

Foreign Language Education for Living

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He will henceforth be known as Ivan the Terrible. He devastated an entire Caribbean island and reinforced in a “nation of criminals” that “we are our brother’s keepers” and that “there but for the grace of God go I.” Emerging out of the post-Ivan Caricom summit held in Trinidad was the recognition of the frailty of human life and, consequently, the ties that bind us all. Human suffering, especially when caused by natural disasters, signals to us the inconsequence of land and sea as dividers of peoples. Should there be a marriage of islands or special arrangements?

Whichever of the latter two we favour, the issue here is what is required of us as a people in terms of what we know and how we think. During the summit discussions the issue of language and meaning immediately surfaced. The concept of “refugee status,” which had surfaced in media commentary, was replaced by “those who require accommodation.” Words and meaning were certainly an issue in that forum. If understanding and intention are issues for those who “speak” the same language, what of those who do not? Especially when politicians speak, I find myself gazing intently at their facial expression and body language to try to ascertain their true meaning. I did the same while I looked at the television broadcast of that Caricom summit on September 15.

What significance does this have for education, and foreign language education at that? There has been discussion at regional policy level, and at the professional language policy level, on the role of curriculum innovation in social development. Initiatives arising out of workshops, seminars, and conferences have time and again focused on the diminution of violence and conflict, and on the generation of respect for human rights, social cohesion, and the equipping of citizens with functional skills for employment.

My experience as an educator has provided me with the evidence to support what the average person knows, that is, that human beings feel uncomfortable with the unfamiliar. Thus we are mesmerised by aliens and phenomena we cannot explain. Hence, in a foreign language classroom, there are those students who would be either excited at the prospect of learning a new language, or be daunted by the challenge of fitting into a mould that is not similar to their own. Apart from the academic requirements of learning a foreign language, I have found that student attitude has a crucial role to play in language acquisition. This attitude is shaped by a number of elements, including the student’s sociocultural background, perception of the language and what it represents, and perception of the teacher. Another significant element for the student is relevance, not only of the language itself to their own experience but also of the nature of the practice. These observations apply to both young and adult students.

What this translates into for the foreign language teacher is that students are inspired by the teacher’s dominance of the language being taught. The teacher’s efforts at improvement in self-proficiency go hand in hand with pedagogical training. The teacher also becomes more sensitised to students’ language learning needs through his/her own experience of ongoing learning of the language.

Since foreign language learning requires levels of competence in four areas—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—its demands on the affective domain are significant. Students literally must come out of their shells, learn to be unselfconscious, know how to laugh at themselves and with others, think on their feet, be spontaneous, help others, listen in order to respond appropriately, and take the time to ensure that their meaning is being communicated. Whilst achieving all of this, the classroom would need to be a place where trust has been established so that confidence grows and is maintained.

Let us assume that teachers have experienced some level of training or teacher education. What then? If foreign language teachers truly understand the role that their classrooms have to play in the qualitative improvement in education and, consequently, in the establishment of harmonised communities and peoples, they would ensure that they took the time to plan their lesson to ensure the maximisation of learning opportunities for their students. Ad hoc teaching can no longer be tolerated. Some may say that their passion would get them through, but passion with planning would achieve far more. Teachers who do not plan adequately are also doing themselves a disservice since they do not avail themselves of the opportunity to maximise their true potential.

A word of advice: planning for teaching does not have to be a lonely task. A resource that teachers often underutilise is their team, which is their department. Great achievers have for centuries been using project management skills. It calls for subdivision of tasks, sharing, delegating, setting deadlines, responsibility, accountability, and organisation. Networking and re-crossing bridges are also recommended.

Once one is convinced of the role of foreign language teaching in educating for living, there will be no shortage of resources to provide ideas for innovation. The School of Education is a valuable source of curriculum implementation projects researched by teachers in their own classrooms. These reports describe interventions they have tried in their classroom, indicate the extent to which they may be recommended, and highlight the projects' shortcomings and strengths. The School of Education is seeking ways of sharing these findings with practitioners. A peer development system may serve to bridge the gap between idealism and reality, a gap that so often retards the potential of the teacher.

On almost every nationally significant occasion, leaders in our country pray for harmony, tolerance, empathy, humility, grace, tolerance, and good example. Most recently, our President exhorted the value of cultural liberty, as we are wont to forget that the presence of cultural diversity does not necessarily assume cultural liberty. Foreign language teachers' understanding of such issues would better enable them to contribute to healthy living for this and future generations.

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