

## “Enhancing Student Learning in Multicultural Classes”

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### Abstract

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Culture and language relate to each other, and teachers need to be trained to use different strategies in a diverse classroom. Nowadays, Albanian students and teachers find themselves in classrooms with different cultures, languages, and backgrounds. EFL teachers face various challenges when they teach multicultural classes. The multicultural classroom may at first be uncomfortable and challenging to both teachers and students. However, if managed well, it can provide the richest of environments for learning, both for students and teachers and it can be a major factor in helping students adjust to a new culture and be successful in the university context.

The study has been conducted through quantitative design. The participants in this study were from the Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” in Albania. It attempts to aid teachers to respond positively to the demands of multicultural EFL teaching contexts. The expected outcome of this study would help teachers to manage multicultural classes and achieve higher results with their students. Teachers need specific competencies to effectively teach in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms and they have a special role in creating a methodology that addresses different cultures and different levels of students.

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**Keywords:** multicultural classes, students, teachers, challenges, strategies, Albania

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language in the modern era of globalization is interesting and challenging even in Albania. Classes are diverse in terms of ability and culture; teachers face the challenge of meeting the needs of diverse students in a mixed-ability class setting. Students come from varying backgrounds, with different levels and interests, and the traditional method of instruction may not be effective. Teachers in such classrooms have to manage and monitor several activities simultaneously. They must help students in developing ground rules for behavior, give and monitor specific activities and direct the sequence of events in each learning experience. In higher education in Albania, there are heterogeneous classes by ability but homogeneous by nationality and entirely heterogeneous classes by both ability and nationality.

After 2000 in Albania higher education institutions and mainly private ones have increased in number. A part of some private universities started to use a foreign language such as Catholic University “Our Lady of Good Counsel” as the language of their study programs, thus creating the opportunity and conditions for approaching foreign students. Consequently, this institution accepts students from different countries of the world or even foreign nationals residing in Albania. Although later than other European countries or even countries in the region, Albania became an attractive place for foreigners to study. Multicultural classes were established in Albania after 2000 and this is seen as an innovation introduced in Albanian education by private universities, the management of which requires overcoming many challenges especially when the classes are mixed-ability and multicultural. Teachers need to be able to understand how students learn, and their various needs for building effective lessons that meet these needs (Kromidha, E, Tabaku, 2011). Academics in non-western countries like Albania should now be better prepared to cope with multicultural classes mainly at the university level where the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students is on the rise.

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Multicultural education aims to provide equal educational opportunities for all students by transforming the overall learning environment and reflecting the diverse cultures and groups of social and national classrooms. Faris, A. (2009). Multicultural education is a process that teachers should constantly attempt to achieve in this global society. In recent years in Albania, because of globalization, classrooms are getting multicultural, due to foreigners who have come to Albania or returned immigrants who have lived many years abroad and then decided to return. This leads to new chances but also challenges for both general teachers and students. Nowadays, teachers need to be prepared to deal with the new educational environment in which students come from different languages and cultures and English is used as the teaching language.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural education aims to change the educational environment in a way that promotes mutual respect and enables the same educational opportunities as legal protection. This perspective explains the attitude of tolerance and equality between individuals in learning (Agus Salim, 2006, p.72). Bank (2009, p. 13) explains that multicultural education aims to transform learning so that students have equal educational opportunities. Learners are made up of different cultural groups, ethnic groups, other languages, and genders. Culture is an integral part of all human society (Browaey& Price2015). In Mulyana (2012), we list five categories that show that culture can influence communication with other people from different cultural backgrounds: history, religion, values, social organization, and language. please. Paul Gorski (2000) emphasized that multicultural education is an approach to transforming education and discriminatory practices in education. Multicultural education is based on the idea that schools recognize that they are essential to transforming society and laying the foundation for eliminating oppression and injustice. The purpose of multicultural education is to "change the approach to education and learning so that students of both gender, cultural and ethnic groups, and linguistic backgrounds have equal opportunities to learn in the classroom" (Saban, 2013). According to Alsubaie (2015), teachers can "combine classrooms and activities inside and outside the classroom" to gain more beneficial opportunities to improve student performance. Teaching is not an easy task, so teaching in a multicultural classroom presents teachers with a variety of difficulties and challenges, even if teachers and students have the same linguistic and cultural background.

Teaching effectively in a multicultural classroom is arguably one of the biggest challenges teachers face today (Den Brok& Levy, 2005; Howard, 1999; Jeevanantham, 2001). McAllister and Irvine (2002) claim that in this classroom situation, teachers struggle to provide a suitable classroom environment and a high level of education to improve student performance. James Banks (2001) defined multicultural education as "ideas, educational reform movements, and processes." Banks and Banks (2010), in another study, multicultural education should have equal opportunities for all students to study at school, regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, race, or cultural characteristics. It emphasizes the fact that it involves the idea of being. Other researchers argue that teaching today's multicultural classrooms requires teachers with other specific abilities and skills at the levels of interaction, classroom management, and evaluation (Chamberlain, 2005; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy, 2012). Burnett (1999) further emphasizes the role of teachers in this context. Excellent teachers of culturally diverse students effectively understand the differences between individuals and cultures and actively seek to assess these differences. He suggests using diverse educational strategies and activities as diversity helps develop and improve learning approaches.

In a separate study, Kostis (2009) claimed that disparities in students' learning styles, communication models, socialization practices, expectations, and individual learning experiences create the conditions for problematic situations in a culturally diverse classroom. Teachers' ability to manage classrooms, according to Kostis (2009), is one of the most important and difficult aspects of "creating positive and stimulating learning environments for students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds," and because teachers teach multicultural classes, they must deal with multicultural contexts, so creating secure and productive learning environments with a diverse group of students poses challenges that require "more than the strategizing."

### 1.1 Teacher's Role in a Multicultural Classroom

Becoming a good teacher who can meet all the needs of different students is not an easy task. However, the first important step in performing this task is to recognize the challenges. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that all students in the classroom understand their lessons. A skilled teacher observes individual interactions, classroom discussions, student work, observation, and formal evaluation to gain a better understanding of what works best for each learner.

According to Borich (2000), effective teachers have teaching clarity, teaching diversity, task orientation, involvement in the learning process, and high student success rates. Teachers are recommended to be well organized to enable effective learning and education.

### **1.2 Paul Gorski and Bob Covert's view on multicultural education**

The collective view of Gorski and Bob Covert on multicultural education was used by Therik (2004) to describe multicultural education. they claim that:

- Students must be able to function in an increasingly multicultural society.
- Teachers need to be willing to help all students learn well, no matter how similar or different their cultures are.
- Educational institutions must take action to combat all kinds of oppression. By first eliminating injustice within their walls and then creating socially and critically active and conscious students. Education needs to be more student-centered and address student perspectives and experiences. Our institutions need to focus on multicultural education in order to create a new system that includes all students in this globalized world.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To collect data for the study, the researcher has followed a mixed methodology. The research design, sample, instrument, and data collection procedure of the study are described below.

### **Purpose and research questions**

The purpose of this study is to determine the needs, challenges, and innovations of recommendations for improving teaching English in multicultural classes in Albania. This study also aims to highlight the needs of teachers who teach in multicultural EFL classes and evaluate the English language program. Secondly, this study aims to make some possible suggestions for successful implementations in mixed-ability classes in Albania. The research questions of this study are:

1. What are the challenges of learning in multicultural classes?
2. Students' perceptions on the aspects of culture learning in English lessons?
3. What are some successful strategies that could be implemented in multicultural classes?

### **3.2. Research design**

The study has been conducted through quantitative and qualitative design. A questionnaire with students in Albania has been used in this study to know the perceptions of teachers and students in a multicultural class to make the proper suggestions for future interventions.

### **Sample**

The participants in the quantitative study were 262 students. The students were from the University of Tirana, the University of Medicine in Albania, and the Catholic University "Our Lady of Good Counsel" in Albania. The participants were both males and females. There were also interviewed 16 teachers.

### **3.3. Instruments**

A quantitative study with a questionnaire survey for students assesses the challenges of learning in multicultural classes, different strategies to overcome the learning challenges, and perceptions of cultural learning in English lessons. The questionnaire had five options, i.e., Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither Disagree nor Agree (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). A qualitative study with the use of 16 teacher interviews.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The researcher has collected data subject to analysis. At first, the researcher analyzed and presented the data from the questionnaire and then the interview results.

This analysis result offers a way for teachers to use different strategies to deal with the challenges of teaching in multicultural classes, enhance students' motivation and achieve better results.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1.2 Questionnaire results**

Multicultural classes are classes that embrace diversity and include ideas, beliefs, or citizens from different cultural backgrounds. Different cultural perspectives have come together to allow students to receive a truly international education. In an ever-changing global environment, it has become vital to equip students with good enough exposure to be citizens of the future.

A multicultural classroom is very important because it helps students understand and appreciate all the cultures around them and can also bring national unity to the classroom. To measure the learning challenges of students in a multicultural class, 262 students at Catholic University "Our Lady of Good Counsel" was asked.

<i>STUDENTS' LEARNING CHALLENGES IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSES</i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
There is a large gap among students' levels in different skills.	4.08	0.769
Students have different learning styles	4.42	0.648
The lack of confidence of some students leads them not to communicate in class.	4.26	0.821
Some students quickly lose interest as they have very low language ability	4.00	0.828
Simplifying the lesson decreases good students' interest	3.55	1.129
The coursebook is designed for average students, not high ability or low ability students	3.55	1.023
The course books' activities do not suit the different levels of the students	3.49	1.039
There is a misunderstanding in intercultural communication mostly due to language problems rather than cultural differences	3.77	0.905
My own culturally shaped knowledge influences the way I interact with people from other cultural backgrounds	3.78	1.004
English teachers find it difficult to devote equal time to all students.	3.46	1.202
I am motivated to study English when the lesson is interesting, and the teacher makes it easy.	4.28	0.847

**Table 1. Challenges of learning in a multicultural class**

Students in this study report that students in a multicultural classroom have different learning styles ( $m = 4.42$ ). Students are more motivated to study English when learning is interesting, and the teacher makes learning simple ( $m = 4.28$ ). Low self-esteem of students in a multicultural classroom is a factor related to the desire not to communicate in the classroom ( $m = 4.26$ ). Other reported problems mentioned by students in a multicultural classroom are: "English teachers find it difficult to devote equal time to all students" ( $m = 3.46$ ) and "The course books' activities do not suit the different levels of the students" ( $m = 3.49$ ).

#### 4.1 Students' perceptions of value on the aspects of culture learning in English lessons

Culture influences the language that is spoken within its constraints as a society, such as how certain words are used in support of the culture. Another issue of this research consisted of students' perceptions of value on the aspects of cultural learning in English lessons. This sub-section of the research attempted to look into students' perceptions and values about the aspects of cultural learning in the EFL context and to enrich the recognition of the local culture in the learning setting. Trujillo (2002) suggests that culture is not homogeneous, it changes through time and this endless transformation must be the main object of interest in the language classroom. The table below shows the mean and standard deviation of the following statements regarding the perceived value of students on such cultural aspects.

<i>ASPECTS OF CULTURE LEARNING</i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD Deviation</b>
Learning about culture helps me become more tolerant and open-minded towards other peoples and cultures	4.17	0.77
Culture learning helps you with your EFL learning	4.06	0.73
I can acquire both additional cultural knowledge and intercultural skills in the classroom	3.95	0.76
I need to understand my own culture first before learning about other cultures	3.87	0.86
The target culture should be taught together with the target language in EFL classes	3.86	0.77
Learning about culture is as important as learning about language in an English class	3.81	0.85
Learning about culture is as important as learning about language in an English class	3.76	0.84
I need to abandon my own cultural identity while acquiring English	2.07	1.14

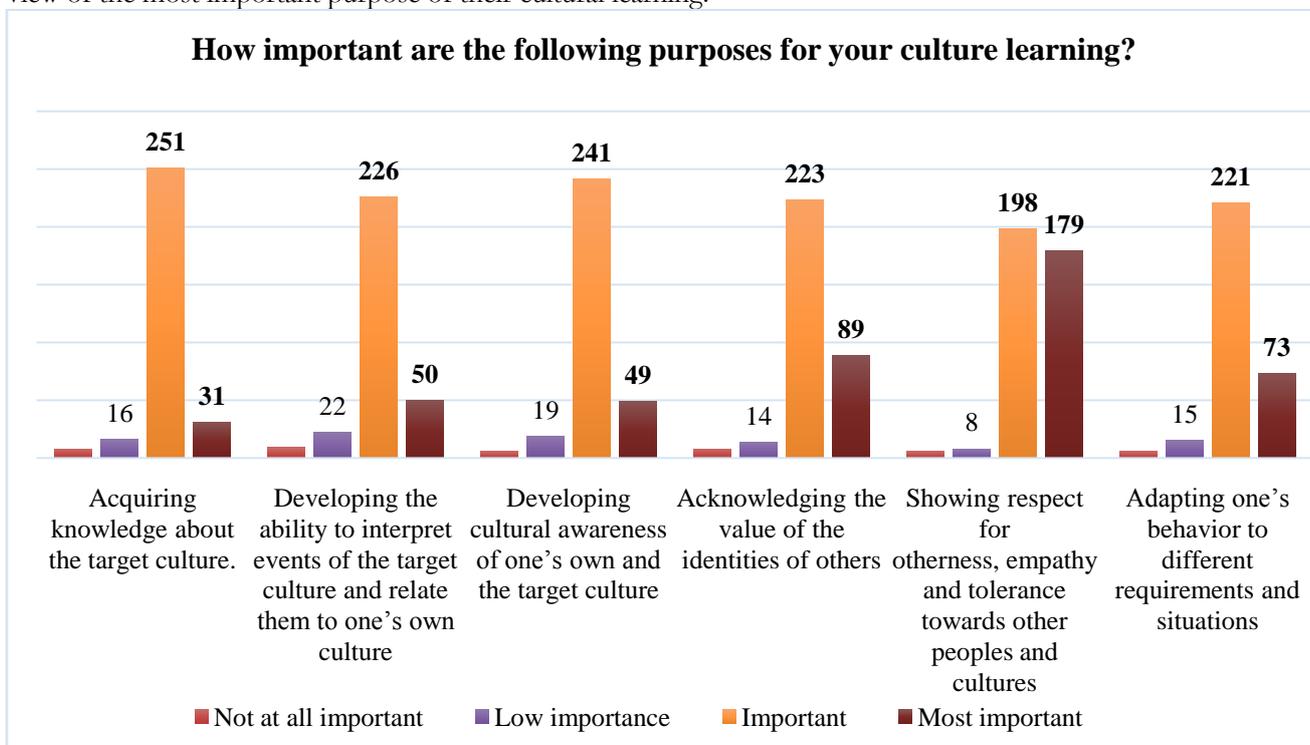
**Table 2. Perception value of students on aspects of culture learning in class**

As seen in table 2, almost all the students share the same perception value on the aspects of cultural learning in English lessons. The majority of respondents agree that culture-learning makes students more tolerant towards others' culture and help them with EFL learning. Very few of them ( $m = 2.07$ ) perceive that they need to abandon their own cultural identity while acquiring English. Another question that we have answered is do the findings differ from one university to another? To find out if there are discrepancies between students at different universities. The results are shown in the table below.

**Table 3. Importance of cultural learning**

The vast majority of students have chosen as the most important purpose for cultural learning is “showing respect for otherness, empathy and tolerance towards other peoples and culture” (40.4%). Nether the less the other aspects are the least important because data shows that approximately more than half of the respondents have assessed all the aspects as important ones. A multicultural classroom is very important because it helps students to understand and value all the cultures around them and also can bring national unity to the classroom.

An illustrative figure is presented below regarding the frequency of students' results, to give a clearer view of the most important purpose of their cultural learning.



**Figure 1. The importance of students' cultural learning**

**4.1.4 Measures teachers take to overcome the learning Challenges in a multicultural class**

The use of strategies by educators to meet the challenges in a multicultural classroom is very important. Students report that the most commonly used strategy by educators in a multicultural classroom is that they work and study many different topics ( $m = 4.15$ ). One strategy evaluated by the students is that the professors call the students by their names and make them feel respected and that what they say is being paid attention to ( $m = 4.11$ ). Students also report that English language teachers apply creative tasks that allow students to work based on their levels (history, opinion, and diary;  $m = 4.08$ ).

Other strategies in a cultural class are: “The English teacher gives extra activities to the group or the students who finish earlier” ( $m = 3.45$ ); “The English teacher uses in-class peer-tutoring” ( $m = 3.54$ ) and “The English teacher gives us extra homework when we have difficulties to understand something” ( $m = 3.63$ ).

<b><i>MEASURES TEACHERS TAKE TO OVERCOME THE LEARNING CHALLENGES IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASS</i></b>	<b><i>Mean</i></b>	<b><i>Std. Deviation</i></b>
EFL teacher uses different strategies it will improve the speed and quality of learning	4.08	0.859
The English teacher applies creative tasks that allow students to work at their levels (story, opinion, and diary)	4.08	0.880
The English teacher summarizes the lesson for us	4.01	0.920
We work on a lot of different topics	4.15	0.797
We use technology appliances to understand better the lesson.	3.98	0.955
We use communicative activities like (group discussions, games, puzzles, interviews, etc.)	3.96	0.997
The English teacher calls students by their names to make them feel respected and to pay attention.	4.11	0.923
The English teacher personalizes tasks (students talk about themselves and their experiences).	3.87	0.939
The English teacher assigns a group project (students get different roles while working on the project)	3.87	0.952
The English teacher makes direct contact with students and provides tips and strategies on how to overcome their difficulties	3.97	0.911

***Table 2. Measures teachers take to overcome the learning Challenges in a multicultural class, regarding the students.***

#### **4.2 In-depth interview with teachers' results**

Teachers in the interview answers emphasize that the most evident challenges of teaching in this classroom context are student motivation, participation, and interest in learning. Teachers express that even though they face difficulties in teaching in a multicultural class environment, it is noteworthy to teach because of students' different cultural and educational backgrounds. Most of them have responded that teaching in a multicultural class is an interesting environment to work in. The other half have expressed those multicultural classes offer a more difficult teaching environment because students have different learning styles, however, it is an interesting experience to deal with such a diverse environment, yet very challenging.

In a multicultural class the most commonly used strategies to overcome the challenges with teaching materials, are: "Using technology appliances to make them more motivated"; "Adapting open-ended tasks summary, analysis, and express opinions" and "Using more communicative activities like games, puzzles, etc.". Meanwhile, the most commonly used strategies in a multicultural class to overcome the challenges in classroom management are "Make use of eye contact, voice control, body language, and distance management to maintain large class's control"; "Provide clear instruction and positive feedback to the students for following class rules" and "Ask questions to get students' attention".

Lecturers report that they use differentiated instructions. They think materials should be different for different levels of students. They should be adopted based on the level of the students to make students motivated and interested in the topics explained. Lecturers in this study report that differentiated instruction is more effective in mixed-ability classes. Motivating students in the class is a very important and difficult challenge for all lecturers. In this thesis, lecturers report that pair-work and group work are the best strategies to motivate students. Communication activities, projects with interesting topics, quizzes, songs, games, quotes, short videos, and role-playing are successful ways of motivating students in a multicultural class. Other successful strategies reported to enhance student motivation are pair-work and group. Teachers report that pair-work and group work are the best strategies to motivate students. It is also very important to train teachers on how to teach in a new context, the multicultural classes. Training is really vital as it is a new phenomenon in Albania.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Students gave their opinions about aspects of cultural learning in class. Culture is a broad term that cannot be easily summed up. Culture influences the language that is spoken within its constraints as a society, such as how certain words are used in support of the culture. As Trujillo (2002) suggests, culture is not homogeneous and changes over time, and this endless transformation must be the main concern of language education.

According to our research data, almost all students share the same perception value on the aspects of culture learning in English lessons. The majority of respondents agree that culture-learning makes students more tolerant towards others' culture and help them with EFL learning.

Very few of them ( $m = 2.07$  out of 5.00) perceive that they need to abandon their own cultural identity while acquiring English. Students claim that the most important purpose for culture learning is "showing respect for otherness, empathy and tolerance towards other peoples and culture" (40.4%). Neither the other aspects are least important because data shows that approximately more than half of the respondents have assessed all the aspects listed in the questionnaire as important ones. Teachers in this study strongly agree that the best strategy during teaching is the method that creates opportunities for students to increase their knowledge and skills. In order to be a success in this new classroom environment, they need to be trained and change the traditional curricula of foreign language learning. A multicultural classroom context is beneficial because it makes students more tolerant and helps them to understand and value all the cultures around them.

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