



Research Paper

Contribution of an English Teacher in a Multicultural Classroom

Ankita Paul

Ph. D in English

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research,
Amity University, Uttar Pradesh

ABSTRACT: A teacher has the ability to impact many lives and plays an extremely important role in the growth and development of a person. A teacher has no reservations against class, caste, creed, colour, culture or geographical location of a pupil and inculcates the same values in students. Due to globalization and other factors, as the world is coming closer and multiculturalism is on the rise, so is the role of the teacher becoming more important as a child can learn the right values of tolerance and acceptance imparted by the teacher right from a young age. A teacher teaches the importance of compassion, empathy and co-operation which are the key ingredients to harmonious co-existence of individuals of different regions, cultures, races, ethnicities, religions etc. to students so that they are able to accept as well as respect other cultures and its people. Also in the midst of growing intolerance in society, it is a teacher who can bring a ray of hope to the debate by promoting equality in classrooms. This research paper makes an attempt to point out the various ways by which a teacher, particularly an English teacher, can contribute to the learning of right values by students in a multicultural classroom, mainly an Indian classroom.

KEYWORDS: Contribution, English Teacher, Multiculturalism, Multicultural Classroom

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I. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism can mean a cultural pluralism in which many ethnic groups collaborate and enter into a dialogue with one another without sacrificing their particular identities. Dominic supports this view: "Multiculturalism is defined as the state of co-existence of diverse cultures. Culture includes racial, religious, linguistic, etc. which may have differences and distinctions in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking and communicative styles. It also aims at the preservation of different cultures and their identities within a unified society as a state or nation." Dominic further gives a glimpse of the Indian society: "The Indian society has been multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic from time immemorial. At the same time our country has been confronted with forces of divisiveness. Hence the biggest challenge before major multicultural countries like India is to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the mainstream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism." Taking the discussion forward, Bajpai says, "India is an outstanding case for the study of multiculturalism. It is home to policies of legal pluralism in religious family law (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi), territorial autonomy for several linguistic and tribal groups, as well as quotas in legislatures, government jobs and educational institutions for caste and tribal minorities. Scholars have hailed the Indian Constitution of 1950 as a prescient model of multicultural accommodation for its recognition of a range of group-differentiated rights within a broadly liberal democratic framework" (p. 1).

A 21st century classroom is often a melting pot of cultures. Due to globalization and various other factors, multicultural classrooms have become common everywhere. But still there is a tendency among people to confine themselves to their own cultural preferences which limits their growth in a multicultural society. These cultural barriers and inhibitions need to be removed in classrooms so that the divisive mentality is not carried outside in the society by students when they grow up. The most important role in a classroom is played by a teacher who is responsible for nurturing young minds by giving shape to their ideas which later turn into ideologies. He/she is the one who acts as a guide, showing the right direction and giving wings to their dreams. For a child who is growing up, the teacher can serve as a role model whose words and actions can leave an impact in his/her mind. A teacher's job is not restricted to imparting lessons from textbooks to students but much

beyond that. A teacher teaches the importance of compassion, empathy, and co-operation which are the key ingredients to harmonious co-existence of individuals of different regions, cultures, races, ethnicities, religions etc. to students so that they are able to accept as well as respect other cultures. Also in the midst of growing intolerance in society, it is a teacher who can bring a ray of hope to the debate by promoting equality in classrooms. There are many ways by which a teacher, particularly an English teacher, can contribute to creating the right learning environment for students in a multicultural classroom. This research paper aims to identify such ways, mainly in Indian classrooms.

WAYS OF CONTRIBUTION BY AN ENGLISH TEACHER

English is an international language. In India, the practice of reading, writing and speaking English came with British rule. The British, apart from building other things like railways, roads, banks, etc. also built many English medium schools in India during the time they ruled the country and much of which was done to get their own children admitted to these schools. Besides, they also built colleges and universities in which English as a subject was included. With years of being in practice in the country, English is still regarded as one of the most important languages in India and is a compulsory subject in almost all schools, even many years after the British left India. Even before the British came to India, India was invaded many times and the culture of India has been influenced to a great extent by the various invasions that had taken place. So the first step towards making students embrace other cultures, languages, religions and races is to make them aware of the fact that in the past people of India have embraced other cultures, even the colonizers' culture and language and also of other invaders' culture (like Turks), and because of continuous practice over the years they have now become a tradition- a part of one's own culture. The various invasions have also brought diversity to the country's culture. From this it can be said that it is important for a teacher to create awareness about the roots of the national culture so that the students are able to accept other cultures in their own nation.

Most Indian languages came from the ancient language, Sanskrit. Even the National anthem of India, which was written by the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore is influenced by Sanskrit and talks about the diversity of cultures. The National Anthem "... conveys very aptly the traditions and values that still hold strong as the backbone of the country. It helps reinforce the accepting and assimilating nature of Indian culture along with its tolerance to pluralism" (Cultural India). Excerpts from the translated version that sings the glory of Mother India goes like this:

Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people
Dispenser of India's destiny.
The name rouses the hearts of Punjab, Sind, Gujarat and Maratha,
Of the Dravid and Orissa and Bengal;
It echoes in the hills of the Vindhya and Himalayas,
Mingles in the music of the Yamuna and Ganga
And is chanted by the waves of the Indian Sea (Cultural India).

It is the job of the teacher to make analysis of the underlying meaning of this patriotic national anthem in classrooms in order to awaken nationalistic sentiments in students and keep them away from divisive mentality. It is always beneficial to learn about other cultures. Besides enriching one's knowledge and understanding of other cultures, it also helps when one, for education, job, or personal reasons has to relocate to other places. At those times there would be no naivety or discomfort on part of pupils in accepting other cultures and adapting to the different environment.

Festivals/customs form a large part of a culture's identity. A teacher should hold discussions about a wide range of topics in class including regional events and festivals in order to sensitize students to other cultural traditions. The teacher should talk about every culture or region in the same breath so that it becomes easy for students to accept things related to cultures apart from their own. During the days of festivals most academic institutions remain closed. But before that the teacher can discuss about those festivals like Diwali, Eid, Christmas, Guru Nanak's Birthday etc. and their importance in details with students.

A teacher should have a uniform approach towards all cultures. He/she should inculcate values of respect for other cultures in students by making references to other cultures frequently. He/she should not impose his/her cultural biases in a classroom but rather have cultural awareness and acceptance of diverse beliefs and perspectives. Topics related to racism, religious intolerance, class and caste division in society, patriarchy, feudalism should be frequently discussed in class. This can help the students to remove their misconceptions about different cultures and attain a better understanding about the society they live in. This, in turn, encourages them to have a fair attitude towards things.

Collective endeavour is important for healthy atmosphere to be created in a multicultural classroom. A teacher should take initiative to organize cultural events in the classroom and encourage students to participate in other regional events than their own. It helps the students to gain more knowledge about other regional

cultures and increases understanding and respect for those. It also exposes the students to wide variety of cultures and helps them to attain clarity about diversity. Mingling with people from other cultures and experiencing a slice of their lives through participation in other cultural events prevents a student from associating his/her identity with a particular region or culture but rather makes him/her consider himself/herself as a global citizen. Workshops related to multicultural activities may also be conducted if necessary.

Teachers can conduct essay and dissertation writing classes in which the topics should be related to multiple cultures. The teacher should ask each student to research on and write dissertations or essays on other cultural events than their own for which marks should be allotted and also make them read abstracts of those dissertations or essays in front of the class. This would create an atmosphere for healthy exchange of ideas and enrich one's understanding about the true meaning of diversity.

Teachers should see that a library with diverse literary books is present in academic institutions. Besides, he/she can advise students to go to libraries outside the academic institution and read good books of world famous authors. In this context it is important to say that literature often paints an accurate picture of a society of a particular era. It also gives glimpses of political events and contemporary culture. To know a region and culture well, it is important to read its literature well. In this way one can gain insight into the culture and regional literature will also be promoted. To encourage feelings of acceptance of other cultures among students, the English teacher should include translated versions of literary works of great regional writers in the syllabus like the texts of Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chatterjee, Mahasweta Devi, Amrita Pritam, K.R. Meera, Naiyer Masud, Arupa Kalita Patangia, A.K. Ramanujan, Taslima Nasrin etc. besides reading English books of regional and non-regional writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Das, Sarojini Naidu, Girish Karnad, Khushwant Singh, V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vijay Tendulkar, Jayanta Mahapatra etc, writers whose works give a glimpse of the different cultural traditions of India and also many evils of society.

Divisions between classes and castes have been made by humans and class and caste selection doesn't depend upon individual choice. It, however, only leads to the creation of gaps in the society. To bridge these gaps, tribals and dalits and other backward classes should be given equal status in the society. Dalit Literature, which has become popular in recent years, should be included in the syllabus to sensitize students to the conditions of the unprivileged sections of the society who belong to the lowest rung of the society not by their own choice but because of divisive politics in the society. But by making students aware about these issues the teacher can convey the message of giving equal opportunities to all in the society. This way the society can be made more inclusive.

Teachers can conduct translation classes where each student has to read a literary piece in his/her regional language, write a summary of it, and translate it in English. It would enable one to understand the speech patterns of his/her regional language more and also to distinguish it from English. This process will make the student be more connected to his/her own culture through reading the language and practicing translation. This way it would be easier for students to accept other cultures and extend the hand of co-operation towards people coming from other regions and not alienate them.

An English classroom should not only be restricted to discussion of literary texts. Discussion of current affairs of national as well as international importance should take place in an English classroom. The teacher, along with discussing important events in recent history of different regions, should also emphasize on pressing global issues. Each region or culture has gone through or is going through some or the other social, political, cultural, economic, environmental, or educational turmoil. Discussing these issues would enrich knowledge of students. Students can learn about the world and that will shape their opinions towards creation of a better tomorrow. There are places which are struck by natural calamities like cyclone, floods, earthquakes and also man-made disasters like insurgency, riots, terrorist attacks, refugee crisis etc. Then there are regions where drug abuse, rape, dowry, murders, domestic violence are common. Students should be asked to get an idea about the social and political situation of each region by reading from news articles and prepare report writing on that. This helps the student to understand the situation of people living in those regions under difficult circumstances and make them empathize with the fates of those people. This also helps them to become better human beings.

Popular Culture is an important area which promotes multiculturalism. Teachers can ask students to read pop cultural texts or know about pop cultural music, dance, movies, art, where many fusions are happening. Occasionally movies/other visuals from different regions with English subtitles can be shown to the students in a classroom. Cinema is a reflection of society and it, being a powerful visual medium, has an impact on its audience. Seeing movies of different cultures and regions widens the horizons of minds and makes students free from prejudices. It helps students to embrace multiculturalism and build good relations with classmates in a classroom.

The teacher should create a healthy atmosphere in class where students can openly discuss and debate about the good and bad aspects of any culture without harbouring prejudices or biases towards any particular culture. A teacher wants his/her students to grow up as rational human beings who can distinguish good from bad and vice-versa by virtue of questioning the basis of things. It is every student's responsibility to contribute

to working towards making the society more progressive by introspecting about various things that need attention, even if it means that one has to be critical of a particular social evil. It is because of this enlightenment in human beings that evil social practices like *Sati* in Hinduism, and *Triple Talaq* in Islam recently has been abolished in India. Students should be made aware of these things so that they can understand their duties of protecting the society from evil forces with collective consciousness as they are the future torchbearers of the society. Critical thinking should be encouraged by the teacher so that students can see both sides of a situation which would empower their sense of judgement and pave the way for a reformed society. But at the same time students should be advised by teachers to be careful with their words or gestures so that they do not end up hurting cultural sentiments of others.

Students can be asked by teachers to create paintings, posters, and wallpapers of diverse literary characters with quotations from literary texts that reflect diversity and multiculturalism and those works of art should be hung up in the walls of classrooms to make them feel equal.

Sharing of personal experiences related to events, food, clothing, region, festivals, music, dance, art etc. of each other's culture helps in healthy exchange of ideas and makes one more open to learning about different cultures in the world. Teachers should ask students to jot down their own experiences of multiculturalism for project works. Sharing one's own experience helps more than gaining knowledge from just reading books and so it should be encouraged. The teacher can even select some topics on multiculturalism and ask students to prepare questionnaires and interview people of other cultures and integrate the information to create a project. Interviews should be part of the project work. It is important for every student to be open-minded in order to sustain themselves in a global society. Sharing one's perspectives about different cultures in the form of debates and Powerpoint presentations in English will also improve the communication skills of students. The experience shared by each student brings variety in the classroom and benefits all and increases mutual respect among them.

In this era where technology has a big role to play in bringing the world closer, and most people are on social media, teachers should encourage students to reach out to people from other cultures and discuss about each other's interpretations of various things, ranging from texts to movies to other cultural events. Also, with the concerted efforts of teachers, schools/colleges/universities should conduct student exchange programs and summer training programs in other places than the students' own to boost confidence in students about being a part of a multicultural society.

The idea of a nation is strengthened by the harmonious co-existence of various cultures which can also lead to a flourishing economy. Due to intolerance towards other cultures there have been problems between human beings belonging to different cultures. But to prevent such untoward incidents from happening an individual needs to be guided in the right direction from a young age. A teacher can do this by promoting equality in classrooms. Feelings of unity and brotherhood should be fostered in a classroom by the teacher, so that it benefits all and harms none. Teachers should give examples from the economy of the world especially of countries with developed economies to students and inform how multiculturalism in such countries leads to expansion of their economies. Richard Florida says in this regard, "The evidence is mounting that geographical openness and cultural diversity and tolerance are not by-products but key drivers of economic progress." So a teacher should encourage students to shun discriminatory attitude towards other cultures and rather to form multicultural friends circle and work circle as it is advantageous for the students for its ability to provide facts and information about another culture directly from a person belonging to that particular culture.

In this era of globalization, it is always wiser to assimilate in another culture than to completely ignore it. This will prevent the society from breaking down further to form narrow walls. This will remove the spirit of divisiveness in society and foster unity which will bring in opportunity. It is the job of the teachers to give students an education based on equality as it makes a student feel secure about being a part of a multicultural society and attain a positive attitude towards things. It enables narrow thinking and pre-conceived notions to be completely removed from the students' mind.

II. CONCLUSION

Though Indian culture boasts of diversity, there have been instances of unrest in communities and tensions among different cultures at different times. A classroom is the best place where cultural relations can be improved through a variety of attempts made by a teacher. A teacher should pay attention to every student's needs and help them perform well in class and also to grow and behave as humane human beings everywhere. Acceptance is the key to co-operation among students in multicultural classrooms. No prejudice should prevail in the classroom and the teacher should create that atmosphere of love, compassion, kindness, and tolerance among students so that they are able to accept their positions in the classroom as well as in the society as global citizens. Despite the diversity, there is unity among individuals in free India. Students should be taught the value of humanity which comes above all, and humanistic tendencies should preside over cultural or regional tendencies. Teachers are role models who are responsible for shaping the minds of students and preparing them

to walk on the right path with a free mind. Hence their contribution in classrooms as well as in the society should always be appreciated.

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