

## Teaching English in Multicultural Classrooms

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### Abstract

The English language classroom provides an obvious multicultural context for learning, and teachers need to help students understand and appreciate the differences and similarities among the various ethnic, religious and cultural groups. This study aims to examine teachers' understanding of and attitudes towards multiculturalism, and in so doing, find out what are the language teaching strategies used in promoting and enhancing successful multicultural interactions. Teachers should be able to seize this opportunity to foster tolerance and understanding in classrooms of diverse cultural backgrounds.

### Introduction

The classroom is a critical social arena where individual lives are shaped and influenced through attitudes and values, which are embedded in both the content and the process of learning. Positive values, for example, an acceptance and conceptual understanding of difference, are important to success (Gardner,2001). Modeling awareness of our own culture and its influence on how we approach the lesson allows students to explore their own culture. Students can then begin to question how their own values influence how they interact with and think about individuals who differ from themselves. We should also inform students that they do not have to agree with us or accept our values.

Culture affects the way we teach and therefore we really cannot engage in bias-free teaching (APA,2003) cited in Kluck (2005). We constantly convey our values to students by the way we talk, or do not talk about individuals, about people with different cultural backgrounds. If we want our students to understand culture and its effects on others then multiculturalism need to be injected or infused in the curriculum. Students live in a diverse world and teachers need to provide the relevant opportunities to apply this intercultural understanding in their daily lives. It is important emphasized Davis (1993), that teachers must remain mindful of their values and seek to identify and address ways in which their biasness interfere with their ability to engage in culturally competent teaching.

Language is a vital means of transmitting culture and a common source of confusion, even among members of the same culture (Stavenhagen, 1990). Every language is part of a culture, and it serves and reflects cultural needs. Even so there are areas in the world where societies share a very similar cultural orientation and yet speak languages that are not only mutually unintelligible but completely unrelated and structurally different. This is especially true when we have a class of students learning, speaking English, all from varied cultural background. The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is one such case.

**Teaching** English in IIUM means teaching the language to a very culturally diversified population of students, coming from different parts of the world. The medium of instruction in the university is English, thus the importance of the language to be taught to all students. Learning English in IIUM, as in many countries, is for academic and scholarly purposes.

Being an international Islamic university it has been our mission to enhance intercultural understanding, not only within and amongst the university community, but also the nation, and across borders. The total number of about 20,000 students from more than 90 countries around the world, reflects the geographical and cultural diversity of the student population. The unifying factor is Islam, but because there are a lot of other considerations pertaining to the different backgrounds of students, looking into teaching these culturally diversified students is imperative in helping them to achieve intercultural understanding and at the same time, academic excellence. Findings of this study can inform teacher educators about the type of experiences that could be incorporated in teacher training programs to which will be beneficial to many multicultural educational contexts.

### **Teachers' understanding of and attitudes towards multiculturalism**

There have been studies done on teachers' perceptions and attitudes and also on classroom observations looking into the instructional strategies used in incorporating multiculturalism in the classroom. This is seen as necessary as teachers' understanding and attitudes about culturally diverse students in the classrooms. Teachers are the key factors in motivating, educating, and making a difference in the education of students irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, age, religion, language, or exceptionality. The majority of teachers usually, consciously or unconsciously, exhibit biases towards students in some manner, says Gollnick & Chinn (1991). There is then this possibility of a mismatch between teachers' teaching styles and the learning styles of culturally diverse students.

A study conducted by Gay (1994), sees teachers as often perceiving their values, beliefs, and actions as the standard norms, and what they know and what they teach is governed by educational principles of teaching. Due to the lack of understanding of ethnic, racial, social, and linguistic diversity of students, teachers can engage themselves consciously or unconsciously in practices that may not be suitable in the classroom. Due to the failure on the part of teachers to understand, accept, and appreciate who these students are, students may feel that the learning environment is alien and hostile toward them. This situation causes stress, anxiety, and a feeling of a lack of support among students, which can affect students' daily academic performance. All students, including culturally diverse students, work better when they feel that they are secure regarding who they are (Winch-Dummet, 2005).

Costa (1997), is of the opinion that formal education depends upon the attitudes and professional preparedness of teachers. It becomes all the more critical to have appropriate attitudes, perceptions and professional preparation to teach effectively in multicultural classrooms. Pena (1997) also noted that analyses related to teachers' perceptions, indicate that educators spend little time getting to know their students and, therefore, have very little knowledge about them. In terms of training, teachers are very aware of the lack of their preparation in multicultural education, and yet some of these teachers do not consider training in multicultural education a high priority (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Fueyo and Bechtol (1999) investigated how teachers' perceptions influence classroom practices in three areas. Teachers have low expectations of linguistically diverse students in the areas of valuing bilingualism, reading-related instructional practices, and reading-related assessment. Their study found that teachers with negative perceptions have a tendency to discourage linguistic minority students from using their primary language and rarely or never use bilingual materials or activities for academic purposes. They further state that teachers with negative perceptions of ethnic minorities have also exhibited differential treatment with students because of gender differences and stereotypical views on students' last names.

It must be strongly emphasized that teachers have a dual responsibility to engage in the critical and continual process of examining their prejudices, biases, and perceptions that affect students' learning experiences. To be an effective multicultural educator and an effective instructor, a teacher must continue self-examination and

transformation (Gorski, 2000; Nelson,2001). Both argue that having a socially held belief system and valuing racial and cultural differences are the keys to improving equal opportunities for all students.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe a selected group of teachers' understanding of multiculturalism and what teaching strategies they have adopted in promoting intercultural understanding in the context of English Language teaching.

The Research Questions thus are:

1. What are teachers understanding of and attitudes towards multiculturalism?
2. What are the teaching strategies used in promoting intercultural understanding in the language classrooms?

### **Methodology**

Based on the concerns addressed in the literature on teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds, 16 teachers, experienced and inexperienced teachers , were interviewed and their teaching observed in the effort to examine their understanding and their practice in the multicultural English Language classrooms. These interviews allowed the interviewees to provide detailed accounts on the topic at issue. Interviews provide immediate feedback, permit the interviewee to follow up on leads, and obtain additional data to enhance clarity (Tuckman, 1999).

The classroom teaching observations was another set of data that was used to identify and highlight the teaching processes and language practices conducted. The teaching observation and the peer observation carried out were recorded handwritten and compared.

The participants are postgraduate students, six of whom are experienced teachers, while the other ten are inexperienced with either less than a year of teaching experience or none at all.

The setting or site of the study is the International Islamic University, a university of very culturally diverse population of students.

### **Summary of Findings and Discussion**

This study seeks to address two research questions, the first being teachers' understanding of and attitudes towards multiculturalism. The term understanding refers to how or what one understands or perceives something, while attitude is the way one thinks or feels about something, and the way one behaves towards something that shows how one feels and thinks. Since the two terms are very closely interrelated, discussions or references made to understanding will include attitudes as an integral part of understanding or perception.

The teachers associated multiculturalism with learning about different cultures and how important it is to be aware and to learn other cultures as well. It also deals with promoting peace, working together, and learning together. They

talked about avoiding prejudices, learning new and different things. Learning to live together, being tolerant and sensitive to the differences in cultures, were all, they said, part of the concept of multicultural understanding. With regards to teaching, the inexperienced teachers' responses were more general comments which for the most part explaining about integrating culture in teaching and teaching students of different cultures and backgrounds to learn one language, English.

All sixteen of them viewed cultural differences as a tool rather than as difficulties to overcome. This tells a lot about the attitude of the teachers. Whether experienced or otherwise they are actually receptive to the idea that whatever or however varied the cultures and beliefs are, there would always be room to improvise or to make use of the differences as a medium and source of intercultural activities in the class. Three students however, reluctantly admitted that even though they found the idea of integrating multiculturalism a worthwhile and interesting activity in class, they were not really sure how exactly they were to create the opportunities for learning.

As such it was not surprising when these participants' attitudes were captured in the way they explained and phrased what they felt. What follows are excerpts from the interviews;

- i It is common sense, awareness, pay attention to cultural differences, aware of repercussions
- ii Try to accommodate, facilitate
- iii. Sensitive to traits of body language
- iv. Reasonable to high level of understanding of issues
- v. Avoid taboos, avoid being offensive to the students, minimize cultural differences
- vi. Willing to learn, to engage, to incorporate multiculturalism in their teaching
- vii. Positive feelings, knowledge about diversity of culture and beliefs interesting, good, worthwhile learning

A more positive attitude towards intercultural interaction ie sensitive to student classroom interaction.

Sympathetic towards different types of handicaps that result in cultural diversity.

Respondents also seemed to have serious concerns about the need for training and experience in multicultural studies for teachers. This they found to be important in order to function effectively in culturally diverse classrooms. The majority of the respondents commented that they have not been aware of any teacher training courses that catered to this kind of needs. The findings of this small study in a way indicate that teacher training institutions or the relevant university faculties are not operating a comprehensive multicultural perspective with regard to teacher preparation programs, especially when the universities themselves are opening their doors to international students.

.. The need for knowledge in multiculturalism ranked high in the participants' preferences, showing that teachers were willing to engage and incorporate multiculturalism in teaching English. These teachers felt that cultural diversity is an asset that could enrich learning. This kind of attitude towards the kind of teaching and learning would be beneficial to students obviously show the care, respect that are important in promoting multiculturalism. Therefore multiculturalism say Tiedt et al. (2005), must permeate the curriculum.

During the interviews, teachers quite openly shared their feelings whether or not they were professionally prepared to teach culturally diverse students. Many were not really well-equipped with the idea of dealing with culturally diversified students, but the two who had the opportunity teaching English to students of mixed background did not

feel the strain as they had the experience to do so. The link that should be established here is between understanding and actual practice. The teaching strategies adopted will be dealt with in the summary of findings that follows.

The second research question is regarding the **Teaching Strategies** employed by the participants. This is to see whether their understanding of the matter and the actual teaching and learning situation have been put into practice through the way they teach and interact with the students in the classroom.

The main teaching strategies employed by the more experienced teachers were classroom discussions and , collaborative work. avoid elements of prejudice, speak of differences in cultures, solicit culturally diverse opinions, discussion of values and beliefs, inject Islamic perspectives. While teachers agree that knowledge of multiculturalism is important, there were a few who did not show any concrete behaviour in promoting it in the class.

An experienced teacher of seven years felt that it would certainly be helpful in the adult language class based on the experience she had. She admitted the awkwardness when she assumed that the students' knowledge background were of the same level, being in the same level of English proficiency class. Much to her surprise she was assuming too much when she thought the students did not have problems doing the task assigned. She was not aware that where the students were from had no access or exposure to the popular branded items she wanted identified.

The inexperienced teachers said reminders on existence of cultural differences, listening to their opinions, voices, avoid prejudices, give tasks on essays of students' different cultures, food, and generally choose and design topics and techniques that could bring forth discussions and different points of view. Wallace (2001) emphasizes the need of multicultural education in the mainstream course work for pre-service teachers to be able to understand the experiences and developmental needs of culturally diverse students.

When asked whether they have integrated multicultural elements in their class activities

Teaching effectively in a multicultural classroom requires culturally sensitive strategies and content to provide equal opportunities for academic success and individual growth of all students. The most effective teachers have learned to understand the cultures of students and their students trust them (Schlosser, 1992). Teachers need to develop an awareness of their own cultural perspectives, beliefs and behaviors and to be aware that their own cultural perspective is not the universal perspective and the only right one. Pre-service teachers need to acquire multicultural competence, the ability to be functional in cross-cultural settings.

The teaching strategies seen by the teachers as could be effective in dealing with the students came about because of some of the difficulties experienced during their teaching practicum. Examples are different background history may cause tension not welcome by certain students, not adhering to the Islamic principles, less tolerant towards certain other cultures, different levels of language proficiency therefore different levels of understanding. Dapting to a different culture is never easy. It is very challenging but beneficial in the long run.

Although multiculturalism is a common issue in the world, it is not much stressed in teacher training programmes. Teachers can become culturally sensitive and knowledgeable about second language acquisition, provide culturally responsive instruction and content that reflects central aspects of a culture and use highly motivating instructional materials. It is apparent that the participants find it agreeable for teachers to be trained.

Suggestions and recommendations from the interviewees wanted some kind of short courses. There is need to know what goes on in their minds give students and what they feel about the differences in culture especially when they interact amongst themselves as learning does not only take place in the classroom but outside, or informally as well. Not well-equipped with the knowledge and the teaching experience most of them they felt that a proper training session on multiculturalism should be given. Specific topics like intercultural communications should be introduced so that teachers as well as students could be more psychologically prepared in dealing with multicultural facets and issues.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This paper is based on a small study focusing on the teaching of English in culturally diverse settings in an international university. Studying teachers' perceptions concerning their preparation to work with culturally diverse students assist the teacher programs to prepare teachers to work more effectively with culturally diverse students. Teachers need to involve themselves in critical reflection and learn to appreciate cultural diversity in the university. It is thus imperative for universities to provide opportunities for teachers to think about and discuss cultural diversity.

Teachers today are faced with the many challenges of educating students who are from very varied cultural backgrounds. The purpose of this study is thus to examine what the teachers' understanding of multiculturalism is and what were some of the teaching strategies adopted in promoting multiculturalism.

This study is significant in three ways. First, it is important because it provides teacher education programs with recommendations for a contemporary pre-service teacher training curriculum. This study provides data that documents teachers' understanding of and how they acquired and developed their skills to teach diverse student populations. Teachers were asked to share their academic and personal demographic information and explore their perceptions about multicultural education.

Second, the focus of this study is on teachers' understanding of multiculturalism and their teaching strategies in dealing with culturally diversified students learning English. The recommendations and suggestions provided by the participants could benefit the teacher training and teacher education programs at colleges and universities especially in preparing prospective teachers to be effective instructors in culturally diverse classrooms. University faculties, in this case specifically the language centre, should be culturally diverse to demonstrate how cultural diversity can be effectively incorporated into the university curriculum and environment

Teachers also made strong recommendations suggesting a variety of options for training practicing teachers and pre-service teachers in multicultural education, which include courses in multiculturalism and intercultural studies, mentoring programmes and practicum in culturally diverse classrooms, and in-service workshops, seminars and presentations for practicing teachers.

The implication to ESL teachers is thus made clear that they should be assisted in acquiring the knowledge to facilitate teaching the multicultural student population. Teaching methodology courses not only can it be done in the English language classroom or other language classrooms but also in content area classes in realising the IIUM's missions of internationalization and integration in the interest of academic excellence and world peace.

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