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Equity and Diversity in Higher Education: An Examination of the Implementation of Inclusive Language Guidelines in Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

With an increasing number of higher educational institutions adopting policies to implement the use of inclusive language in an attempt to embrace diversity regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity or nationality, a debate has ensued. While many have applauded the move for being a step in the right direction towards equality and global citizenship, others have decried the measure for restricting choice and for its potential to turn into a punitive system by taking the form of grade or point deduction. This ongoing controversy also poses a very real question, i.e. how can academia promote the use of inclusive language in an effective and sustainable way? In an attempt to answer the question, in addition to in-depth interviews with students and faculty, participant observation of in-class activities on the use of inclusive language and other events such as workshops and seminars on the dissemination of inclusive language guidelines, also provided valuable data. Findings indicate that positive reinforcement is viewed as one of the most useful ways of encouraging students to use language that is non-exclusionary. In contrast, as expected, punitive measures had the effect of producing anxiety and resentment. It is also noteworthy that people who reported being ambivalent about which approach would work best also thought that the use of inclusive language is unlikely to make much of a difference to pre-existing stereotypes, biases and prejudices. While this view may have some validity in the short-term, the effect of the continuous use and exposure to inclusive language over a long period of time is unknown, and hence, it may be too early to renounce the idea of inclusive language for a society that can foster greater respect and tolerance for people belonging to different groups.

Key words: inclusive language; approach; diversity; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Language works mostly subliminally but has the power to affect human thought, behavior and action (Pinker, 2007; Ottenheimer, 2005; Whorf & Carroll, 2012). It

shapes the culture in which it is used by reflecting attitudes, beliefs and assumptions while simultaneously creating them, constantly affecting the way reality is perceived. Biased use of language can lead to people feeling devalued, marginalized and segregated, and foster prejudice and hostility towards a certain group. In contrast, inclusive language, defined as language that “acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities” (Linguistic Society of America, 2016), can promote a climate of respect and equality for all, gradually promoting diversity.

Therefore, it follows that in order to create an environment in higher education institutions where everyone feels that they are treated with dignity and impartiality, language that makes people feel marginalized and discriminated against should be avoided. Historically, language has been known to exclude individual and groups based on their culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, socioeconomic status, and appearance. But as world-wide campaigns to bring about social change gain momentum and the demographics of universities witness rapid change, this issue needs to be addressed. In this shifting socio-political environment, students and faculty cannot afford to ignore the language that can facilitate effective communication with people from diverse backgrounds. In this sense, the use of inclusive language can be an integral component of diversity education.

Aligning with this global trend in higher education, as The University of Hong Kong adopted the inclusive language guidelines for submission of students’ work last year, this paper aims to examine students’ and teachers’ reactions to the implementation of the measure. It argues that through ongoing feedback, teachers are in a position to help students avoid exclusionary language. By integrating proofreading exercises into lesson plans and other such course-related activities, educators can enable students to engage with the materials and correct their misunderstandings while keeping in mind that a perceptible change in their cognitive, affective and behavioural skills is likely to come with time.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 undergraduate students from different cohorts and 6 teachers from different faculties at the University. In addition, participant observation was used to record students' and teachers' reactions during workshops and seminars on inclusive language. Interview and observation data was then coded thematically to identify salient points emerging from the study.

FINDINGS

Inclusive Language Guidelines and Students' Concerns about Grades

During the interviews, when students were asked about the recommended guidelines on the use of inclusive language, most students immediately responded with a query about how this would affect teachers' marking and their grades. For instance, Diane¹, felt that this was one more thing to think about during her busy academic life and *worried it would make it even harder to get an A in the language component of assessments*. She added: *You know, our GPA is very important*.

After the interviewer reiterated that inclusive language will not be made mandatory and will have no bearing on students' grades, Anson, Diane's classmate, replied: *As long as my grade is not deducted, I don't mind*.

Inclusive Language and Willing to Learn Students

Almost all students interviewed said that they understand the need for inclusive language in order to be fair towards different minority groups. Students were particularly keen to use non-discriminatory language with the purpose to communicate well but did not know how to do so.

Confusion about Appropriate Language

Edward expressed his confusion as follows:

I don't know which words are okay. Should I use gay or homosexual or queer? If my teacher can tell me, I will feel more confident.

Association between Interesting Tasks and High Student Engagement

¹ *The paper addresses all participants by pseudonyms to protect their identities and abide by the confidentiality agreement.

Students from the Faculty of Business demonstrated great enthusiasm in using inclusive language during their writing exercise. For example, when asked to think about a gender-neutral substitute for ‘craftsman’, students came up with answers such as *craftsperson* and *craftspeople*, none of which are used in English. When the teacher suggested ‘artisan’, instead of feeling dejected, they insisted they wanted to learn more and would like to complete the quiz on inclusive language.

Workplace Requirements as a Strong Motivation to Learn

Additionally, when students from the Faculty of Engineering were told that in their workplace there could be an expectation to avoid using language that demeans people because their superiors and co-workers may belong to diverse groups, they seemed more motivated to learn. In Jason’s words:

I have learned a lot. I can address people at work as ‘colleagues and friends’ instead of ‘ladies and gentlemen’ to include everyone. I can write ‘Members of the Search Committee’ because it is non-binary instead of ‘Dear Sir/Madam’.

Faculty’s Skepticism and Resistance to Political Correctness

In contrast to students’ reactions, many teachers expressed doubts about the efficacy of adopting inclusive language guidelines. While some teachers felt that these superficial measures are unlikely to change deeply embedded beliefs, others seemed frustrated that political correctness is carried too far. Mr. Trent, for instance, stated:

Aren’t students supposed to express themselves without censorship through scrutiny of their language. It’s tedious and pointless to say first-year-students not freshmen, because everyone understands it refers to first-year undergrads.

Yet a few teachers unreservedly supported the initiative. Ms. Chan felt it would create a campus culture of respect because:

People may think twice before teasing or calling people ‘psycho’ or ‘mental’. There could be someone around who suffers from mental health issues who could find this hurtful. It is cruel and people need to know about it.

DISCUSSION

The data reveals that students and faculty have very different reactions to the introduction of inclusive language guidelines at the University. Students were primarily driven by pragmatic concerns: grades, tasks and job requirements.

Teachers, however, took a more ideological perspective on the issue with many discussing worries about overblown political correctness and a few making a case for thoughtfulness and tolerance.

Need for Inclusive Language in Higher Education

In terms of students' responses, the findings of this study corroborate that of Kennedy's (1993) on the use of non-sexist language in Canadian schools because she highlights that students see value in knowing about inclusive language and therefore feel the need for instruction and teacher input. She further states that despite this, most students don't get to learn much even in universities. In a similar vein, Yakaboski (2011) and Parson (2016) contend that within STEM fields, language propagates stereotypes by relying on a binary system of use (e.g. men, competition and active vs. women, collaboration and passive respectively), which advantages men and deters women. These inequalities cannot be addressed without making students cognizant of the role of language in reinforcing discriminatory practices. This may be particularly true for those who use English as a second or foreign language (Tsehelska, 2006). If teachers provide gentle but sustained feedback, reward rather than threaten pupils, design interesting tasks and relate the importance of inclusive language to the ability to communicate effectively in a diverse job market, students are more than likely to welcome opportunities to learn about inclusive language.

Recognition of Political Correctness for Social Progress

Political correctness (PC) began as an attempt to minimize offence to minority groups in society. However, in recent years, PC has been ridiculed and also accused of curtailing freedom of speech. Many academics too have taken this stance. This does not make it any less important though. Inclusive language has tremendous potential in making all students feel safe and supported while simultaneously demonstrating a university's values. Research shows that stigmatized minority groups experience high levels of chronic stress when they face or fear discrimination, which causes them to suffer from major health problems (Clogan & Rumens, 2015). This implies that when linguistic constructs start affecting people in negative ways, they need to be revised. Furthermore, it becomes a university's responsibility to support the needs of

those on campus who are most vulnerable. Hence, if education is to serve as a driver of social progress, then it should make inclusion a priority.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the paper proposes that inclusive language be prioritized in institutions of higher education. When students are not worried about penalties, they demonstrate a great deal of enthusiasm to learn about inclusive language, especially if they receive praise and find the tasks interesting and relevant for their future. And although some teachers may feel that emphasis on political correctness may be overblown, the consequences of creating a campus culture that neglects inclusion is far more scary. To uphold the ethos of education, universities must cater to the needs of all, and recommending non-mandatory guidelines on the use of inclusive language offers a simple way to embrace diversity and strive towards more equality.

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