Introduction

The purpose of my study was to look at how knowledge of the students’ cultures, specifically the culture(s) of minority language students, can aid the teacher in the classroom. Something that many people who live in the country of their birth fail to realize is that the culture taught to them by their parents teaches them how to interpret another person’s actions, how to react to a variety of situations, and how to behave in general. What one culture might think is acceptable or expected behavior is to another culture at least unacceptable if not downright rude. Some knowledge of the basics of other cultures can smooth over these problem areas, and can greatly improve the classroom environment for both students and teachers.

Background

This study had two main parts. The topic first captured my interest based on the experiences I was having with a small group of students in my classroom. This experience helped me frame the research hypothesis I wanted to explore in this project. From there, the second part of this project was designed to explore the extent to which my research hypothesis held for a larger group of students.

The event that motivated this study occurred when one of my Vietnamese students, whom I’ll refer to as “Miss D,” attempted to accuse me of being anti-Asian in the middle of class for criticizing her for talking in the middle of class. But to really explain what occurred, a bit of background is necessary. Miss D is part of a group of five very disruptive girls who pretty much do whatever they want and get away with it by accusing anyone who tries to stop them of “picking on them because they’re Vietnamese” or “Asian.” Miss D is the only one of this group in my class, although she has other friends in my class.

In my class, Miss D was a “chronic chatterbox.” She took any opportunity she could to talk with her friends and did little work. One time when I told her to stop this behavior, she told the entire class that I was picking on her because she was Vietnamese. I would not have any of this. I knew that Vietnamese culture, just like its Japanese counterpart, holds teachers in high regard and that a student must respect and honor their teacher. I told her that if I were going to pick on her for being Vietnamese then she had to act like it first, that she had to do what I told her, and to show some respect. She then proceeded to tell me that she wasn’t talking back to me (when in fact, she was doing exactly that by
speaking as she did.) When I pointed this out to her, she basically sat down and stopped talking.

From that day forward, Miss D improved. She did not chatter, and she seemed to pay attention in class. She raised her grades from a borderline D to a C/C+. She also came in after school for extra help, which she had not done previously.

Focus of My Research

From there, I decided to focus on a group of four girls in the same class who came from a similar cultural background as Miss D. These students were all about the same age, had been in the country roughly the same length of time, and were all from the same country (Vietnam), so had similar cultural backgrounds. However, in respect to their grades, they were different: they ranged from A to F and everything in between. I applied the knowledge of my own (Japanese) culture, and the knowledge of the Vietnamese culture I learned from my students with the express purpose of motivating or otherwise pushing these four students to do better. This was assessed through observation, one-on-one interviews, and surveys, in addition to their test results and other grades. Each of the other girls in this group raised her grades as well, with the one exception being the girl who had an A before the study began and kept it through the end of the year. The other girls raised their grades from an F to a C, from a D to a C, and from a C+ to a B+, respectively.

The second part of this project involved looking at certain stereotypes of recent arrivals to this country. Asian immigrants, for example, are seen as always excelling in Math and Science, and certain Asian cultures (such as the Japanese) are always seen to be more comfortable working in groups as opposed to individually, etc. I created a survey which I gave to my students.

Findings

As I reviewed the students’ responses to the survey, I realized they could be separated into three groups: US born students, students from other countries who had been in the US less than 10 years, and those who were born overseas but who spent more than 10 years in the US. This division was chosen since students who have been in the US ten or more years have spent half or more of their lives in this country and are more likely to have acculturated to American ways.

The results appear below, with the number of students who responded to each question given as a percentage of the whole. Some percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. In addition, the percentages for Question 5 do not add up to 100% because more than one answer was permitted. The results are presented in the following table in the order described above and use the following font formatting: US born students’ answers (regular font), foreign-born students’ answers (italicized font), and students born overseas but who have spent more than half their lives here (underlined font).
1.) I especially like to work in a group.

A.) Strongly Agree
US: 18%; Non-US: 12%; Non-US, 10+ years in US: 33%
B.) Agree
53%; 73%; 67%
C.) Disagree
26%; 6%; 0%
D.) Strongly Disagree
3%; 9%; 0%

2.) I especially like to work by myself.

A.) Strongly Agree
12%; 21%; 9%
B.) Agree
52%; 30%; 27%
C.) Disagree
31%; 48%; 36%
D.) Strongly Disagree
4%; 0%; 27%

3.) The most important thing about high school is to help me

A.) Get into college
59%; 46%; 36%
B.) Get a good job
10%; 23%; 27%
C.) Gain Knowledge
31%; 31%; 36%

4.) My parents expect me to get good grades all the time.

A.) Strongly Agree
41%; 67%; 42%
B.) Agree
44%; 27%; 58%
C.) Disagree
16%; 6%; 0%
D.) Strongly Disagree
0%; 0%; 0%

5.) I think that the most important area of study is

A.) Math and Science
63%; 67%; 42%
B.) PE
2%; 0%; 5%
C.) Social Studies
16%; 6%; 21%
D.) Art
18%; 9%; 11%
E.) Language
20%; 15%; 21%

6.) What others think of me is more important than my grades at school.

A.) Strongly Agree
4%; 6%; 0%
B.) Agree
22%; 25%; 8%
C.) Disagree
43%; 41%; 75%
D.) Strongly Disagree
30%; 28%; 17%
7.) I respect all of my teachers.

A.) Strongly Agree  B.) Agree  C.) Disagree  D.) Strongly Disagree
10% ; 58% ; 17%  52% ; 27% ; 50%  23% ; 6% ; 25%  15% ; 9% ; 8%

8.) I show respect to all of my teachers.

A.) Strongly Agree  B.) Agree  C.) Disagree  D.) Strongly Disagree
15% ; 55% ; 25%  54% ; 33% ; 67%  25% ; 12% ; 8%  6% : 0 % ; 0%

9.) How comfortable are you asking questions of the teacher?

A.) Very Comfortable  B.) Comfortable
22% ; 24% ; 17%  59% ; 52% ; 75%

C.) Uncomfortable  D.) Very Uncomfortable
18% ; 24% ; 8%  0% ; 0% ; 0%

10.) How many times do you ask questions of the teacher in class? (on average)

A.) Once a day or more  B.) Once a week
57% ; 55% ; 50%  29% ; 30% ; 25%

C.) Once or twice a month  D.) Hardly ever.
6% ; 9% ; 17%  6% ; 6% ; 8%

Discussion

In many ways, the US and non-US born students responded the same way when asked the same questions in many areas. For example, everyone seemed to be almost as comfortable working by themselves as in a group, although certain individuals expressed a preference. (Many people agreed with both questions 1 & 2 even though this would seem to be contradictory.) The results of the last question, regarding asking questions of the teacher also show roughly the same percentages across the board. All groups said that Math and Science were the most important areas of study, but since mine is a Science class, this result might be somewhat skewed.

The areas in which there were noticeable differences included questions about respecting and showing respect for teachers, parents' grade expectations, and the purpose of high school. US-born students' idea of high school is a place to help them get into college, whereas a higher percentage of non-US students felt it was either a place to gain knowledge or to help them get a good job.
But the major differences, in my view, are the questions relating to teacher respect and to their parents’ expectations. The non-US born students here for less than ten years said that they both respected and showed respect for their teachers in far greater numbers than either their US-born counterparts or those here for longer than ten years. The foreign students here for less than ten years also indicated that their parents have higher expectations for their grades than do the students in the other two groups.

If I were to explain this difference, I would guess that the reason is related to the “mindset” of the people who come here. Most people would not choose to leave their homeland except due to war, jobs, or for economic or other advancement. Many of the parents of the children in this group have sacrificed to get their families here, and expect their children to make the most of it.

As for the respect for teachers, the United States is in the minority when it comes to teacher respect. Bluntly put, most of the rest of the world respects teachers more than we do. In Japan, for example, a school principal is held in higher respect than almost anyone else in the city except for the Mayor or the City Council. With this in mind, the results of these two questions become more understandable. In my “Red 7” class, where the four Vietnamese girls were not one of the students here for less than 10 years responded that they did not respect or show respect for their teachers.

In several instances, the answers of the foreign-born students here for more than ten years parallel the answers of the US born students, but are markedly different than the answers of the foreign-born students here for less than ten years. I would explain this by the phenomenon of “acculturation.” The longer a person lives in a foreign country, the more that person will become acculturated (i.e. adapts themselves to include the foreign culture along with their own) or assimilated (replaces their own culture with the foreign one.) This is true anywhere, and the younger a person is when they move the easier it is for them to accommodate the new culture. It is possible, for example, for a young child to learn a new language perfectly when an older child or an adult can learn the language but might learn it imperfectly.

On two questions though, the foreign-born students here for ten or more years differed markedly in their opinions than either of the other two groups. They seemed to be more comfortable asking questions of the teacher (92% of them said this compared to 82% for US born and 74% for non-US born students here for less than 10 years.) They were more likely to place more importance on their grades than on their peers’ view of them (See Question 6). I cannot come up with a theory to explain this, although of the three groups this one was the smallest with only 12% of all the respondents falling into this category.

Conclusion

In closing, it is my hope that I have shown how cultural knowledge of minority language students can help their teacher both provide discipline and motivate them. Complete knowledge of a culture is neither feasible nor required; no one has the time to completely investigate dozens of cultures. The basics are usually enough to at least reach a common ground for everyone involved. As a
general rule, it would seem that teachers enjoy certain advantages to teaching minority language students since they are more likely to have a higher respect for teachers and their parents are more likely to expect better grades. This is a combination any teacher would want to have, since such students are less likely to pose problems in the class.