of which I have little knowledge?

How do you tap into students’ cultures if you don’t know about these cultures and if they differ from yours? You might think that my first suggestion would be to learn as much as you can about the students’ cultures. This is important but even more crucial is knowledge and assessment about your own culture.

Many of us who teach are members of the dominant culture, the culture that has the power to shape what happens in our schools and other institutions, to shape and influence the kind of instructional strategies we use

and the assessments that we consider important. This is the culture that impacts how we see our students’ cultures, what we know or don’t know about them. This is the culture that helps us to see their family patterns as dysfunctional or their parents as indifferent to their children’s learning. Put simply, knowing where we are coming from culturally, is the first step in helping us to learn about our students’ cultures. When we are inclined to think of our students’ cultures in deficit terms, let’s check ourselves and ask “is it really deficit?” “Or is it just different from what we consider normal?” Having checked the lenses through which you view your students’ cultures, your next



question where can I look for that culture?

Many of us look to the multicultural days, the food, the festivals and the folklore as the places to learn about our students’ cultures. If we start here, then we must look not only at these expressions of culture but also underneath these expressions

of culture. We must ask “What is the meaning of these activities in the lives of the students and their families? What can they tell me about the prior experiences of this ethnic group? What does it indicate about my students’ interests and their goals?” These are questions we can explore in the process of teaching and learning English. We can get at these questions through the themes we encourage students to explore in their writing and

speaking as they learn new vocabulary and develop phonemic awareness. We can learn about our students’ culture through respectful interactions with their families and the communities from which our students come. We can attend events in the community that are open to the general public. We can continue to read about the cultures through literature of our students.

Some guidelines as we embark on learning about our students’ cultures.

1. Pay attention to the cultural lens which we are wearing on this journey. If ours is the dominant culture we have to guard against the tendency to see the cultures of our English Language Learners

in deficit terms. If we do not pay attention to the way in which cultures of people of color are racialized and minimized we can perpetuate racism and limit learning.

2. Culture is diverse and dynamic, complex and changing. If we catch ourselves categorizing whole groups of people in a single word, watch out! There is diversity within cultural groups. Cultures change as people live out their lives in a new land. We are more likely to be accurate if we say “with this group of Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, Arab Americans or Asian Americans, I have noticed this cultural pattern.”
3. Our students are tremendous sources of cultural knowledge. Be open to learning from them. Mine the cultural gold they share with you and use it to hone your instructional strategies to support their learning.
4. The communities and families of our students’ communities are rich with culture. Begin the partnership with them by honoring them as their children’s first teachers.
5. We can renew our commitment to, in the course of our professional development, learn about the values and victories of our students and ways of implementing our learning in our teaching.
6. Learning more about our students’ cultures and our own culture is an endless journey. May it be a joyful one!