

Cross Cultural Aspects of Classroom Management in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The pluralistic construct of the Sri Lankan Teaching English as a Second Language environment recognizes cultural sensitivity as a paramount requisite as cultural diversity can exist within the student populations and between students and the teacher. Cultural perceptions of students and teachers when based on the principle of equity negate tunnel vision and biases. Incorporating material and activities that foster cultural awareness is identified as a classroom strategy which when used astutely can reap optimal benefits and result in cross cultural bridging. Thus the intricate weave of the cultural fabric of the country has made the management of the Teaching English as a Second Language classroom in Sri Lanka complex.

Keywords: pluralistic culture, Teaching English as a Second Language, cultural bridging, classroom management

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a multiethnic and a multireligious country where ethnicity and religion are the main elements which define cultural diversity. Cultural diversity in Sri Lanka recognizes three main ethnicities: Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim; four main religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam; three main first languages: Sinhala, Tamil and an institutionalized second language Sri Lankan English(SLE). The multiethnic nature of the Sri Lankan society is reflected through the following statistics.

Table 1: Estimated % population of Sri Lanka by ethnic group (2011)

Ethnic group	% population
Sinhalese	74.9
Sri Lanka Tamil	11.2
Indian Tamil	4.2
Sri Lanka Moor	9.2
Burgher	0.2
Malay	0.2
Other	0.1

Source: [15].

This ethnic diversity is recognized at the primary and secondary educational institutions which are mainly under the Ministry of Education and as seen in statistics below many of them provide the students the right to decide on their medium of education. While the Sinhala and Tamil media are the choice of a majority of Sinhala and Tamil students respectively the Muslim student population opts to follow their studies

in one of these media. Students are chosen for English medium education through a test conducted at school level while in some urban schools following core subjects in the English medium is compulsory. The following table illustrates that most schools provide education in the Sinhala and Tamil media.

Table 2: Government School System at a Glance 2012

Schools on medium of education		
Sinhala only	6,368	64.3%
Tamil only	2,914	29.4%
Sinhala and Tamil	39	0.4%
Sinhala and English	403	4.1%
Tamil and English	152	1.5%
Sinhala, Tamil and English	29	0.3%
Total	9,905	100%

Source:[16].

Furthermore though Sri Lanka has an overall literacy rate of 95.6% and exhibits gender equality in literacy it is a very low percentage of this population who claim literacy in SLE. As a result of the Official Language Act No 33 of 1956 and Act 28 of 1958 the vernaculars- Sinhala or Tamil became the medium of instruction within the government educational institutions and English was taught as a second language. Though TESL has a history of around 150 years and was based on egalitarian values it was very low population who self-assess and claim that they have literacy in English. But what is noted in the statistics provided by the two national surveys below is a

significant improvement in their ability to speak, read and write English over a ten year span.

Table 3: Ability to Speak, Read and Write English: 2001 – 2011

Year of survey	% literacy rates (10 years and over)			% ability to	
	Male	Female	Overall	Speak English	Read and Write English
2001	92.6	90.0	91.2	14.4	17.1
2011	96.8	94.6	95.6	23.8	30.5

Source: [17].

Thus the above statistics indicate the importance and the contribution made by pedagogical process TESL in Sri Lanka.

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Tylor defines culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society [1]. According to Clifford culture is not ‘an object to be described ... [nor] a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitely interpreted [2]; [it] is contested, temporal, and emergent’. Trumbull too postulates that culture is the systems of values, beliefs, and ways of knowing that guide communities of people in their daily lives[3].

In 2001, UNESCO adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity to raise awareness worldwide about the importance of intercultural dialogue, diversity and inclusion. While culture is the core device for survival of societies it is constantly changing its learned behavior patterns and perceptions. But this change is least witnessed in the moral values set down by diverse religions. Thus educational systems and structures in countries such as Sri Lanka should be sensitive to the cultural patterns unique to each ethnic group and religious perceptions so that intercultural understanding could be generated through tolerance and acceptance of differences amongst its ethnic constitute.

CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

Peklaj and Vodopivec [4] define a dichotomy in the conception of learning in the cultures of the world as Individualistic and Collectivistic/Sociocentric. According to Greenfield et al., [5] Individualism emphasizes individual identity, independence, self-fulfillment, and standing out while Collectivism emphasizes group identity, interdependence, social responsibility, and fitting in. These two broad cultural value systems, Some scholars [6-8] state, shape people's thoughts and actions in virtually all aspects of life. According to Triandis [9] representative of 70% of world cultures are Collectivistic/Sociocentric and all

ethnicities under the pluralistic culture of Sri Lanka are collectivistic. Thus in their conceptions of learning Sri Lankan students share the following commonalities cited in literature.

- Well-being of group; responsibility for group
- Interdependence/cooperation
- Narrative knowledge about people's experiences is highly valued
- adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus
- Modesty
- Social orientation
- Social intelligence

But the diversity in ethnicity and religion in the student/teacher construct demands strategic classroom management.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

Gabriel et al [10] postulate that challenges in multicultural classroom management are multifarious. As indicated by statistics on population (Table 1) the Sinhala community emerges as the largest population in Sri Lanka and as a corollary the dominant culture. Literature on the role of culture within the classroom state that the fundamental task of classroom management is to create an inclusive, supportive, and caring environment [11].

Weinstein, et al [11] further state that effective classroom management requires a comprehensive knowledge of diverse cultural backgrounds of the learners in the teacher. The perceptions and the resultant attitude of the teacher towards students from different ethnic groups especially if they differ from the teacher's own ethnicity may trigger feelings of alienation, helplessness in these student populations. Teacher attitudes should not inculcate ethnocentrism, cultural tunnel vision or ignorance on values and norms of ethnic groups differing from their own. Thus Gabriel et al [10] suggest that teachers should demonstrate an openness and willingness to gain cultural literacy where you learn about aspects of culture that are important to your students. Thus in such an educational environment according to Gabriel et al[10]. Values, norms, and beliefs of dominant cultures must be modified to meet the academic, sociocultural, developmental, moral, and ethical needs of ever-increasingly ethnically diverse school populations. This challenge has been met successfully in Sri Lanka. For example to generate intercultural understanding primary and secondary level text books are made available in three languages English, Sinhala and Tamil to ensure equitable access to education in the language choice of the students through the provision of learning materials. What is of importance to this study is the recognition given to the pluralistic constitute of the society in TESL learning materials as seen below.

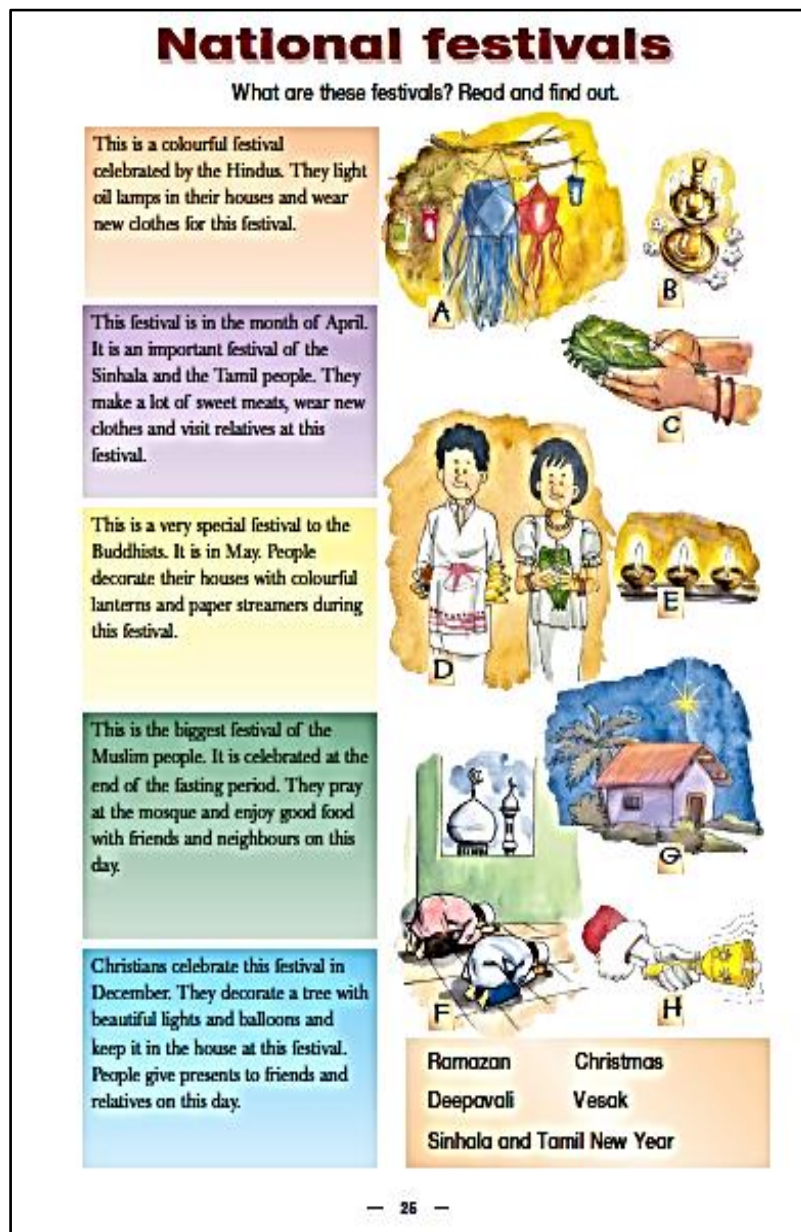


Figure 1: Extract from the Grade 5 English Text Book
Source: [18].

As seen above under the title *National Festivals* five major festivals: Sinhala and Tamil New Year (Sinhala and Hindu), Ramazan (Muslim), Deepavali (Hindu), Christmas (Catholic) and Vesak (Buddhist) are introduced to all students. This creates awareness on cultural practices of other ethnicities in the country and builds empathy. Furthermore no culturally biased questions are structured in classroom material/ summative exams. All students are provided the opportunity to follow their religion as a subject at school level. They can offer these diverse religions at the Ordinary Level examinations. At tertiary level within universities evidence of recognizing the cultural/religious diversity in Sri Lanka is exhibited through a

wide selection of subjects: Sinhala, Tamil, English, Buddhist culture, Christian culture etc. Thus education in Sri Lanka while catering to the pedagogical standards that keep abreast with international development takes into consideration the cross cultural construct of the society.

MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT: A LESSON PLAN

Martin & Sugarman[12] state that 'Classroom management refers to those activities of classroom teachers that create a positive classroom climate within which effective teaching and learning can occur'. Thus the focus of this lesson plan is to construct a preen try to

Everyman which is prescribed for G. C. E. Ordinary Level Literature. *Everyman* categorically is a Christian play and endorses Christian ideology and religion. It assumes a good knowledge of Catholic doctrine and of the Christian faith in the reader though consisting of pan religious themes such as transitoriness, value of good deeds and sin. In a multi religious classroom the following lesson plan recognizes the need to create awareness that *Every mane* epitomizes mankind generally and almost all religions share doctrines which teach us how to behave and how not to behave.

Goal: Appreciation of *Everyman* which is a selected drama in the G. C. E. Ordinary Level English Literature.

Objective: At the end of this lesson the students will be able to analyze and discuss similarities/differences

between the main Christian concepts in *Everyman* and the other religions of the audience.

Time duration: 1 hour

Audience: A student population (n=40) with equal gender representation and a mean age of 15 years from G. C. E. Ordinary Level classes selected under stratified random sampling consisting of 10 students each from the following religions: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islam.

Material: Handouts

1. The selected abridged version of *Everyman* in the anthology G. C. E. Ordinary Level Appreciation of English
2. Vices and Virtues of Religions
 - 2.1 Vices and Virtues in Christianity

Table 4: The seven Deadly Sins and virtues of Christianity

The seven Deadly Sins and Virtues of Christianity							
Deadly Sins	Pride (arrogance)	Avarice (materialism)	Envy (jealousy)	Wrath (anger)	Lust (impurity)	Gluttony (greed for food)	Sloth (laziness)
Virtues	Humility (modesty)	Generosity (charity)	Kindness (gratitude)	Patience (compassion)	Chastity (purity)	Temperance (moderation)	Diligence (fervor)

2.2 Vices and Virtues in Islam

2.2.1 Some Vices in Islam

- i. *Stupidity* is deficiency of wisdom
- ii. *Slyness* is the excessive use of the intellect; that is, using the power of the intellect in matters for which it is inappropriate.
- iii. *Cowardice* is deficiency of courage.
- iv. *Foolhardiness* is the excess of courage; that is, reckless action in cases where it is inappropriate.
- v. *Lethargy* is laziness.
- vi. *Rapaciousness* excess in sexual activity, eating and drinking, and other sensual pleasures.
- vii. *Submissiveness* is the deficient state of accepting oppression and tyranny.
- viii. *Tyranny* oppressing either one's own self or other

Source: [19].

2.2.2 Some Virtues in Islam

- i. Obligatory charity
- ii. Truthfulness
- iii. Sincerity
- iv. Unselfishness
- v. Humility
- vi. Patience
- vii. Honesty
- viii. Moderation

Source: [20].

2.3 Vices and Virtues in Buddhism

2.3.1 Five basic precepts for lay men: a code of moral conduct(vices to avoid) in Buddhism

- i. To abstain from taking the lives of living beings.
- ii. To abstain from taking that which is not given.
- iii. To abstain from sexual misconduct.
- iv. To abstain from telling falsehoods.
- v. To abstain from distilled and fermented intoxicants.

2.3.2 Some virtues listed in Buddhist scriptures

- i. Ahimsa (non-violence)
- ii. Benevolence (Generosity)
- iii. Tolerance
- iv. Compassion
- v. Respect – for all living beings and for the sanctity of all life.
- vi. Wisdom – knowledge is contrasted with ignorance.
- vii. Austerity
- viii. Celibacy
- ix. Honesty

2.4 Vices and Virtues in Hinduism

2.4.1 Some Vices or products of ignorance in Hinduism

- i. *kāma* - longing, excessive desire

- ii. *krodha* - anger , wrath
- iii. *lobha* - covetousness or greed; the desire to acquire
- iv. *moha* - delusion; to fall into error
- v. *mada* - pride and arrogance, wantonness or lust, intoxicating drink
- vi. *mātsarya* - jealousy, envy

Source: [21].

2.4.2 Some Virtues in Hinduism

- i. Purity of mind and body .
- ii. Self-control / discipline
- iii. Detachment over worldly issues .

Virtues			
Buddhism	Christianity	Hinduism	Islam
Generosity	Generosity		
Vices			
Buddhism	Christianity	Hinduism	Islam
	Envy	Envy	

Activity III:

- i. Review the list of Virtues; recognize which ones you have been practicing in your life. Find out whether peers from other religions have been practicing them too.
- ii. Look up in a dictionary any words that are unfamiliar, or which you can't define.

Activity IV: Discuss the presence/absence of the following concepts which are in *Everyman* in your religion

- i. Day of reckoning
- ii. Heaven/Hell
- iii. Holy scriptures
- iv. Confession
- v. Repent
- vi. Redemption

At the end of these activities it is envisaged that the alienation generated within the non Christian students towards an essentially Christian drama will be diffused through the comprehension that all religions share basic concepts. Furthermore the interreligious dialogue generated will benefit classroom management as it promotes ethno-religious harmony.

CONCLUSIONS

Weinstein et al [13] state that students often make decisions of what they do in class based on their perception of whether or not the teacher cares about them. They further say that potential misunderstanding between students and teachers with different ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds can occur if such caring is absent. One form of caring is to respect and value the ethno-religious construct of the student population.

- iv. Truth in thought word and deed .
- v. Non Violence towards all .

Source: [22].

Activities

Activity I: List the common Virtues and Vices shared by religions given below. Add as many as possible to the list. Remember that the compilation given to you are *some* extracts. Thus if a Virtue or Vice is missing in the list under a religion ask peers who are from the said religion whether they would consider the concept as a Virtue/ Vice.

According to Marzano et al [14] virtually anything a teacher does to show interest in students as individuals has a positive impact on their learning. This is achievable through an empathic grasp of how each ethnic group feels, thinks, acts, and reacts in situations where culturally and religiously sensitive material is the instrument of classroom teaching. A strategic approach can develop an awareness of the assumptions, values and beliefs of other religions/ethnicities and eradicate prejudices and biases.

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