Character building in language learning: Immersion principle in the implementation of responsible, fair, and care values in developing EFL classroom activities

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Abstract

Character is the combination of traits and qualities distinguishing the individual nature of a person; a summary or account of a person's qualities and achievements, as well as a description of a person's attributes, traits, or abilities (Adi, 2011). Meanwhile, character building could be defined as experiences which teach us some of life's lessons; lessons like keep our word, care, honesty, and other traits. This paper tries to propose the integration of character building into language learning activities, particularly the application of immersion principle in EFL classroom activities. The immersion principle (Vale, Scarino, & McKay, 1991) says that learners learn best in an environment where they are surrounded by a range and variety of spoken and written language; which include teacher talk, other classroom talk, audio or videotapes, specially-prepared written information, or reality and written texts from outside the classroom. Accordingly, this paper will explain the implementation of the principle in integrating three pillars of character building: responsibility, fairness, and caring in EFL classroom activities.

Keywords: immersion principle, character building, responsible, fair, care

Introduction

Character is defined as the individual’s inner makeup as a well-established structural whole as manifested in the individual’s, actions habits, and mode of thought, as well as in the human sphere of the emotions. It is the combination of traits and qualities distinguishing the individual nature of a person, a summary or account of a person's qualities and achievements, as well as a description of a person's attributes, traits, or abilities. It is also the total of traits and qualities that will define a certain individual or group of people. Character describes the ethical and moral strength of the individual, as well as attributes and abilities that will ultimately correspond to their life choices. In general, character is also a broad term that is used to describe the general curriculum and organizational features of schools that promote the development of fundamental values in children at school. Good character is not constructed automatically; it is developed over a period of time through a process of teaching, example, learning and practice. It is constructed by interaction of many variables such as; education, family, mass media, society or friendship. While there are many factors influencing to the construction of individual character, character building through education--more specifically classroom learning process-- is one thing that educational practitioners could contribute to the construction of students’ character (Adi, 2011).

In The Jakarta Post, May 21, 2010, Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono reminded educators not only to reach science to their students, but also moral values. In his address on National Education Day and National Awakening Day at the Jakarta International Expo building in Jakarta, the President underlined the importance of forming character building in education. The Head of State called on the entire Indonesian people to implement the theme of the National Education Day "Character Building as Pillar of National Awakening. The president said that to become a superior nation, at least five things had to be done by the Indonesian people. Firstly, the
Indonesian people must have a good morality, science, good conduct, religious, civilized and against violence. Secondly, the Indonesian people must be intelligent and rational with a vision of building a better future. Thirdly, the Indonesian people need to be innovative, creative, and willing to work hard to improve the situation. The fourth, he added, the Indonesian people need to increase their spirit. And the fifth, the Indonesian people need to become a true patriot for the people, state, and country.

In keeping with the effective approaches in building character in the classroom, Antes and Norton (in McDaniel 1998) provides the following suggestions for moral education as a part of character building: provide opportunities for students to be responsible for each other by providing cross-age grouping and cross-age tutoring, the older will benefit by being a role model and by developing patience and tact, and the younger will benefit by being helped academically and witnessing a caring, helping relationship. It should relate educational experiences to students' lives providing opportunities for students to share their points of view. Next, develop cooperative activities in the community with service projects to help students develop a sense of responsibility and connection to the community as a whole; encourage discussions with and among students concerning aspects of school life and how to interact with other people in the appropriate manner; guide children in playing a role in decision making in the classroom and school; provide for forms of student self-government in public schools as a means of helping students contribute to others and develop critical thinking and interaction skills.

McDaniel (1998) adds that we should use day-to-day activities and what is happening in the students' lives as opportunities to deal with values and ethics; encourage students to think in complex ways about moral issues in life as they appear in the curriculum; use reading and writing activities to encourage moral and ethical thought; structure the learning environment so that it models democratic values and provides a safe environment for learning, sharing, and cooperating; encourage self-discipline through cooperative interaction between persons in the learning environment; use discussion, role-playing, and analytical and creative projects as a basis for critical thinking about values, attitudes, character traits, and moral issues; use cooperative learning activities to help students develop social interaction skills; and establish parent support groups to develop a moral consensus.

**Immersion principle and character building**

The immersion principle (Vale, Scarino, & McKay, 1991) says that learners learn best in an environment where they are surrounded by a range and variety of spoken and written language; which include teacher talk, other classroom talk, audio or videotapes, specially-prepared written information, or reality and written texts from outside the classroom. The teacher provides communicative data that are comprehensible, relevant, and at the same time challenging to learners. Students are surrounded by a range and variety of spoken and written language; teacher talk, other classroom talk, audio and videotapes, specially-prepared written information, and reality and written texts from outside the classroom. The teacher provides communicative data that are comprehensible, relevant, and at the same time challenging to learners. Teachers create an atmosphere where learners are using and working with the target language and culture, develop learning activities appropriate to the context of the learners, provide a variety language of language stimuli from a range of resources such as teacher talk, other classroom talk, audio and videotapes of talk, written and printed information, or realia. This principle is useful to foster learning from others who have different experiences and knowledge.
Meanwhile, Huitt in *Moral and character development* (2004), suggests a variety of alternatives to dealing with moral and character education in the schools. First, the teacher can ignore it completely which assumes the issue is outside the bounds of proper curriculum. The interest by professional organizations and the public suggests that this view is inappropriate. Second, the teacher can take a "values neutral" stance and provide opportunities for students to clarify and defend their own values without making recommendations or advocating a particular viewpoint. This is the position taken by the advocates of the values clarification movement. It assumes that in important ways no values or character traits are more valid than others. Teacher, to the extent that certain values or character traits are more likely to lead to socially desired outcomes, it would seem inappropriate to not identify these as "better" values. This is not to say that the techniques used in values clarification have no merit, but that when educators and the public have developed a consensus about the worth of certain values, it seems entirely appropriate to teach these to students. A third approach is to teach students a specific process to follow when making decisions and putting these into action. This is the approach of the analysis view used in values education and assumes moral and character decisions are made rationally. Another cognitively-oriented approach is to engage students in discussions of relevant moral issues with the expectation that students who hear their peers discuss the issue from a higher level will gravitate to that position. While the techniques used in both of these approaches have been shown to be effective in changing thinking, there is scant evidence to support the belief that changing thinking will automatically lead to a change in behavior. And it is impact on behavior that distinguishes values education from character education. A fifth approach is to teach students a given set of values and accompanying appropriate actions. This is the position taken by the inculcation approach to values clarification. This approach assumes a set of absolute values agreed upon by society that are unchanging and that be applied equally appropriately in all situations. A final approach is to use the inculcation, values education, analysis, and moral development approaches described above when and where appropriate and then to have students put their thoughts and feelings into action in a variety of social actions as suggested in the action learning approaches. This combination of approaches is much more likely to impact the two important aspects of character not included in values education--volition and action.

**Character building resources and activities for EFL**

In this paper, it might be argued that there are two dimensions of the integration of character building into language learning activities in EFL classrooms. They are language dimension and character dimension.

In the first place, Vale, Scarino, and McKay (in Adi 2002) explain that there are four general considerations for effective materials. In the first place, it is the consideration to the *nature of the learner group*, that deals with some principles such as: the materials should be appropriate for the learners’ level of language development; the materials should challenge learners without frustrating them; and the materials should meet learners’ immediate learning needs. The second is the consideration to *the purposes of the materials in relation to the goals and objectives*, that deals with to what extent the materials promote communicative use of the target language; how the materials increase learners’ knowledge and understanding of the target language community and culture; and how the materials encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning. The third is the *teacher’s needs and preferences* consideration, that relates to the issues such as: how the materials can extend the teacher’s contribution; and how the materials can exploit rather than constrain the
teacher’s expertise. And the fourth is the *practicalities and general considerations*, that relates to some criteria like: the materials should be presented in imaginative and appealing way; the materials should be economical in terms of preparation time; and how the materials allow for all learners to be actively involved in its use. Duppenthaler, Littlewood, and Tomlinson (in Adi 2002) all agree that teaching materials should fulfil these following criteria; they should achieve impact, they should help the learners to feel at ease and develop confidence, they should provide learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes, they should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful, they should take into account the learners different learning styles, and they should not rely too much on controlled practice.

Secondly, in the character dimension teachers should provide opportunities for the learners to construct their character by integrating pillars of good character into their cognition. This paper tries to focus on three pillars of good character (charactercounts.org/sixpillars.html) in EFL activities, they are: responsible, fair, caring. In general, responsible means liable to be required to give account, as of one's actions or of the discharge of a duty or trust; involving personal accountability or ability to act without guidance or superior authority; a responsible position within the firm, able to make moral or rational decisions on one's own and therefore answerable for one's behavior. Whereas fair means equitable implies justice dictated by reason, conscience, and a natural sense; free from favoritism or self-interest or bias or deception; unbiased, impartial, even-handed, unprejudiced, just, clean, square, equal, objective, reasonable, proper. And caring means to be concerned or interested; to provide needed assistance or watchful supervision; and to have a liking or attachment (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/character).

In classroom teaching learning process, integrating the value of responsible, fair, and care in English language learning could be done in these following activities: The teacher could provide the students with worksheets for learning centered activities in which the worksheets consist of several activities such as true false questions, discussion questions, writing assignments, and student center learning activities.

- For the value of responsible, in the true false questions, the students are supposed to explore how responsible they are. In discussion questions, they are provided with examples of cases about what they will do if something happens and need for their responsibility. And in writing assignments the students are supposed to do some writing tasks from the worksheets asking them to write anything about responsibility cases. It could be in form of narrative writing activities assigning students to describe in details of a time when the students did something irresponsible.
- Student activities could be in the form activity such as having students break into groups and share a time when they acted irresponsibly and a time when they took responsibility. In a large group, have them share one of their stories and the impact that person's behavior had on those around them. As a group, they could identify some problems in their school or community.
- For the value of fair, the activities as the previous value, in true false activities, students are supposed to explain about themselves whether they treat people the way they want to be treated, treating people without prejudice, or consider the feelings of all people who will be affected by their actions.
- In discussion activities, questions such as: “*How do you know when something is unfair? how many people here think the world is unfair? What makes a person fair?*” could be applied for the students to trigger a classroom discussion.
- For writing assignment on the other hand, students are writing descriptive paragraph describing something they see in their community that they think is unfair.
Appendices of this paper could be an alternative guide for teachers to integrate the values of responsibility, fair, and care into classroom language learning activities.

**Conclusion**

Character Building is developed over a period of time through a process of teaching, example, learning and practice. It is constructed by interaction of many variables such as; education, religion, culture, family, mass media, society, friendship. Immersion principle and appropriate resource could be an alternative in integrating character building in EFL activities. The values of responsibility, fair, and care are good characters that can be integrated into language learning classroom interactions.

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APPENDICES

Three out of six pillars of character building: responsible, fair, and care
(source: charactercounts.org/sixpillars.html)

A. Responsible

Are You a Responsible Person?

Personal Responsibility:
True   False
☐☐ I do what needs to be done.
☐☐ I am reliable and dependable.
☐☐ I never make excuses or blame others for my actions.
☐☐ I always follow through on my commitments.

Social Responsibility:
True   False
☐☐ I do my part for the common good.
☐☐ I volunteer in my school or community.
☐☐ I participate in community service.
☐☐ I do what I can to help take care of the environment.

I think I am/am not a responsible person because: ______________________

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do parents mean when they say you should "take responsibility?"
2. Do you consider yourself to be a responsible person?
3. How does it make you feel when somebody lets you down?
4. How does it make you feel when you have let somebody else down?
5. Are you responsible? In what ways are you, and in what ways are you not?
6. How might taking responsibility give you power over your life?
7. What responsibilities do you feel you personally have for: 1) yourself, 2) your family, 3) your community?
WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write about a time you were let down by someone's irresponsible actions. If you could say anything to this person now, what would it be?
2. Can you think of a time you did something really irresponsible? Describe it in detail:
   a. Why did it happen?
   b. How did you feel about it at the time?
   c. Did it affect anybody else?
   d. Did it cause any problems for you?
   e. How do you feel about it now?
   f. What did you learn from it?
   g. Or, perhaps you would prefer to write about something you did that was very responsible.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

- Have students break into groups and share a time when they acted irresponsibly and a time when they took responsibility. In a large group, have them share one of their stories and the impact that person's behavior had on those around them.
- As a group, identify some problems in your school or community. Come up with a plan for attacking one specific problem.

B. Fair

Are You a Fair Person?

True False
☐ ☐ I treat people the way I want to be treated.
☐ ☐ I treat people without prejudice.
☐ ☐ I consider the feelings of all people who will be affected by my actions.
☐ ☐ I play by the rules.
☐ ☐ I never take advantage of others.

I think I am/am not a fair person because: _____________________

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you know when something is unfair?
2. How many people here think the world is unfair?
3. What makes a person fair?
4. What does being fair have to do with one's character?
5. Have you ever been punished in a way you felt was unfair? What was unfair about it?
6. What are some little things you can do to make life more fair?
WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. One girl said that she thinks an example of being unfair is when people judge her without knowing her or the whole situation. Write about a time when that happened to you.
2. Describe something you see in your community that you think is unfair. What do you think should be done about it? What role could you play in making that change?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Invite a law student to talk to your class or group about how he or she makes a fair decision in the courtroom.
2. Have each student think of a recent incident where he or she felt treated unfairly.
   a) Then have each student find a partner.
   b) Now, each pair must act out what happened, but the student whose situation it is must argue the other person's point of view.
   c) As a group, discuss what this process felt like. Did anyone discover some points that didn't seem fair in the beginning but might be fair now?

C. Care

Are You a Caring Person?

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I think I am/am not a respectful person because: _______________________

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Agree or disagree: Some people say that kids are selfish and don't care about anything but themselves.
2. How do you know if someone cares about you?
3. How do you feel when people show that they really care about you?
4. How do you feel when you do something really caring for someone else?
5. What makes people care about others?
6. What do you think the world would look like if nobody cared about anybody else?
7. What motivates you to give to others?
8. Do you consider yourself a caring person? In what ways?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Describe the most caring thing anyone has ever done for you. How did that make you feel?
2. Watch a movie or a TV program, and then write about how the actions of the characters demonstrated either caring or uncaring.
3. Write a critique of an uncaring character, suggesting how he or she could have been a more caring person.
STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Have your class brainstorm a list of dos and don'ts for being caring. Ask for specific examples of each behavior they identify. Compare their list with the quiz questions above. Hang the list up on the wall as a reminder.

2. Bring in articles from newspapers and magazines describing situations that show caring and uncaring actions on the part of individuals, groups or governments. Discuss these situations. In what ways do they demonstrate either caring or uncaring?