

Commentary: The Educator Effect

It is an undeniable fact that the circumstances in which we live in the 21st century require us all to overcome more challenges than ever, thus posing the need for every individual to learn and develop constantly for sake of acting more efficiently in any field of life. One area that everybody should consider essential is the need to improve communication and develop transcultural awareness in an ever-changing world of international relations. It is certain that such abilities will help individuals become more culturally knowledgeable, and hence transmit their intended messages across cultures.

In the light of such requirements, it is not only important to know foreign languages and cultures from books; it is also important to learn how different forms of knowledge are communicated across cultures. That kind of knowledge is never easy to acquire; in fact, it is extremely demanding for those who endeavor to do that. It is not sufficient simply to learn this kind of knowledge through books, or through formal methods in a classroom. The only way to acquire it is through co-operation and mutual understanding of the parties involved.

As an educator in Turkish institutions for a decade now, I believe that the key factor in the dissemination and sustenance of knowledge across cultures is co-operation – between learners and educators, as well as the source and target cultures they deal with. This can only be sustained by what I might call “The Educator Effect.” The very reason for this claim is that educators should be the guides who should first lead learners up the path of learning about and discovering foreign languages and cultures, and allow them the opportunities to walk in the path by providing “Road Maps to Learning.” Unless the route is clear, no learner can be held responsible for losing their motivation.

Personal experience reveals that it is to the learners’ best advantage if learners introduce a “System” into their lessons and move on in accordance with pre-set principles. This system is not knowledge-based, but should derive instead from the educators’ understanding of learner psychology, coupled with a readiness to cope with the barriers preventing or inhibiting understanding of the foreign language or culture. Such barriers might include lack of self-confidence, a belief that the language or culture is somehow “difficult” to understand, or that the task of learning that language or culture might be “pointless.” My opinion is that anything is possible when the right approach is adopted, based on the awareness that learner expectations differ from one culture (or even classroom), as opposed to another.

The need to create an environment for learners to gain confidence is of the utmost importance, and it should be dealt with prior to any learning experience. Learners become more confident if they understand that mistakes – or supposedly “erroneous” knowledge – is not something to be ashamed of, but rather provides an important stepping-stone the road to transcultural learning. Educators can make it possible by creating “scaffolding” – a series of support-mechanisms (including feedback, questioning), as well as structuring the syllabus in such a way as to enable learners to acquire knowledge and understanding step by step.

There should be no doubt that in such contexts, learners will acquire more confidence, as well as wanting to undertake tasks on their own, which in turn will make it possible for educators to expose them to the target language and/or culture as much as necessary. By such means learners can become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and thereby set realistic goals for their own learning. In other words, they are empowered to discover language, as well as cross-cultural issues on their own. When this goal has been achieved, it will be much easier for educators to consolidate learners’ knowledge and prepare them for more complex assignments requiring different abilities, as well as involving the discovery of new kinds of knowledge.

Encouraging further learning is another element that certainly proves beneficial for learners. To achieve this aim, educators need to possess an unshakeable belief in the efficacy of activities that require “collaboration” among themselves and their learners. It is best if educators understand that working together with their peers provides space for sharing responsibility for learning, and takes the stress out of learning. The wonders that group projects or extensive reading assignments can work as a result of collaboration are often marvelous to behold.

The most significant in for devising a systematic approach to transcultural language learning is to encourage learners to “reflect” on their own learning processes before, during and after every assignment. Doing this is not only a means for learners to understand themselves and their capabilities – as well as assessing their own levels of linguistic and cultural knowledge of the foreign culture - but also it helps them to see how far they have come, and how they might develop in the future. This provides a much more relaxed approach to learning, rather than worrying about the excessive amount of work they might need to put in before they can be deemed “proficient” in the target language, or “knowledgeable” about the foreign culture. “Reflection” on experiences is so powerful that it might be perceived as the North Star in the pedagogical sky, even if one might be bereft of a compass.

Finally, educators, as well as academics, once they adopt a “system,” should also acquire more confidence – not only in terms of their classroom practice, but in the way they write about their experiences, whether pedagogical or in terms of their knowledge of a foreign language or foreign culture. Such confidence will gain them respect and recognition from learners, as well as fellow-educators. Confident educators will always be role models, thus the example they set will never go ignored. Most importantly, confidence will encourage educators to learn more about what they are doing and why they are doing it, which is the gateway to “constant professional as well as academic development”. Educators who are “learners” will not be just educators, for they will start seeing themselves as “facilitators” and act accordingly at all times with any type of learners in various circumstances. In essence, they will stand as solid evidence as to the possibility of “transformation” through perseverance.

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