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Diversity and Inclusion of Sociopolitical Issues in Foreign Language Classrooms: An Exploratory Survey

Over the history of foreign language education, a stigma has developed that foreign languages are for the privileged to learn, and that minorities were dissuaded, based purely on socioeconomic standing. This can be clearly seen within the survey results, as minorities are much lower in percentage than Caucasian students. This is especially prevalent in the African American demographic. Out of all the languages surveyed, Japanese and Swahili had higher levels of students of color than the other languages in the study. Overall however, the minority students within a language course were usually correspondent to the culture that speaks that language, such as Latino students taking Spanish classes.

This lack of diversity within classrooms has unfortunately expanded to the teachers, with direct correlation. There are far less minority teachers in foreign language than there are of the privileged majority. This unfortunately has created a lack of secondary culture education being incorporated into the classrooms. In fact many people, from students to education board members, view culture and language as two separate things. For example, one male student, when questioned, answered ““Why should it matter. Math doesn’t try to be relevant to diverse backgrounds, why should foreign language?”” (Saito-Abbot, 20). This shows a disconnect between the students and the culture of the language they are learning. Language and culture are intrinsically linked, and it is difficult to fully understand one without the other. On top of this, the very goal of learning another language is to be able to communicate. It is very hard to truly communicate and connect with people if there is not a mutual understanding of where both parties are coming from.

One of the main issues facing foreign language education is that “Critical issues such as racism and other injustices may not be addressed sufficiently in foreign language classrooms” (Saito-Abbot). It is understandable at the lower level, as it is very time consuming simply trying to learn the basics of the language. However, even at upper levels, even though there is more reference and connection to various social ethics, there is still very little focus on these issues. Classrooms, especially foreign language ones, need to be the ones to look at these issues and present them to students, as this is how they will grow to be more culturally and globally aware. Language and culture are not two separate issues that need to be taught at different points; instead they should be taught in unison, to fully flesh out the comprehension of both to understand the whole.