



Teaching English language to students of diverse cultures

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Abstract: *In schools where the English language is taught, it might be challenging to treat and teach students equally, if they are of diverse cultures. Potential problems may occur because students have different understanding, background knowledge, learning abilities and cognitive skills, as well as challenges related to comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary and language acquisition in general. The paper investigates teaching English to students of diverse cultures in schools. The results showed large differences in terms of learning and acquiring English evident in: difficulty acquiring vocabulary, frequent occurrence of code switching, and cognitive challenges.. The results showed a relationship between learners' motivation and attitudes towards learning. The evidence indicated that culturally diverse students in elementary school are more active and verbal in English learning classes while those in high school face more difficulties related to pronunciation, speaking in large groups and motivation. Culturally different students at the university level develop into introverted students with less cognitive skills. With proper methods applied by the teachers, students' achievements can be upgraded which would eventually influence students' skills of mastering the English language.*

Keywords: *diversity, culture, classroom, school, education.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the current paper was to get to the root of the matter and address the most crucial factors that would give the most accurate answers to how different understanding, background knowledge, learning abilities and cognitive skills, as well as challenges related to comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary and language acquisition in general, affect the teaching process within multilingual language classrooms. When teaching English in such a context, a teacher should consider the experience and learning approaches of the students while choosing methods appropriate to use with all of them in order to help them understand properly, without any difficulties (Quinton, 2013).

Different social backgrounds, environment and culture influence the process of language acquisition (Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo & Zavrl, 2019). Students are different in terms of experience, methods of learning and many other factors (Guild, 1986), all of which impact the students' behaviour and their learning styles. Thus, good and professional teachers use a variety of teaching methods in order to stimulate all their students' learning. For instance, relying on stereotypes regarding one's race or ethnicity is not a proper way to create a teaching plan for students of that culture (Davis, 2013).

Another aspect of creating a good atmosphere in a multicultural classroom should be based on establishing a friendly relationship between a teacher and students, since students in an authoritarian classrooms are more likely to give negative feedback or might feel threatened for being different. In order to avoid this, a teacher should behave like a facilitator in the classroom, not like an instructor (Lynch, 2015). Creating a survey to decide what is the most interesting for student and what fits their needs might be a good way to show them that they are actually the ones who help the teacher decide and gives them motivation to learn, once they had a chance to choose and be recognized as an important factor in making decisions.

Usually, students with different cultural background, non-native speakers of the language spoken in that country might feel lost and unaccepted, those feelings pressuring them to push their native language aside and forcing them to consider English as their main language. In a culturally responsive classroom, it is important to celebrate varieties and help non-native speakers realise that diversity is an advantage and that it enriches the whole classroom. That is the perfect method to help students achieve fluency in English without feeling uncomfortable. Even the usage of students' native language in some materials might be very helpful in English learning (Lynch, 2015). Teachers should know how to incorporate materials related to their students' diversities into everyday classes and make them feel accepted and thus encourage students to develop a sense of identity based on their differences. Teachers are important helping students not to feel like they are on their own, but have a friend in their teacher.

Various grouping strategies such as grouping students according to qualifications/programs should be done by teachers. This helps to tend to their needs, for example in the language use, grammar and language skills in English language learning. At other instances a teacher may divide students according to their abilities if the learning outcome requires that. Also, group dynamics need to be taken into consideration when grouping students together. Moreover, background and a proficiency level play a central role as well when grouping students. A curriculum is quite often underestimated for its importance in teaching, but it is crucial for a good pedagogic approach to academic performances. Even the simplest curriculum is important because it defines what is chosen as the best literature, authors, and texts for students, and what is the best to use in order to help students value their own culture and history (Davis, 2013). What is important is that all students in a group should be active participants, cooperating with their fellow members in all given activities. This will ensure that they are learning effectively. Balancing a group helps prevent the Halo Effect by the teacher and those who are proficient are expected to offer support to students that require help. This diverse nature of students in one class is stimulating and calls for the teacher to be innovative and creative in order to have a "coherent" class.

This study addresses the issue of multicultural classes in Bosnia and Herzegovina investigating teaching English to students of diverse cultures in schools with the focus on the following issues: challenges, differences, outcomes and methods. The participants were not randomly selected, but chosen based on their cultures. Thus, the study will show how teachers' approaches within such classrooms influence the learning outcomes of the class.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of handling multiculturalism is a very popular topic for many researchers. We investigated all the pros and cons of having students of cultural and other diversities inside a classroom and how it influences their educational progress, their mental health, their cognitive development, as well as their socialisation and relationship with peers and teachers.

To start with, Witsel (2003) explained that learning and studying are not easy even in the classroom where all students are of the same culture, leading to the conclusion that the fact that students who do not belong to the same culture as their classmates have twice as more difficulties in school. With respect to the existing differences within classrooms, Bećirović (2017) indicated that younger students achieve more, thus are more motivated than older students, or that females achieve more than male students.

regarding other researchers who dealt with the matter of immigrant studies and their coping with their background, Saenz (1994) implies that they might not suffer so much from being alone in the class with no other peers coming from the same culture, while Steele and Aronson (1995) suggest they suffer less from being marked with stereotypes connected to the culture they have grown up in. This is because of the growth of the number of relative students in one classroom, which was shown by the research of Sekaquaptewa and Thompson (2002).

Students that come from other surroundings might also feel more powerful and confident, and less visible or noticed in a classroom environment which is culturally diverse, and this encourages students of different cultures to work together and become acquainted with other cultures (Yaman & Bećirović, 2016). However, unfortunately not many teachers are able to pay extra attention to culturally diverse students, and are not even certain if they should. This is one of the questions this research is most focused on. According to Gay (1994) teachers believe their thinking and opinions are right and their facts are correct, that they are universally accepted, without considering that their own norms, values and behaviour influences their teaching and the treatment of students. As Pena (1994) indicated, teachers spend little to no time with their students and that is the main reason why teachers are not fully aware of the students' needs, and in culturally diverse classrooms this plays a crucial role.

Sleeter (2001) agrees that one of the main problems is the fact that students who are usually the minority are more endangered than the ones who are numerous in the classroom and psychologically, they feel uncomfortable from the very beginning, being aware that they belong to a small group of people. It is very important, in each case, to have a proper approach with these students and to make them feel comfortable. One of the most important things would definitely be using the native language. However, while researchers like Genessee (2012) would agree that using the native language in an English classroom is more of an asset than a barrier, culturally diverse students would disagree.

Corbet (2003) explained that multilingualism in an English classroom matters and it should be fun, where students of different cultures can interact and share their interests regarding one topic. Helot and Young (2006) conducted research in which they found out that teachers become more effective when they are aware of the richness which multilingual classrooms offer, because it is there that the teacher has a large variety of possibilities in the organisation of strategies and managing the classroom. Multi-culturalism and multi ethnicity, as well as multiracial elements are incredibly important for the whole process of inclusion in school and that is why teachers should nourish and work on accepting diversities (Bećirović, 2012). Cooperative learning and social interaction solve problems such as inappropriate behaviour and lack of participation (Sechele, 2002).

However, it seems that in most learning environments teachers still need much support in addressing the issue successfully. For instance, Hélot and Young (2006) found few supports in the French curriculum to deal with linguistic and cultural diversity. According to them, teachers can learn to be more effective professionals when they are made aware of the abundance of languages spoken and cultures represented by human beings. Building on this awareness, teachers need to generate strategies that recognize multiple linguistic realities.

Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas and Gúzman (2006) further argued that multilingual schools need to include critical language awareness involving multilingual and intercultural elements. To accomplish these ends, teachers can be taught to reflect on their own language-learning experiences. As an example, Hélot and Young authored the *Eveil aux langues* and *Janua Linguarum European* projects (Candelier, 2003a, 2003b) and the *SwissEveil au language, Ouverture aux langues (Eole)* project (Perregaux, De Goumoens, Jeannot, & De Pietro, 2003), which had as a major objective to demonstrate a model for language awareness curricula. The materials developed through these projects contain activities aimed at fostering positive attitudes toward different languages, their speakers, and their cultures. These multilingual activities include using a second language (L2) to teach a curricular subject or offering pupils the opportunity to use their first language for specific activities.

In the French study curriculum, Hélot and Young (2006) managed to gather data which were addressing linguistic and cultural diversity, which aided the two in reaching conclusions about differences between multiple realities in a linguistic sense. Hélot and Young (2006) highlighted the importance of being aware of the amount of how plenty of speaking languages and cultures are discovered with each individual, as one of the very important traits of teachers as professionals. Similarly, Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, and Gúzman (2006) discuss the importance of embracing multilingual schools to start to build up the language awareness via multilingual and intercultural elements, which is accomplished by teachers being critical to themselves and reflecting their own language-learning methods. This includes teaching a subject in an L2 or offering student the opportunity to use their first language in some activities.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research represents a qualitative study, in which unstructured interviews were conducted. The interview consisted of 10 initial questions, all related to English instructors' treatment of culturally diverse students. All of the questions in the interview were understandable to all the participants.

The research sample included 33 participants whose ages varied, as the research was conducted in elementary school (11 participants), high school (11

participants) and university (11 participants). The participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any time they did not feel comfortable and also they were informed about the purpose of the research.

The sampling frame included target population of students in Sarajevo of different ages and different gender. Non random sampling was applied using a snowball sampling method. The participants were divided into three groups, elementary school students, high schools students and university students, which implies that the groups were separated by certain age borders.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the cultural challenges in learning English as a foreign language in diverse schools. Previous results suggest that there are many differences in teaching, also various methods and approaches used depending on the students' cultural and ethnical backgrounds because each student required different attention and support in learning.

The results of this research revealed a different experience on all three levels. When it comes to motivation, the elementary school students and the university students stated they were mostly motivated to go to classes, while the high school students were not.

"I like going to school because we have fun in English classes and sometimes, we watch cartoons in English. Last week we watched Sleeping Beauty" A.H. 13 y/o
"When it comes to motivation, besides regular student issues such as laziness or not wanting to get up early, I don't have any issues, especially not because of my professors or assistants. University is something we all enrol voluntarily, and I realise that my motivation has to be on high levels if I want to graduate." A.K. 21 y/o

Responses on questions regarding group work activities showed that the high school students and the university students dislike working in groups, but feel a lot more comfortable working with people of their culture and the elementary school students stated they feel comfortable generally working in groups, but little more comfortable in groups with other members of their culture.

"The only thing I like during group exercises is that somebody else gets the work done for me. Besides that, group work can be really humiliating because my friends who are domestic students give certain comments, such as "Let us do that, he is too slow and will only slow us down" and they thing I don't understand. But I do" K.G. 17 y/o

In terms of in class participation and activity, the elementary school students have shown to be very relaxed regarding their cultural diversity, and do not feel ashamed of their accent, they like to stand out, and are comfortable speaking English in front of the other students and not only the ones that come from the same cultural background. On the other hand, the high school and the university students replied that they are ashamed of their accent, they do not like to stand out and are more comfortable when speaking English within the group they are culturally part of.

"I like my accent because it is different. Others sometimes laugh, but I think it is also funny. I also laugh at others when they make mistake. But it's not bad laugh, it's cute." S.H. 10 y/o

"It is very difficult being in class with people who are as fluent in English as you are, but you feel like they are making fun of you whenever you try to speak. I've never faced anyone laughing at my face, but I am convinced they dislike my accent." K.C. 21 y/o

On the questions regarding the teacher's behaviour in the classrooms, students responded differently. The elementary school students find the teacher's classroom management appropriate, but the high school and the university students dislike the way their teachers manage classrooms.

"I think our professors divide domestic and foreign students too much, even though they sometimes try to mix us, but fail because that never works properly" S.C. 16y/o

However, the elementary and high school students feel like teachers treat them the same as others, where on the university level they do not feel the same. Unfortunately, the question about using the native language in classrooms was answered positively on all levels.

"I sometimes feel sad when teacher speak Bosnian, but I understand a lot, so it is no problem for me" A.G. 9y/o

"My foreign colleagues and I noticed that most of the professors obey the rule to speak only English in class, but sometimes native colleagues start speaking Bosnian, and then professor continues." G.A. 16y/o

The results presented the various approaches to students who are from different cultural background and how they are regarded as neglected compared to other students. By having a diverse classroom, grouping the learners by various types of topics of interest and level of expertise, integrating some gamification elements to foster the discussion and knowledge sharing, peer-learning, include problem solving and inquiry teaching method.

Potential problems may occur because students have different understanding, background knowledge, learning abilities and cognitive skills, as well as challenges related to comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and language acquisition in general (Dubravac, Brdarević-Čeljo, & Bećirović, 2018). Nowadays, textbooks offer a wide range of features in an effort to help teachers accommodate the learning styles of all the students. In some cases activities or projects are identified as appropriate for a specific learning style (Gardner, 1993). School counsellors, school psychologists, and testing specialists are a sensible resource for information about determining an individual student's referred learning style (Warner & Bryan, 2001).

The method used was useful, even though it could have been more detailed, but regarding the target audience and the ages in observation, those of younger age might have had problems with understanding what was asked of them, while changing the method for three groups would give different and incomplete results.

5. CONCLUSION

This study found that the student's ethnical and cultural background played an important role in their overall learning experience. An important role concerning students of diverse cultures has the teacher. The results are in line with the results of McCombs (2001) and Newman (2002) who found that students who feel they have supportive and caring teachers are more motivated to engage in academic work than students with unsupportive and uncaring teachers. Indeed, teachers who learn more about their students' backgrounds, cultures, and experiences will feel more capable and efficient in their work as teachers and have less difficulty with their students acquiring the English language. During classroom interactions, teachers should keep the special cultural needs of their diverse student in mind, also some educators believe that all children benefit from inclusion because it creates an authentic microcosm of the society students will be participating in once they finish school (Karten, 2010; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

Most of the time students have their own purposes for learning or achieving specific goals within a class (Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017). It is very important to focus on the learning outcomes the teacher wants learners to achieve besides their individual background. Having a classroom with diverse learners is a wonderful opportunity to share knowledge and enrich the classroom and learning experience through different expertise. The 21st century skills aim that learners experience learning across curriculum, meaning that the same topic can be analysed from various perspectives.

Teachers can improve lives of their students, and they should work hard on that. They can also help in making the multicultural classroom more pleasant place to be in, by changing their approaches to learning. Being flexible is one of the most important aspects of teaching students of diverse cultures (Doyle, 2006). It is of great importance for teachers to investigate the issues of any kind inside the classroom and related to learning processes and to help students reduce the problems, to help students to improve their academic achievements and create a strong relationship with students.

As values underlie every educational practice and behaviour expectations are culturally anchored, conflicts are likely to occur when cultural issues are not appropriate addressed in the classroom (Demir, 2009). That has shown to be the key to effective English language learning with students of diverse cultures. Still, studies found that minority ethnic groups often struggle in academic institutions due to language difficulties, feelings of isolation and having problems adjusting to a new cultural environment (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). Especially important is that educational institutions support minority students, as well as encourage the creation of initiatives to support multiculturalism in schools. Research should support academic administrators' efforts to enhance faculty awareness of the impact of culture on minority students' learning (KaiKai & KaiKai, 1992).

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