

Cultural factors and errors in the English classroom: teacher attitudes and student learning

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Cultural factors in Fiji often make the school classroom environment a formal one. Teaching tends to be teacher-centred rather than pupil-centred. This is reflected in the layout of the room, where the teacher is in front of the class and the pupils' desks all face the teacher. Much of the teaching does not consider the individual differences in one class. Because of factors like the class size, inexperience of the teacher and a lack of resources, the whole class tends to be taught the same way. In this type of situation, students are not encouraged to make errors, for correcting them is often seen as time-consuming.

In the indigenous Fijian culture, teachers are generally respected and tend to hold a high status in society. This is particularly true in rural areas. Young children, on the other hand, are often perceived as the least important people in the traditional Fijian social hierarchy. They are to be seen, not heard. They are not encouraged to talk in the presence of older people; hence their reluctance to ask questions or participate in class discussions. In school, the often-held view is that 'a good class is a quiet class'. Society expects a lot from the teacher who tries to live up to these expectations by controlling the class well and ensuring the children make very few mistakes. The individuality of the students is, therefore, suppressed and, very often, the end product is young people who lack the confidence to express themselves. Expatriate teachers have remarked that our pupils will generally think, or pretend to think, whatever teachers want them to think

and seem to have very few original ideas. In reality, they lack confidence to express themselves. This is reflected in their writing – be it essay or personal writing.

It is often forgotten that making errors is part of the learning process. Children must be allowed to make errors so that they can learn from them, but this must be handled sensitively. When errors are not handled carefully in the classroom, the process of learning is affected. If the class laughs at a child who makes a mistake, a situation that is often not rectified by the teacher, who may even join the class in ridiculing the child, shyness is aggravated.

Students in Fiji are not only ridiculed but also reprimanded, both verbally and physically for making mistakes. It is not unusual for the teacher to hit the pupil's hand with the ruler or the duster if he/she makes a mistake. Corporal punishment using the duster is known as *ququnipusi* (cat's paws) because the child forms his hand like a cat's paw for the teacher's duster to strike. Another practice is for the teacher to get students to stand up if they have all the answers right in a test or exercise. Then those with one wrong answer will stand until they reach those with all their answers wrong. Then there are the teachers who post test/exam results on notice boards for all to read. This is fine for students who get good marks, but embarrassing for those who get poor marks. These teachers believe this will motivate students to study hard and gain better marks.

Such practices are very demeaning and demoralising for the weak students. They may lose interest in the subject, or even resent the subject and school in general. They will be afraid to answer questions in class for fear of giving the wrong answer and being punished. This is the kind of student who plays truant. Teachers have a lot to answer for when children drop out of school altogether.

Some teachers over-emphasise getting good grades and tell their students to learn model answers instead of writing their own and making mistakes in the process. I have marked exam papers where students have written model essays and letters they have been taught by their teachers/lecturers. Learning does not take place in this type of situation.

There are times when a teacher makes a mistake (e.g. a spelling mistake or a language mistake) in class. However, because of the belief that the teacher is always right, it is unusual for pupils to point this out. Those who do so may be reprimanded for their audacity in pointing out the error. These teachers will not admit that they, too, are human and can make mistakes. Again, this comes from the mistaken belief that the teacher knows everything, but it makes students even more worried about making mistakes themselves.

While some cultural attitudes have a negative effect on learning, others can have a positive effect. Teachers can capitalise on the traditional attitude of the community and carry out a lot of innovative language teaching. They can help open up the pupils' minds to new ideas, and help them analyse and evaluate these ideas for themselves. Because of the importance the Ministry of Education places on English, the language teacher plays a pivotal role in a child's education. She can

make use of the Fijian communal lifestyle by encouraging peer learning among students where brighter students can help weaker ones. Fijian people are used to sharing, so the language teacher can use group work in class and encourage pupils to correct each other's errors. Group work creates a more relaxed and casual environment, and lively discussions can be generated where students will not be afraid to make mistakes. The teacher monitors these groups by ensuring that there is a good mix of students with different abilities, and can go around the class, advising and correcting errors in an informal manner. This method of teaching will foster learning and pupils will be encouraged to participate without fear of being ridiculed or reprimanded. It also inspires confidence in the students so that they feel free to express themselves. This will lead to more interesting and more original ideas that will come through in their discussions and writing.

To sum up, it is evident that, traditionally, Fijian culture fosters in students a certain amount of respect for the teacher. Teachers on their part must take advantage of this in a positive manner. Once they are more tolerant of errors made in class, there might be a corresponding change in the attitude of students to making errors. Their confidence will grow, not only in language but in other subjects as well, and learning will take place. This will be reflected in their exam results, their understanding and their ability to express themselves.