Tolerance and Diversity in the ESL Classroom

Sean Lenihan and Troy Cunningham
Port Moody Secondary, BC

A common feature of many schools today is the multi-ethnic makeup of the student body. Diversity and multiculturalism are key features in the modern Canadian social landscape, and are defining characteristics of Canada in the eyes of the rest of the world. However, this multicultural façade has begun to show cracks in many local settings as we begin to see conflict, both verbal and physical, increase between different ethnic groups in our local schools.

At our school, as teachers of immigrant and refugee youths, we have noted this increase in conflict with some trepidation. This conflict has taken on various forms over the last few years and has slowly become more worrying. What first began, perhaps, as reluctance by students of one ethnic background to work in cooperative learning situations with students...
of other ethnic backgrounds, has escalated in recent months to more direct confrontation. Sunni students have reported conflict on the basketball court over use of space and choice of music with Shiite students. Iranian students have been heard making fun of Kurdish students because of their lack of a real country. Kurdish students dismiss all Asians as Chinese, without trying to understand the differences that exist between Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese students. The most recent and most worrying incidents have required police involvement as Afghan students and Iranian students have begun to bring weapons to school and make physical threats against one another.

As ESL teachers, we find these increased incidences of intercultural conflict worrying because they are almost wholly within the context of the students we teach in our ESL classrooms. None of these conflicts seem to be involving students from the dominant 'Canadian' culture. Rather, we are witnessing difficulties and rivalries within the ESL community slowly explode into open conflict with the threat of real violence. It was from this context, then, that we decided to undertake and investigate what we as educators and what our students, including immigrant, refugee and international, could do to raise awareness and acceptance of ethnic diversity. We hoped that through a concentrated unit of study on multiculturalism and an exploration of the causes of discrimination or racism, we would increase our students understanding of the need to respect everyone, regardless of their race, creed, or ongoing conflicts within their countries of origin.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

When we began to consider investigating our students' attitudes, opinions and beliefs, we looked in vain for comparable research or previous studies that addressed these issues specifically in a similar context to the one in which we worked. Much of the research done with ESL (English as a Second Language) learners is concentrated at the post-secondary level or examines the interaction between minority groups and the dominant culture. Our focus was really upon how the students of the various cultural groups interacted within our classrooms and within the wider school community.

This is not to say that this issue is one that has been ignored in the past; it is recognized and appreciated as a problem, as Brinton, Sasser & Winningham wrote:

> [...] racial and ethnic tensions exist among and between the many ethnic groups. Many school campuses suffer from misunderstandings and occasional violence as language minority students adapt, with varying degrees of success, not only to the culture of the United States but to the cultures of one another. (1988, 7)

This potential for conflict has been recognized by various scholars but the primary concern is, apparently, the potential for conflict between representatives of the dominant culture and the students from diverse backgrounds.

In studies whose contexts more closely resemble our own, such as Abrams and Ferguson's examination of the different learning styles of students from a variety of nations studying at the UN International school in New York, the main concern is with teaching styles and the broader aspects of second language acquisition (2004). While the similarities between our students and those in the UN International school program are strong, culture and respect for diversity only enter into their study as something that teachers, as representative of the dominant culture, need to develop and to be aware of.
Likewise, Dogancay-Aktuna's work highlights the importance of teachers and teachers-in-training to be aware or knowledgeable of students' cultural backgrounds in addition to teachers' own cultural assumptions (2005). This concern that teachers, who are representatives of main stream or dominant cultures, need to be sensitive to cultural differences and their impact upon student learning and living is fairly widespread (Abrams & Ferguson, 2005; Smith-Davis, 2004; Duff, 2002). David Corson takes this importance even further when he argues that this lack of understanding of the students' cultural backgrounds has even more negative results;

[...because of inadequate preparation in intercultural relations, [school administrators and teachers] have few insights into the interests and values of many of those who are affected by their actions. So instead of running schools effectively, administrators and teachers are often disempowered because of their ignorance of the real effects of what they are doing. As a result, their schools can become islands of alienation in the very communities that they are meant to serve. (1999, 79)]

It is imperative that teachers learn as much as they can about their students' cultural diversity and seek to use this understanding to enable the students to succeed in school and their new communities. As well, it is clear that teachers in classrooms with cultural diversity need to be knowledgeable of the sources of conflict between the various groups and to create ways to bridge the differences.

One suggested approach is based on the contact hypothesis, which has been popular with peace educators and multicultural educators for many years. If members of groups that are in conflict are brought together on an ongoing basis, sharing a commonality of purpose, the increase in understanding and tolerance will contribute towards peaceful co-existence (Glazier, 2003). Simply put, "the more that individuals can meet and thus learn about members of other ethnic groups, the more their existing prejudices and stereotypes will be undermined" (Connolly, 2000, 170). However, both authors argue that this has not been enough and that there needs to be a more directed approach to elimination of conflict and discrimination. Glazier, in studying a school in Israel where Arab and Jewish children learn and work together, argues that the added component is attaining what she calls cultural fluency, necessitated upon:

[...moving] contact beyond the surface, allowing individuals to move across psychological, language, and physical borders, and requires a sustained commitment to each other and the task at hand. It is this commitment over an extended period of time that allows for learning and transformation, and in the educational context it is the curriculum that plays a critical role in the experience of company-building. (2003, Theoretical Perspective section, 6)

It isn't simply through spending time together that people learn to understand and appreciate alterity. Rather it requires a shared task, and in the case of school, a curriculum that allows students to address the issues of difference in a critical and personal manner.

It is interesting then, to see the connections between the recommendations Glazier (2003)
makes and the suggestions made by proponents of Intercultural Communication (ICC) theories (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Barna, 1998; Barnlund, 1998). Like the work that Glazier (2003) draws upon, ICC seems to have emerged from business oriented studies, and looks at the benefits good intercultural communication brings to an increasingly globalizing world economy and life style. Barnlund sets the tone by asking "[w]ill a global village be a mere collection of people or a true community? Will its residents be neighbors capable of respecting and utilizing their differences or clusters of strangers living in ghettos and united only in their antipathies for others?" (1998, 36). Through creating solid opportunities for understanding to develop and for people of various cultural backgrounds to live and work together, these difficulties can be overcome and the world made a better place to live. Interestingly enough, Dogancay-Aktuna, in discussing how to improve teacher training, points to ICC as "a discipline that can offer language teachers and their educators important insights about how and why cultures of learning might vary" (2005, 100). This then, should be carried over into examining the classrooms and communities that are being created in our schools today, which are the contexts where this type of new globalized community is being created.

One of the main identified stumbling blocks to successful intercultural communications is the stereotyping we create of people of diverse cultures (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Barna, 1998). It is interesting to consider stereotypes and the role they play in helping people to understand others, since stereotypes are to a certain extent built upon people's perceptions of reality.

Stereotypes help do what Ernest Becker says the anxiety-prone human race must do—reduce the threat of the unknown by making the world predictable. Indeed, this is one of the basic functions of culture: to lay out a predictable world in which the individual is firmly oriented. (Barna, 1998, 181)

Even though these stereotypes are part of how people make meaning of the world around them, they are a major source of conflict between members of different cultures, as they may be rooted in false expectations or may become exaggerated in response to perceived threats (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Bennet, 1998; Brown, 1992). As one group comes under pressure to assimilate to the dominant culture, they may begin to more clearly define their own identities in contrast to both the dominant group and to other minority groups. In a classroom with diverse cultural backgrounds, the boundaries between students based upon culture and ethnicity can become hardened as the stress of assimilation grows. Not only will the students resist or react to the dominant culture, they will also resist or react against others who are different; "a second source for conflict in culturally diverse groups is the competing needs of assimilation and preservation of cultural/ethnic identity (especially minority group identity)" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, 107).

The Project

Bringing these theoretical strands to bear upon the context of our school and the problems we perceived made us decide to undertake a three-week unit to teach about discrimination and intercultural conflict. We see it as a duty of the school system to make our students, who are new to Canada, and most of whom are new to Western culture, aware of Canadian values, and of respect for diversity and multiculturalism. We felt that for this to be an effective unit of study, we would need to engage the students critically with texts, each other and themselves, to examine the sources of discrimination. While we would maintain our focus on language teaching, we agreed with David Corson that,
Successful schools are focusing their intervention on cultural and critical literacies that respond to the sociocultural and sociopolitical situation of learners…Talking about text, not just learning how to read it, is central to all this. These things gradually lead to individual and group empowerment, and they begin to counteract the illiteracies of oppression and resistance…This pedagogy is culturally liberating, giving legitimacy to the minority students' culture. (1999, 211)

Through engaging students in critically examining discrimination in Canadian history and in discussing their own experiences and attitudes, we would be moving beyond Glazier's criticism of most multicultural units, that "in diverse classrooms teachers too often reach for an uncomplicated and uncontroversial curriculum that fails to address students' own lives and experiences (2003, Concluding thoughts, 3).

We decided that it would be beneficial to examine the roots of the conflicts from the students' perspective. We wanted to challenge their attitudes and assumptions about the conflicts and encourage them to take a more objective view. In other words, we wanted them to step outside themselves and examine why they thought the way they did. We hoped that they would realize that increasing tolerance and acceptance of others was best not only for them, but also for our society at large. Something needed to be done, and this project provided an opportunity to take a first step.

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The Classroom
The project took place in an intermediate-level ESL Skills 10 class. The class was taught by a Caucasian male Canadian teacher, one of the teacher-researchers, and had 24 students. The students were mainly grades 9 and 10, with only one grade 11 and one grade 12 student. There were nine females and 15 males. One female, an Iranian girl, left the school on the eighth day of the research because her family moved to another city. The students had the following backgrounds:

- Three Iranians (two boys and one girl)
- Eight Koreans (five boys and three girls)
- Seven Afghans (four boys and three girls)
- One Taiwanese boy
- One Russian girl
- One Romanian boy

The students had lived in Canada for between three months and two years. All students and their parents agreed to participate in the project.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research and the potential for hurt feelings or open conflict, we decided to have the students write their opinions and reflections down in journals. After engaging in classroom activities or discussions, students expressed their opinions in written form and the teacher-researcher replied, often asking further questions. It was hoped that this would allow the students to express themselves honestly, without fear of response from other students. It was made clear that only the teacher-researchers would read their opinions, and they would not be punished in any way for expressing their honest thoughts.

The Unit

We began the unit with a plan to have the students discuss their own experiences with discrimination and intolerance, and then have the class study various examples of discrimination from history. It was hoped that engaging in critical discussion together, in honest reflection, would lead the students to be more understanding and tolerant of others and reduce conflicts in the classroom, as well as in the school at large. The teachers were open to altering the plan if student journals or activities led them in a different direction—and the students did lead the project in different directions.

The first activity had the students working in groups, brainstorming words that they associated with "discrimination." Students had some background knowledge of this word, because it had come up the previous semester during a unit on Canadian law. Perhaps predictably, the students came up with words such as "racism," "religion," and "unfair." Then, discussion flowed to racism in the United States. Being familiar with Hollywood movies with racial themes, the students knew about the tensions between African Americans and Caucasians in America. One student, Katya, a Russian, had an interesting idea for solving the racial problems in the United States. She had the following exchange with the teacher-researcher, Mr. C.:

Katya: Why don't they (African Americans) go back to Africa?
Mr. C: Well, how did they get to America?
Esmael (an Iranian boy): Slavery
Mr. C: That's right. Their ancestors were taken out of Africa by force and sent to work in
the United States. The African Americans in the United States are now "American." They have no connection with Africa. So how can they "go back?"

**Katya:** Well, I'd like to go back to my country. I'd swim back if I could.

This was a notable exchange because it reflected a lack of knowledge on the part of the student. Katya was apparently unaware that African Americans were not "African" and could not simply pack up and move back. It underlined the need for students to be accurately informed in order to make rational decisions and view others more objectively. Without this accurate information, communication difficulties and a lack of understanding will undoubtedly follow. It is essential that students know the facts before making up their minds as to what has happened or how they should react in a particular situation.

In a later journal, Hekmat, an Afghan student, claimed that Osama Bin Laden had studied in the United States. When he was asked where he had heard that Bin Laden had been a student in the US, he said "from my friends," but he also said that he wasn't sure if it was true or not. This story however, had shaped the opinions that he was giving in his journal and provided, in his mind, a link between the Taliban, Osama and the US, who were all responsible for the violence that had brought his family to Canada.

Following the discussion about discrimination, students were asked to write a journal entry about a first-hand experience they (or someone they knew) had had with discrimination. The journals also reflected some misunderstandings. Mike, a Korean boy, thought it was "discrimination" when he couldn't make a reservation at a Chinese restaurant in Vancouver. The story he related actually was one of miscommunication. Neither he, who spoke Korean, nor the host at the restaurant, who spoke Chinese, were able to make themselves understood in English. As a result, he was unable to make the reservation. While not in itself an example of discrimination, this was clearly another one of the barriers to intercultural communication identified by Barna (1998).

Although some students appeared to misunderstand the question, most of them were able to relate 'real' examples of discrimination. Some examples were from experiences in other countries, such as Jafaar, an Afghan boy who experienced discrimination in Iran. Others occurred in Canada, such as the one involving Katya's grandmother, who was treated rudely on a bus because she couldn't speak English. In fact, of the 24 students, 14 wrote about discrimination in Canada, showing that they clearly felt the stress of assimilation into their new setting.

Following the discussion about racial tensions in the United States, we decided that an examination of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King might generate discussion and some interesting viewpoints. The class read a short biography about Dr. King and learned about the American Civil Rights Movement. This led to a second journal entry. Students were asked to think of another example of a group of people having conflict, possibly from their first country.

When the teacher-researchers read the journals, we were intrigued by some omissions, as well as by what was turned in. Two Kurdish boys, Kerevan and Azad, did not hand in the assignment. This was very unusual for Kerevan, who always completed and submitted assignments, and who, up until that point, had never missed handing one in. In the past, other Kurdish students have related horrific accounts of genocide and chemical weapons attacks in Iraq. Perhaps he was expressing a reluctance to relive the past and would rather leave it behind him? This highlighted again the sensitive nature of our project, since many of our students have experienced things beyond the imaginations of any Canadian student,
and many of them in fact do suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. It was decided not to pursue him and to allow the assignment to pass without forcing him to hand something in. The other Kurdish student, Kesra, did write about Arab-Kurdish conflict in Iraq, and described a peaceful, legal resolution to a dispute over land ownership.

Katya, the Russian girl who had earlier suggested that African-Americans go back to Africa, wrote in her journal about the conflict between Russians and Afghans and Iranians. She implied that Russians were 'better' than Afghans, and that she disliked them because they "think they are Russian, but they aren't." She also blamed Iranians and Afghans for fighting at school and said they often fought "for no reason." The teacher-researcher observed that she was perhaps making judgments again without having all the facts. Was she aware of the Soviet domination of other countries during the Cold War and the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979? When asked if she knew about the Cold War and the invasion, she replied that she liked the Soviet Union better and that people "were happy" under communism. She also indicated that she knew about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For the teacher, this discussion indicated that Katya was not able "to get inside the head and heart of the other, to participate in his or her experience," (Bennett, 1998, 207) and that she could not see the conflict objectively. It did not seem possible for her to see Russians in any kind of negative light.

After discussing conflicts from around the world, the class began to study multiculturalism in Canada. Students were put into multiethnic groups, chosen by the teacher-researcher. A picture of people from various ethnic backgrounds was put on the overhead and students were asked to choose which ones they thought were Canadian. Predictably, they all selected the Caucasians in the picture and identified them as Canadian. None of the students thought the visible minorities in the picture were Canadian. Apparently, the students regard only Caucasians as 'Canadians,' which means that they see themselves as outsiders in Canadian society. This perception certainly leads to feelings of alienation, which can produce anger and conflict, and is an element of culture shock resulting from the pressures of acculturation/assimilation (Bennett, 1998; Brown, 1991). In our opinion, it is essential to make the students feel included and a part of Canadian society, to ease their transition through the stages of culture shock. If they don't have a stake in society, how can they be expected to care about it?

This was also a good opportunity to examine Canada's multiethnic mosaic. The teacher-researcher explained to the students that all the people were Canadian and that Canada was composed of people from many different backgrounds. The class then put together a timeline of immigrant groups who came to Canada in the last 150 years, in order to get a picture of what Canadian society is really like. The teacher also explained what Canada's multicultural policy was about and how Canada promoted diversity and encouraged immigrants to be proud of their heritage and to hold onto their culture, while at the same time being 'Canadian.'

At this point, Esmael, an Iranian student, asked if it was like this in the United States? The teacher-researcher explained that there were two approaches to cultural policy. One was Canada's multiculturalism, where immigrants were encouraged to celebrate their heritage. The other was a melting pot, where immigrants were expected to assimilate into the mainstream, which is an approach advocated by some people in the United States. This question again caused the teacher to alter the original plan. Since a student had asked about alternative approaches to assimilation, the next journal question asked for student opinions on the following question: Which approach is better, multiculturalism or the melting pot?
All students thought the multicultural approach was better than the melting pot. This indicated that they valued their cultural identity and wanted to hold onto it. Some students, such as Kesra, wrote that she appreciated how Canada educated its immigrants and helped them start a new life. It was encouraging for the teacher to note the positive response the students had to Canada's immigration and cultural policies. Could this be a place to begin having the students realize that a tolerant philosophy is going to be much better than an aggressive, confrontational approach? It was certainly time for a more critical examination of intercultural relationships and discussion of situations where things had gone wrong.

After studying Canada's multiculturalism, the class was again divided into groups, this time for a jigsaw activity that had them reading case studies of discrimination and intolerance—two from Canada, and two from other countries. The case studies were:

- Japanese-Canadian internment during World War Two
- Chinese railway workers during the 1880s
- The Holocaust
- Mennonites in Russia in the 1870s

The students worked together to identify which group was being oppressed and discussed reasons for the oppression.

A follow-up activity proved to be very revealing. Students were asked if any of the oppressed groups deserved to be oppressed, if they had done anything that would warrant such treatment? Most students said the victims were blameless, but there were a few examples where this was not the case. Two Korean boys, Mike and Brian, were unsympathetic to the plight of the Japanese Canadians during World War Two, writing that "(Japanese) are powerful and dangerous." This opinion reflects an anger and distrust of Japan shared by many Koreans. In the following class, the teacher-researcher attempted to distinguish between the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces which invaded East Asia and committed atrocities and the Japanese-Canadians who were uprooted from their homes and sent to camps in the mountains of BC. It seemed to work in this instance, and the Korean boys indicated that they had changed their opinion of Japanese-Canadians in future discussions.

There were other examples of students blaming the victims. Two Iranian boys and an Afghan boy thought the Jews deserved their treatment in the Holocaust because, as Jafaar wrote, "they attacked the Arabs." Again, here is a factual error. The student was unaware that the modern state of Israel was not created until after the Holocaust. It is crucial that they understand the history, if there is to be any hope for understanding or peace between Israel and other nations in the region. Similarly, Katya, the Russian girl, thought the Mennonites deserved to be oppressed because, as she writes, "the Russians were trying to be better."
It is significant to note that in all of these examples, the students saw the other oppressed
groups as blameless. It was only in the case of their own particular, pre-existing cultural
conflicts that they saw the victims as deserving of oppression. These students didn't step
outside themselves to see their own conflict with any type of objectivity. Here we find the
perils of persistent preconceptions and false stereotypes at work (Brown, 1991):
"Intercultural conflict involves varying degrees of biased intergroup perceptions and
attributions in assessing what transpires in an ongoing conflict episode" (Ting-Toomey &
Oetzel, 2001, 19). There is a critical need for the students to develop real understanding and
knowledge so that they may become more tolerant.

In a follow-up journal about the causes of discrimination, we were particularly shocked by
the assertion made by Arif, an Iranian student, that the Jews "need to be destroyed." For the
teacher-researcher, it made him more aware of his own bias and perspective. Being of
Western background, brought up believing that the Holocaust was probably the single
greatest crime in human history, it was shocking to see such words written by a student. It
is very important that educators are aware of the backgrounds and points of view of the
students they teach (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005; Duff, 2002). The teacher wrote the following
response to Arif's journal: "There are Jewish people at this school. Do you think they should
be destroyed? Aren't they just innocent kids?" It was an attempt to get Arif to see the
conflict between Jews and Muslims from a more personal perspective, hopefully making
him more tolerant, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Arif reaffirmed his belief that Jews
need to be destroyed in the final journal entry of the unit.

Following the case studies and reflections about blaming the victims, there were two more
main activities in the unit. First, the students discussed and wrote about the causes of discrimination. Then, they talked about how they could break what the teacher-researcher referred to as "the cycle of intolerance."

Students in groups brainstormed the causes of intolerance and discrimination. Like the first activity of the unit, they could play 'word association' and come up with single words to explain why people discriminated against each other. Some words that came up were:

- Jealousy
- Religion
- Fear
- Power
- Culture

Students were very eager to express their opinions during the larger class discussion, and we were impressed with their level of analysis of the question. Azad, a Kurdish boy, recognized the effect that imbalances in power and wealth can have on oppression. Laura, a Korean girl, noted that fear and lack of knowledge can lead to oppression. Laura recognizes that people need to be accurately informed if discrimination and intolerance are to be reduced, matching some of the same conclusions that the teacher-researchers were drawing.

This led nicely into the last major issue: How can we break the cycle of intolerance? Students were presented with the following diagram and asked to interpret it:

![Figure 1: The Cycle of Intolerance](http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v14n01/articles/lenihan/index.html)

Students began by discussing what the diagram meant, and then each group presented their interpretation to the class. Some groups related personal examples to explain how the cycle worked. Seung, a Korean boy, gave an example of how it could develop into a fistfight in a basketball game, with players becoming increasingly aggressive as the game went on. Other students had a broader interpretation. One group, led by Katya, said it was a good explanation of black-white relations in the United States. As the discussion went on, it appeared that all students came to realize that it was cyclical and that aggression only led to more aggression. When asked if the cycle was an accurate reflection of reality, all agreed it was.
Then it was time to ask how the cycle could be broken. Azad, a Kurdish boy, said it could be broken by completely winning the struggle. The teacher-researcher wondered if, because he had lived through the power imbalance between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, whether Azad perhaps had a feeling of hopelessness. As Glazier (2003) points out, the inequality or power imbalance existing in many classrooms in North America is one of the major factors rendering multicultural education ineffective. After this rather discouraging beginning, students came up with some positive ideas to try to end the cycle.

Abid, a boy from Afghanistan, recognized the importance of education. He said educated people are less likely to resort to violence; the more we know about other people and how to appropriately resolve conflict, the better off we will be. Seung thought it was important to make laws against racism. Arif suggested "calling the cops" and getting third parties involved. Katya thought it was important to think about the consequences before acting. We were very impressed by the well-considered responses to the question and by the interest the students demonstrated in seeking solutions to these problems.

To conclude the unit, after making anti-discrimination posters, students were asked if their views regarding discrimination and intolerance had changed at all, or had the unit reinforced them? Many students wrote that they weren't racist before, so their views had been reinforced by the unit they had just studied. One particular student, Arif, indicated one thing hadn't changed and that was his opinion that Jews needed to be destroyed. This was very discouraging. Other students said they were surprised to find Canada had examples of discrimination and racism in its past. Hekmat mentioned the Japanese Canadians, while Azad wrote, "I never knew the world had so much discrimination. And I also learned that you shouldn't judge other people by their skin colour, religion, or culture." Some of the other students from Middle Eastern backgrounds said they'd changed and explained how. Esmael wrote, "I didn't have any good idea about… Jews… but now I think (this) group shouldn't be oppressed." This was very encouraging, because if one student has been changed for the better, then this project was worthwhile.

Many of the Korean students indicated their opinions hadn't changed. Bo Bae wrote, "I didn't change my mind because I didn't see anything change. Unfortunately, many people are still oppressing other groups." Two others agreed with this rather pessimistic conclusion. One boy, Jin, wrote "I thought the discrimination was a very bad thing. And still I think the discrimination is a very bad thing." His response was interesting since in one of his first journal responses he had written extensively on the KKK and its role in American society.

As for Katya, again she didn't step outside her original point of view. She wrote that she knew most of what had been covered in class, but "I hope some students in this class learned something and now they behave better." We can only hope! It would be very interesting to check in with these students and survey them about their attitudes in the future.

**Conclusions**

After completing this 15-day unit, were we successful in changing our students' views about each other, and were we successful in improving their tolerance of each other? The students' final journals seem to hold out a positive hope, since 10 out of 24 felt that their thinking about discrimination had changed for the better. And, as Glazier (2003) or Bennett (1998) would say, bringing about the kind of intercultural tolerance we are seeking is really the goal of lifelong learning, not something that can be arrived at overnight or through a
short unit on multiculturalism. The students involved in this study were working collaboratively on some fairly critical texts and were discussing sensitive matters in a mature manner. More importantly, as they learned about the nature of Canada's multicultural policies and the history of discrimination in the past, they also learned a lot about each other and how each other thought. These students will continue to work together in class for the rest of the school year and will hopefully take some of the positive attitudes they have developed with them into the community as a whole.

In addition to what the students learned about themselves, each other and the cultural context within which they are now living, we as teacher-researchers also learned a lot. We have seen that the lives of the students are very complex, involving many factors beyond the classroom. One of the most interesting things we learned was the importance of the kinds of background knowledge that the students have with them when they come to the classroom. As adults, we forget that, although these young people may have lived through significant events, and perhaps because of it, they are not objective observers. Their knowledge of the world is shaped by a cultural lens that comes from religion, family, history, gender, and many other factors.

As ESL teachers, we are the conduit for new cultural perspectives and new ways of thinking about previous experiences for these students. Our job is to do so much more than facilitate language acquisition (Brown, 1992; Corson, 1999; Dogancay-Aktuna, 2002). We need to present the facts and events in an objective manner, as well as be honest with the students about our own perspectives. This last requirement is crucial, since we cannot present our own perspectives as the truth. A balanced and critical approach is required, allowing the students to gain the information they need, and allowing them to make their own decisions based upon their new understandings derived from as many different cultural perspectives as possible.

It is to expose the culturally distinctive ways various peoples construe events and to seek to identify the conventions that connect what is seen with what is thought with what is said. Once this cultural grammar is assimilated and the rules that govern the exchange of meaning are known, they can be shared and learned by those who choose to work and live in alien cultures. (Barnlund, 1998, 50)

As this understanding grows, people let go of their stereotypes and preconceptions, and begin to profit from each other. As one of the students, Jung, wrote, "we can't discriminate to each other because all people are the same—human."

References


Intercultural Press.


About the Authors

Troy Cunningham and Sean Lenihan have been teaching English language learners at Port Moody Secondary in British Columbia for the past 10 years. Over that time, the school population has changed as refugees from different countries moved into the catchment area and began attending school. This work was done as part of an M Ed study at the University of British Columbia. The research was done in response to challenges they faced at the school as they observed conflict and tensions involving students of different backgrounds.