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Otherine J. Neisler  
*Boston College*

Alyssa Nota  
*Boston College*

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...It is imperative that teachers examine their culture-based assumptions and opinions, in order to delineate clear goals for ESL instruction, and to create shared understanding with and among their students.

## Cultural Influences and Interactions in the ESL Classroom

Otherine J. Neisler and Alyssa Nota

*In English my name [Esperanza] means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting... At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver.* {Sandra Cisneros (1989, pp. 10-11), *The House on Mango Street* (emphasis added)}.

There are many students like Esperanza in American schools today. Cisneros' character finds her identity anchored in her Hispanic name, yet is aware of the cultural diversity around her, particularly in school. Regardless of ethnic or linguistic background, students are influenced on a daily basis by cultural factors. Students' ways of life, behaviors, attitudes and expectations are shaped not only by their home culture, but also by other *cultures*, which they encounter in their academic and personal experiences. The main objective of this article is to consider four distinct *cultures* which students encounter in the context of ESL learning.

Our decision to discuss cultural influences and interactions in ESL learning developed from a joining of our individual research interests – language instruction and multicultural education– topics which share common ground, yet are not often considered simultaneously. For this project, we ask: What is the purpose of ESL instruction? We propose that it is the acquisition of English as well as the skills necessary for academic success.

However, we suggest that the goal could be expanded to include the acquisition of skills needed for success in the [United States] U.S. macroculture. "In addition to acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills to function effectively in home, community and school cultures, students should be competent to function within and across micro-cultures in their society, within the national macroculture, and within the world community" (Banks, 1993, p. 7)

While our discussion here could apply to students of any background, we chose Hispanic students as our focus for many reasons. The principal reason is that Hispanics make up the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States (Snider, 1990, p. 378). Further, our motivation is precipitated by findings like the following: a 1989 study conducted by the Children's Defense Fund, *Latino Youths at a Crossroads*, compared the educational attainment of Latino students and that of other ethnic groups. This study found that Hispanics lag significantly in three areas:

1) The percentage of Hispanics who fail to receive a high school diploma is almost three times the rate found among whites, and almost twice that of blacks. They also tend to drop out much earlier. In 1988, more than half of Hispanic dropouts between the ages of 16-24 had not even completed the ninth grade, and 31 percent had not completed the seventh grade.

2) Hispanics are more likely than blacks and far more likely than whites to be two or more grades behind in school; the percentage who were that far behind increased by several points between 1981 and 1986. By age 17, one in six Hispanic students is at least two years behind expected grade level, and two in five are one year behind.

3) Only 7 percent of Hispanics who graduated from high school in 1980 had completed a four-year college degree in 1986, compared with 18 percent of black and 21 percent of white graduates (Snider, 1990, p. 378).

Moreover, according to a report released in October, 1998 by the Educational Foundation of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), *Gender Gaps: Where Schools Still Fail Our Children*, dropout rates for Hispanic girls are especially high. For example, in 1995, thirty percent of Hispanic females age 16-24 had dropped out of school and not yet passed a high school equivalency test (Cain, 1999, p. 13).

Statistics such as these are evidence of the urgent need to recognize and work to resolve the problems and challenges confronted by our Hispanic students. Certainly students of all backgrounds confront challenges in their educational experiences. However, as the rate of diversity in our society and schools continues to rise, we must take action to assist those students most in need. As the findings of the Children's Defense Fund and the AAUW Educational Foundation indicate, Hispanic students are among those who could benefit most from additional assistance and attention to their learning experiences.

Issues of language learning and multicultural education are predominant in the lives of Hispanic students. Literature relevant to these issues includes categories such as: language variation and use in education (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1992; Heath, 1983, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Perry & Delpit, 1998); bilingualism and bilingual education (Genesee, 1994; Hakuta, 1986); the teaching of culture, and salient issues such as power and identity, in foreign language and ESL classrooms (Cummins, 1994; Gebhard, 1996; Genesee, 1987, 1994; O'Maggio, 1986; Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992); multicultural education (Banks, 1993, 1994; Banks and McGee, 1993; Brown, 1992; Grant, 1992, 1995; Nostrand, 1991; Sleeter and Grant, 1994). Scheel and Branch (1993) offer interesting insight into the role of conversation and culture in instructional design.

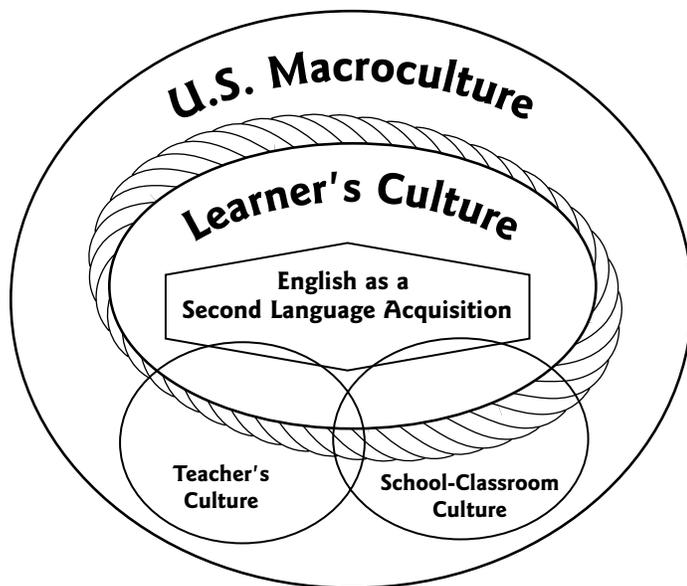
While we may not be able or adequately equipped to meet the needs of every student in U.S. ESL classes, it is helpful to have a general understanding of our students' perspectives. Their values and views of themselves and the world are often deeply embedded in their cultural backgrounds. As teachers and researchers, we must recognize our students' diversity and the interaction of multiple cultural attributes which influence them. For this article, we adopt the following definitions: (1) *ethnic culture* is the knowledge, values, symbols, norms, perspectives, and interpretations that distinguish ethnic groups such as African Americans, Hispanic and Jewish Americans (Banks, 1993); and (2) *culture* more broadly defines the values, norms, beliefs, customs, perspectives and rules of a social organization.

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**Otherine J. Neisler is an Assistant Professor, and Alyssa Nota is a Doctoral Candidate, in the Graduate School of Education at Boston College.**

We conclude that there are four distinct cultures [three micro-cultures within one macroculture (Banks, 1993)] which interact and influence students' ESL learning experiences. The relevant micro-cultures include: (1) students' ethnic cultures, (2) teacher's ethnic culture and (3) ESL classroom/school culture. The macroculture is the host culture in which the learning takes place. We suggest that while English language acquisition is a principal goal of the learning experience, it is not a culture; rather, it is the event during which the cultures interact. Moreover, language learning is the catalytic event that precipitates the unique macro/microcultural interactions. The cultural aspects that students bring to the classroom are compounded by the simultaneous interactions of the teacher's culture, the classroom/school culture, and the mainstream U.S. culture (see Figure 1 which is an expansion as well as a specific application of the *Micro-cultures and the National Macroculture* diagram developed by Banks, 1993, p. 11).

**Figure 1**  
**Multicultural Interaction in the ESL Classroom**



### **Students' Ethnic Cultures**

A student's ethnic culture imbues the knowledge and perspectives the student brings from home to the learning environment. The unique system of interpretation develops from the significant influences of parents, family and community, which are inextricably linked with social class. A student's ethnic culture and the cultures which the student encounters in school are often disparate, leaving the student to negotiate his/her place in each setting, similar to Cisneros' character in *The House on Mango Street*.

The influence of Hispanic students' ethnic cultures are significant to their academic progress. Snider (1990) notes that Hispanic students are far more likely than whites or blacks to have undereducated parents, a major factor influencing a child's educational achievement. Forty percent of Hispanic household heads have less than nine years of schooling, compared with only about 10 percent among white and black families. Nevertheless, Cummins (1994) argues that the

academic and linguistic growth of students is significantly increased when parents see themselves, and are seen by school staff, as co-educators of their children. Schools should seek to establish a collaborative relationship with these parents; one that encourages them to participate with the school in promoting the academic progress of their children. The need for parents to be positive influences on the child's learning is essential. This is a particularly urgent consideration where Hispanic parents are concerned.

There is an understandably powerful link between students' ethnic culture and language learning. Heath (1986) emphasized the significant influence family and community have on children's language acquisition. Language learning is embedded in the learner's culture due to the highly personal and idiosyncratic nature of language. Family and community factors which may affect language acquisition include: the parents role in the child's learning, the amount and type of oral and written language use in the home and community, and links between home/community and outside institutions, such as school (McKeon, 1994, p. 18).

Heath (1986) has discussed specific examples regarding recently arrived Mexican-American families. Collaboration between youths and adults was expected in order for children to acquire fundamental skills. For example, it was the shared responsibility of parents and extended family to raise children. It was also common for older children to entertain and help care for younger children, and for children to be consistently in the company of groups of adults. The type of environment Heath described provides an abundant source of linguistic and cultural information available to aid children's learning. Additionally, it is particularly valuable for teachers to keep in mind that ESL students may be primary interpreters for their families and subject to rigid traditions, practices or language usage in their home and community cultures.

### **Teacher's Ethnic Culture**

Another culture which impacts the ESL classroom is that associated with the teacher, who enacts his/her ethnic culture and social class on a daily basis. Like students, the teacher brings to the context values and expectations which may differ from those of others in the classroom or school. Just as interactions with parents, family and community influence a student's perceptions, the same is true of interactions with teachers.

Can the disparity of cultural attributes in the ESL classroom be reconciled, and if so, how? It is a common suggestion in the ESL and multicultural literature for teachers to familiarize themselves with their students' cultures. We agree that such knowledge would enhance the teaching and learning processes. Yet, is it possible for teachers to attain a complete knowledge of their students' cultures, particularly in a multicultural/multilingual ESL classroom? While it may seem an ideal goal, it is certainly not practical. Individuals, born and raised within a single culture, will acquire skills and understanding of that culture throughout their lifetimes. Therefore, teachers cannot be expected to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of their students' various cultures, when it is really unrealistic for their own culture.

It is, therefore, imperative for teachers to examine their culture based assumptions and opinions, to delineate clear goals for ESL instruction, and to strive to create a shared understanding with and among their students. To attain mutual understanding, teachers and students must diverge from their personal cultural frames of reference to acquire and value the knowledge of others in the classroom.

Banks (1993) reminds us that social class is strongly related to academic achievement. Teachers' related assumptions and expectations in this regard could also drastically affect students and their achievement. Persell (1977) notes that teachers' expectations may be influenced by students' behaviors, appearance, and language style (for additional detail on the influence of teachers' expectations on student achievement, see Brophy and Good, 1970 and Rosenthal, 1974). Although a discussion of the issue of power (between students and teachers) is beyond the scope of this article, one can assume the inevitability and gravity of the issue in a classroom context (for a discussion of language use in the classroom, and how language may be used to exercise power, see Fairclough 1989 and Wardhaugh 1992).

### **ESL Classroom/School Culture**

The ESL classroom culture specifically, and the school culture more broadly, frame the experiences of students and teachers. Students must familiarize themselves with the rules, values and structure of the classroom which can vary greatly depending on the instructional methods and organizational goals of the class (i.e. two-way bilingual versus transitional or immersion programs). Elements of the classroom or school culture which may directly influence students include: (1) rules of behavior which may be in conflict with students' home culture norms or previous classroom experiences; (2) level of academic rigor allowing for more or less freedom than students have been afforded in the past; (3) disparity of teacher and student power; (4) extent of and opportunity for individual decision-making; and (5) the stance toward negotiating cultural understanding in the learning environment.

Maintaining high academic standards is an essential element of student achievement. Snider (1990) has noted that Latinos are more likely than African-American students to be attending predominantly minority schools, and that such schools tend to have less-experienced teachers and "watered down" curricula. The goal should be neither to water down the curriculum nor to decelerate learning, but rather to build on the knowledge base students have already acquired in their first language (Neisler & Zollers, 1998).

With these significant factors in mind, it seems important to create a learning environment which values students' cultural diversity, while continuing to challenge and motivate students. Students benefit from having the opportunity to express their knowledge and thus, learn from each other. Within an environment where students share and discuss their diverse cultural experiences, they are able to integrate new knowledge, acquired through English as a second language, with previous knowledge. Not only can students correct misconceptions, but they can also compare conflicting and complementary components of various microcultures and the U.S. macroculture. Conversely, academic and personal growth may be hindered if students feel invalidated by the dominant ethnic group or macroculture, or intimidated by a classroom culture that is unresponsive to cultural conflict.

### **U.S. Macroculture**

Like a silent partner in the learning process, the macroculture in which learning takes place, plays an influential, yet underexamined role. In the traditional sense of ESL instruction, the macroculture is the environment in which the target language is spoken as a first language. For example, for this article, we refer to ESL classes held within the U.S. culture. Socialization into the macroculture is a significant influence, and consequence, of the ESL learning

experience. Students are "socialized into mainstream U.S. culture with its emphasis on justice, liberty, freedom, democracy, competition, power, and money" (Shade and New, 1993, p. 317). Banks (1993) argues that the key component in U.S. culture is the idea of equality; two additional tenets are individualism and individual social mobility. Reflective of the macroculture, U. S. schools are highly individualistic in their learning and teaching styles, evaluation procedures, and norms. Thus, traditionally group oriented students, like Hispanics, may experience problems in the typical and highly individualistic learning environment (Banks, 1993, p. 12).

In this quest for cultural knowledge, it is not plausible for students or teachers to acquire exhaustive knowledge of every microculture or even the U. S. macroculture. Nostrand (1991) states: "An adult understanding of a culture requires only a manageable part of the vast amount there is to know about a whole culture" (p. 140). For example, he states that for most aspects of an individual's life, he/she can use a standard dialect and vocabulary. However, when that person specializes in some geographic or professional milieu, he/she must learn a more specialized dialect or vocabulary. Nostrand further argues that more in depth knowledge of a micro or macroculture is needed only in specialized cases. Therefore, teachers need only know general guidelines for areas of possible cultural conflict.

### **Suggested Classroom Practices**

While it is not our intent to convey stereotypes of any ethnic group, we have compiled a brief checklist of cultural behavior patterns which may affect academic achievement. Although we have focused on academic concerns of Hispanic students, the checklist has broader applications for the general ESL population. The four categories are: physical behavior, conversational behavior, behavior related to gender and class, and classroom behavior.

An individual's cultural values, behavior or perspective cannot be presumed in advance (Scheel and Branch, 1993, p. 15). Rather, the checklist is an aide for developing an understanding of an individual's culture, and a means to open conversation on critical issues of culture within the ESL classroom. We acknowledge and appreciate the diversity within and across groups, and assert the importance of recognizing the abilities and contributions of every student. We recommend that the checklist be expanded and documented through systematic research.

Faced with an increasingly diverse student population, there are steps teachers can take to provide students an equitable and productive learning environment. We suggest that teachers:

- 1) recognize and facilitate their students' challenging transitions between home and school, given that the two environments may conflict and the cultural and linguistic levels, thus confusing students,
- 2) examine their attitudes and personal assumptions about students from different backgrounds, in order to uncover unconscious prejudices,
- 3) represent their own culture and be a primary conveyor of information about the subtleties of U.S. macroculture,
- 4) welcome students' cultural diversity,
- 5) demonstrate how language learning is enhanced through knowledge of culture,
- 6) model a positive attitude; share willingness to participate in and appreciation of collaborative, intercultural, and life-long learning,

**Chart I**  
**Checklist for Identification of Cultural Behavior Patterns Affecting Academic Achievement**

<b>Behavior Category and Questions That Guide Observation and Classroom Discussions</b>	<b>Student Behaviors</b>	<b>Related Research Findings</b>
<p><b>1. Physical Behavior</b></p> <p><i>Do students exhibit these physical behaviors?</i></p>	<p>Students may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- avoid eye contact when they speak to you.</li> <li>- stand or sit closer to you than other students.</li> <li>- involve or welcome more touching or physical gesturing when speaking to others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Eye contact avoidance may be a sign of respect rather than dislike, defiance or disinterest (Scarcella, 1992).</li> <li>- When speaking, people acculturated in the U.S. macroculture stand at least one foot farther back than some groups of Latinos (Scarcella, 1992).</li> <li>- The fact that U.S. teachers have less tactile involvement with students than Latino teachers may be confusing to some students (Scarcella, 1992; Gebhard, 1996).</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Conversational</b></p> <p><i>Do students exhibit any of the following characteristics in their conversations?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- engage in "high involvement" conversational/ interaction style that is aggressive albeit respectful.</li> <li>- induce debate with classmates while conciliatory interaction styles seem to pose obstacles to conversation.</li> <li>- hesitate to ask for help or clarification.</li> <li>- give and expect more positive comments from teacher and prefer praise to be given in personal, face-to-face encounters.</li> <li>- react negatively to public criticism.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher and peer attempts to avoid conflict might actually spark it for someone who values conflict, debate, or aggressive conversational style (Tannen, 1990).</li> <li>- Some Latino students may be (1) unaccustomed to asking teachers to clarify, (2) consider it impolite to distract the teacher, and in teacher/student interactions (3) may fear being perceived as aggressive or disrespectful (Condon, 1986). Heath (1986) notes that Mexican American children are often taught not to initiate conversation with elders, only to answer talk that is directed toward them.</li> <li>- Personal attention is a vital element in Latino communication (Damen, 1987).</li> <li>- In Mexican culture, any public action or remark that may be interpreted as a slight to a person's dignity might be regarded as a serious offense (Condon, 1986).</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Behavior Related to</b></p> <p><i>Do any of your students interact differently based on teacher's gender?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- interact more openly with male teachers and administrators, or are more accepting of disciplinary measures from male supervisors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some researchers argue that the differences in academic achievement between Latinos and other ethnic groups, result from Latino adherence to values that place women in the home, not in the classroom or the workplace, and encourage young men to enter the work force as soon as possible (Pittman &amp; Duany, 1990; Nota, 1998).</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Classroom</b></p> <p><i>How are your students discussing cultural diversity?</i></p> <p><i>What cultural attributes influence each student's learning?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- have acquired more knowledge in their first language than they are able to articulate in English.</li> <li>- do not know how to examine cultural commonalities and differences to arrive at shared understandings of micro and macrocultures.</li> <li>- have different learning styles or knowledge bases.</li> <li>- think about information differently in order to arrive at a decision.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Culture influences each dimension of learning by providing guidelines that help students select strategies for storing and retrieving information, valuing information, managing their time, interacting with their peers, structuring their knowledge base (Shade &amp; New, 1993).</li> <li>- Teachers are often the primary sources of information regarding the macroculture and can model and initiate open discussion about micro and macrocultural differences to enable students' development of strategies for negotiating their multicultural lives (Banks, 1993).</li> </ul>

- 7) develop strategies through which students can express their existing knowledge base, in their first language, while helping them translate that knowledge into English and build upon that foundation,
- 8) foster the committed participation of parents, family and community in the school function and academic experiences of students,
- 9) encourage students to discuss cultural attributes with the goal of acquiring intercultural skills,
- 10) help students to understand that they are undergoing multicultural experiences while supporting their home culture and language as they develop new skills needed for success in the U.S. macroculture.

The process of negotiating new multicultural identities allows students to examine and maintain aspects of their own culture as they acquire intercultural skills, and forge the ability to be successful in the U.S. macroculture. Nostrand (1991) reminds us that multicultural education has distinct goals which we must keep in mind if we are to achieve, and promote among our students, intercultural understandings. First, multicultural education should promote openness between cultures. Second, it should build new commitment toward not only tolerance but respect for others and other cultures. Finally, multicultural education should encourage teachers and students to better understand the culture-bound perspectives of others with sensitivity and with a willingness for empathy. As suggested by Figure 1, expanded goals for ESL curriculum design which reflect these multicultural sensitivities might include: (1) developing a more detailed checklist without contributing to negative stereotyping, and (2) developing ESL teacher education which emphasizes multicultural issues and facilitates students' transitions from ESL to mainstream classrooms.

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