

Chapter 5

Understanding the Role of Culture in Teaching



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1 Introduction

The main focus of this chapter will be the issue of multiculturalism and its impact on the design, strategy, and implementation of education. While this chapter does not purport to be comprehensive in its coverage of this issue, it will discuss areas of potential interest and relevance.

The internationalization of education can, at times, leave people behind. Assumptions made about the preparedness of people of varying cultures and backgrounds to handle the disruptions of internationalization can prove problematic if they fail to take into account the cultural diversity inherent in learning and teaching styles. Demand for international education is on the increase—but how should international education be defined, and is the understanding of it the same among both students and academics? What do students expect and what should they expect from their investment? What do we as educators have an obligation to provide? Does education extend to the personal as well as the academic?

Development necessarily involves compromise and learning to develop in partnership and collaboration. The people of a country should not be required to relinquish their cultural identity in favor of a completely internationalized education system; rather, there should be a concerted effort to consider identities, strengths, weaknesses, and alternative approaches, and to seek mutual understanding. There will naturally be a dominant player in this equation but the structure need not be so pervasive as to prevent the incorporation of varying perspectives; indeed, such myopia stunts growth and halts development and can well lead to increased conflicts. We have seen this problem in arenas outside of education, and ours is no less susceptible to the dangers of arrogance and naivety.

Barriers to learning exist in many different forms and are not strictly limited to language, although this can of course represent a major obstacle. There are issues of reputation, approach, acceptance, methods of processing information, methods of delivering information, and the very structure itself that play into the relative success rate of different teaching practices. These barriers must all be considered in

our aim to provide comprehensive and effective teaching praxis, as must balancing individuality and conformity to the model.

Academics must exhibit continuity not through complete uniformity in the way in which they deliver material or teach, but in the way they represent the university and the message they deliver. As long as there is potential for conflict between academic colleagues, there is a considerable probability that students will bear the brunt of this inability to harmonize the message. “Cultural differences were rarely highlighted by participants. Nonetheless, differences in organizational cultures were viewed as more problematic than differences in national cultures.” (Heffernan & Poole, 2005). Thus, one of the primary problems of EMI delivery is that of guaranteeing the quality of the product and the transparency of the delivery. Differences inherent in culture do not signify weakness or inability but rather highlight the fundamental differences that exist in approaches to education and further cement the primary reason for the internationalization of education in the first place.

“Culture has been shown to have a strong impact on international relationships” (Baran et al., 1996). International relationships comprise people from different cultural backgrounds, where each person “carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime” (Hofstede, 1991). Cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the cultural context are necessary for effective relationships. The more internationalized we become, the more sensible we should be.

2 Global Context

With increasing globalization, culture takes on an ever more important role in our life. Spencer-Oatey (2008) defines culture as the set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behavior and their interpretation of the meaning of other people’s behavior. Personality influences specific individuals and is partly inherited and partly learned, while culture functions at the group level to define group identity. Classroom dynamics are greatly influenced by students’ personal characteristics as well as the sociocultural setting in which they function. Student motivation is fundamental to language learning. In particular, English learning outcomes suffer if students experience a lack of motivation due to cultural differences.

The use of a single or multiple languages in education may be attributed to numerous factors, such as the linguistic heterogeneity of a country or region, specific social or religious attitudes, or the desire to promote national identity (Tucker, 1999). For example, the United States—a self-proclaimed “nation of immigrants”—has historically had an uncomfortable relationship with its immigrants and their languages. However, there have been exceptions at different times in the nation’s history. During the eighteenth century, many of the new settlers spoke French, Dutch, and German (Kloss, 1977/1998), and the German language was widely spoken in

the new colonies. In 1870, when the country experienced an economic recession, it was said that bilingual skills in English and German would be beneficial to business and trade interests. By the 1880s, a more restrictive language policy was ushered in, largely in response to the recent immigration of increasing numbers of Southern and Eastern Europeans. The Naturalization Act of 1906 made English speaking compulsory for attaining US citizenship. Thus, the long history of bilingual education in the US has shifted depending on politics, the economy, and the size of the immigrant population (Ruiz, 1984). Even in the present day when many different language programs exist, English is still the official language and bilingualism tends to be a subtractive option for students. According to the report *Bilingualism in 2022: US, UK and Global Statistics* (Gration, 2022), Spanish is the most popular second language to learn in the US. Two-way immersion programs, which are popular in the US, became a way to integrate language minority students (e.g., native Spanish speakers) and language majority students (e.g., native English speakers) with the goal of bilingual proficiency for both student groups (Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010). In such programs, all students receive roughly half of their instruction in both their native language and the target language (Dormer, 2018).

U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that 21.6% of the people in the US (one in every five adults) speak a language other than English at home. According to the above-mentioned *Bilingualism in 2022*, over a third (36%) of UK adults speak more than one language fluently. This means that there are around 24.5 million bilingual adults in the UK. In Europe, learning a foreign language is compulsory, with English as the most studied foreign language. The importance of English is recognized throughout Asia, and EMI is now spreading in the region for largely pragmatic reasons (Kam, 2002). In recent decades, the Australian government, educators, and linguists have been formulating and implementing policies to promote bilingual education among Australia's aboriginal people (Li, 2016). According to Grin (2003), language policy is a systematic, rational, theory-based effort at the societal level to modify the linguistic environment with a view to increasing aggregate welfare. Language planning is a government-authorized long-term, sustained, and conscious effort to alter a language's function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems (Weinstein, 1980). The examples above serve as an acknowledgment that history, geography, and population shape the definition of culture and that culture then further transforms the way in which language is taught.

3 Cultural Differences and How a Multicultural Classroom Affects Teaching

The above findings suggest that if a classroom is structured with students from different backgrounds and cultures, it is essential for educators to understand their differences and maintain an awareness of each individual while implementing EMI

CULTURAL CATEGORIES		
Linear-active	Multi-active	Reactive
Talks half the time	Talks most of the time	Listens most of the time
Does one thing at a time	Does several things at once	Reacts to partner's action
Plans ahead step by step	Plans grand outline only	Looks at general principles
Polite but direct	Emotional	Polite and indirect
Partly conceals feelings	Displays feelings	Conceals feelings
Confronts with logic	Confronts emotionally	Never confronts
Dislikes losing face	Has good excuses	Must not lose face
Rarely interrupts	Often interrupts	Doesn't interrupt
Job-oriented	People-orientated	Very people-oriented
Sticks to facts	Feelings before facts	Statements are promises
Truth before diplomacy	Flexible truth	Diplomacy over truth
Sometimes impatient	Impatient	Patient
Limited body language	Unlimited body language	Subtle body language
Respects officialdom	Seeks out key person	Uses connections
Separates the social and professional	Interweaves the social and professional	Connects the social and professional

Fig. 1 Lewis model of students' categories

into the teaching pedagogy. As per the Lewis Model, students/learners worldwide can be divided into three categories: Linear active, multi-active, and reactive (Fig. 1).

- The Linear-active category is the easiest to identify; it encompasses the English-speaking-world (North America, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand) and Scandinavian and Germanic countries.
- The Multi-active category is more scattered and includes Southern Europe and the Mediterranean countries, South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Arab and Middle-eastern countries.
- The Reactive category tends to be more localized in and around Asia, except for the Indian subcontinent.

The internationalization of higher education is characterized by a coming together of people with different cultural orientations, thinking patterns, perceptions, and emotions (Otten, 2000). It is critical for educators to understand the culture of each individual student before any teaching pedagogy is developed and delivered. Effective classroom interaction methods are crucial for language development and students should have opportunities to interact with the teacher and classmates, receive feedback, request clarification, and initiate communication (Suryati, 2015).

To effectively handle differences between students in multicultural classrooms, we must first identify what “differences” are. These can be discussed in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic differences. Extrinsic differences comprise architecture,

the mode of clothing, everyday practices, and language and script, while intrinsic differences consist of culture and value systems, attention and perception (holistic vs. analytic), problem-solving (relational vs. categorizing), and rhetorical structure (linear vs. circular/indirect) (Pae, 2020). Language is not merely a means of communication; it also expresses an underlying culture. Cultural differences embedded in language are often difficult to translate into other languages (Nevgi et al., 2008). People from different cultural backgrounds express, learn, and even listen in different ways. According to Hall's context theory (Hall & Hall, 1990), different cultures have different ways of communicating; some communicate explicitly (low-context cultures) while others communicate implicitly (high-context cultures).

For instance, it's common for open-ended questions asked by the teacher to be met with silence in East Asian classrooms, whereas such questions often lead to heated participation in Western classrooms. The Eastern emphasis on the importance of diligence in the pursuit of perfect scores is evident in Confucius' ideas that hard work was the direct route to great success. This is why Asian students often get high marks in paper examinations rather than in-class participation. Confucius also believed in "respectful learning," which requires students to respect the authority (Wan, 2021). Thus, Eastern students tend to keep quiet to avoid conflict and mistakes in public in contrast to the positive engagement of Western students in the classroom. Where such differences exist, the educator's role as the bridge becomes indispensable.

Within the classroom, communication can be significantly affected by high- and low-context variation along with the factors above. The EFL teacher bears the brunt of this responsibility. Once a Western teacher understands that high-context cultures do not frequently produce students who act and react in a similar manner to what the teacher may have experienced in teaching in their own culture or from their personal educational experience, then they can teach with greater understanding and in a more productive way (Bent, 2018). The teacher's cultural awareness—or lack of it—determines not only the atmosphere in the teaching space but also the learning outcomes of the students. Teachers who learn more about their students' backgrounds, cultures, and experiences will feel more capable and efficient in their work as teachers (Alsubaie, 2015). Additionally, studies have shown that some educational contexts are likely to prevent students with low language proficiency from engaging in fruitful social interaction and reasoning related to their learning tasks (Vedder et al., 2006).

4 Local Context: Taiwan as a Multicultural Society

Since 2019, Taiwan has implemented native language education for "new immigrants" from Southeast Asian countries (Kasai, 2022) and included Taiwanese, Hakka, and Indigenous languages as elective languages under the provisions for native language instruction (MOE, 2022). In the 1990s, Taiwan designated four major ethnic groups on the island: 'native' Taiwanese, Mainlanders, Hakka, and

Indigenous peoples. This designation served as a recognition that Taiwan is a multi-cultural nation. Although the term ‘New Immigrants’ is commonly used to refer to female spouses from Mainland China and Southeast Asian countries, the Taiwanese government officially defines New Immigrants as “spouses of Taiwanese who are foreigners or stateless, or people from Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macao” (MOI, 2015). Statistics from the National Immigration Agency show that there is a total of 554,706 foreign spouses residing in Taiwan, a number slightly higher than the population of Taiwan’s Indigenous tribes (NIA, 2019). Among those with Southeast Asian nationality, Vietnam (108,340) is the most common home country, followed by Indonesia (30,385) and Thailand (9102). As existing data show that almost 90% of new immigrants are women (NIA, 2019), this population can be understood to be a part of the international phenomenon of ‘feminized migration’ in East and South-east Asia (Hsia, 2018). The children of these women will grow up in a bicultural background.

In addition, according to Total Fertility Rate—The World Facebook (CIA, 2022), Taiwan has the lowest total fertility rate in the world. In the past few years, due to the low birth rate in Taiwan and increasing global competition in the higher education sector, the Taiwanese government has initiated quite a few international recruiting campaigns, including Study in Taiwan, The New Southbound Talent Development Program, the Taiwan Experience Education Program (TEEP), and the Huayu Bilingual Exchanges of Selected Talent program (Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education of Taiwan, 2022).

Thanks to these efforts from the Taiwan Ministry of Education, the number of overseas students at Taiwanese colleges and universities has grown from 57,000 in the 2011 academic year to 128,000 in the 2019 academic year. The number dropped to 92,963 in the 2021 academic year due to COVID-19 border controls (National Development Council, 2022). Although China is generally ranked as international students’ top country of origin in universities around the world according to OECD data, the majority of international students studying in Taiwan hail from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Hong Kong (National Development Council, 2022). In the 2021 academic year, National Taiwan University had the highest number of international students of any university in Taiwan, followed by National Cheng Kung University and Ming Chuan University. The percentage of international students at the 10 universities with the largest number enrolled ranged from 6.93% to 12.9% (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In the past, many universities had an insufficient number of EMI courses for their international students. Chinese, the language used in the classroom, acted as a barrier for most international students, making it difficult for them to complete their credits and fulfill their graduation requirements. International students frequently commented that they had difficulty communicating in Chinese, which interfered with both their social and academic life.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education approved a list of Key Cultivation Universities and Colleges to implement the new Program on Bilingual Education for Students in College (BEST Program). The resulting use of English as a medium in the classroom

to teach professional courses has been a different kind of challenge—for non-English-native students. Regardless of the language used, going to college is the time when most local and international students leave their hometown and experience the stress of entering a different culture and different environment. Therefore, helping students become more aware of cultural differences and incorporating this awareness into teaching is one of the core values of EMI instruction.

Multicultural education does not only include the education of students in cultural diversity and the education of children of different ethnicities but goes far beyond this, as it shapes the educating institution's image and seeks to meet the broadest possible range of needs (Rachmawati et al., 2014). Educators in such a university atmosphere must possess specific competencies such as a supportive attitude, flexibility, and an empathic vision, which are essential for teaching in a multicultural environment (Aktoprak et al., 2017). In the set of case studies described below, NCKU professors shared their experiences delivering EMI courses in a multicultural classroom.

5 Case Studies: EMI Instruction in a Multicultural Context

An assistant professor from the Department of Photonics pointed out that foreign students generally speak better English than local students, providing activity/study groups with foreign students with an advantage. On the other hand, a professor from the Department of Nursing stated that students' English proficiency and accent can greatly vary.

And even though Taiwan is already a multicultural society, some of the students have had limited opportunities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. An assistant professor from the Department of Industrial Design indicated that international students usually form separate groups for class projects because they are familiar with their classmates from the same cultural background; however, local students often don't understand different cultural backgrounds because they have never experienced different lifestyles. This leads to a gap between local and international students.

Additionally, the situation can differ at different levels (undergraduate or graduate) or in different fields. Research indicates that postgraduate students actively negotiate and renegotiate their learner identities and belonging in the context of higher education environments and develop new subject positions (Towers et al., 2022). An assistant professor from the Department of History stated:

The students I have taught so far normally participate in cross-cultural interactions without much hesitation. Some students (both international and domestic) hesitated to a limited extent at the beginning due to language barriers, but have since interacted successfully with students of other cultural backgrounds in lively in-class discussions and high-quality project work.

In multicultural classes, educators must figure out how to engage students with diverse backgrounds and must develop their cultural awareness to improve the design

and delivery of their EMI courses. There are many means by which educators can do so.

For instance, an associate professor from the Department of Physical Therapy said that she raises a lot of questions during teaching to ensure the students understand her materials. An associate professor from the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics specified that for students from diverse cultural backgrounds, he assigns a project topic that is relevant to most countries in the world, such as renewable energy. An assistant professor from the Department of Nursing noted that by engaging in mutual discussion, the whole class can learn from one another about the dilemma faced by the elderly in nursing care and the current distribution of social support in their respective countries.

Teachers play a vital role in building a positive learning environment in their classes based on equal treatment of students by teachers as well as among the students themselves (Thuy, 2018). Even simple steps can make a visible breakthrough. By way of illustration, one professor asked students to share their home countries' festivals or symbolic items. A professor from the Department of Biotechnology and Bioindustry Sciences chose to arrange mixed groups of both international and local students.

While the instructors are instrumental, universities also share a great responsibility for improving the quality of EMI courses. According to one assistant professor, the imbalances in the number of foreign and local students cause a lot of trouble, as shown in the following comment:

I hope that the school can stipulate that students have a certain level of English before enrolling, or provides EMI bridge courses to overcome the problem of uneven English proficiency among the students.

A teaching assistant is also an urgent need for many teachers delivering EMI. A professor and an assistant professor both mentioned this point. For students, a teaching assistant can also play a key role on a more intimate level, leading group discussions and responding to students' needs immediately. NCKU is currently planning on training more EMI teaching assistants with the goal of providing at least one teaching assistant per course in the near future.

5.1 Case Study 1: Multicultural Classroom in the Department of Business Administration

As universities continue to attract growing numbers of international students, addressing how teachers deal with cultural diversity in the classroom has become increasingly important (Woods et al., 2006). This case study reports on EMI teaching for legal issues in business administration within the multicultural classroom.

5.1.1 Clear Delivery is Above All

An assistant professor in the Department of Business Administration states, “Both of my EMI courses are law-related, and clear content is very important in such courses.” Ultimately, EMI is primarily a tool for teaching content rather than a tool for learning English. Since university-level courses are professional courses instead of English courses, he has made adjustments including simplifying the content on slides and canceling weekly group discussions.

He observes that when students with no legal background select his course, they tend not to be very active in class participation compared to other courses. “However, as law penetrates into many aspects of modern life, sometimes students are willing to share their own personal experiences, or they can sympathize with parties in the legal cases discussed in the course.” He encourages active class participation through case studies and keeps interactions with students short and manageable to help them build confidence.

5.1.2 Constructing a Comprehensive Learning Environment

Students tend to better understand the content relevant to their own cultural backgrounds, as stated by the instructor:

For example, when I talk about police enforcement in the United States, it is the US students who know more about it. On the other hand, it takes some time for international students to understand issues that have taken place in Taiwan.

We can see that the teacher’s ability to take on different perspectives and multicultural attitudes is critical for negotiating the complexities of diversity in classrooms. These qualities enable teachers to better align their teaching to their students’ needs (Abacioglu et al., 2019).

In response to the current situation, he has slowed down the pace in the class, noting that “I just need to spend some extra time to do the explanation and the background introduction.”

Accents have occasionally been an issue as well. For instance, the assistant professor revealed that it was difficult for classmates to understand some international students’ accents during class discussions. In a culturally responsive classroom, it is important to celebrate the variety and help non-native speakers realize 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 (Dautbašić, 2019). When accent issues occur, he invites such students to join the discussion and uses slides as an aid to make sure the whole class understands the content of the discussion. As Howarth and Andreouli (2015) stated, a community does not emerge and does not survive without the recognition of diversity.

5.2 Case Study 2: Multicultural Classroom in the Department of Industrial Design

This case study focuses on a multicultural classroom in Industrial Design and reports on the construction of a stress-free English environment, and how the teacher encourages the students to discover their own motivation for learning. “Once a student discovers their core motivation for learning, nothing can stop them from learning,” the assistant professor of this studied case pointed out.

5.2.1 Background—Aim to Shape a Comfort Zone for the EMI Classroom

An accent can create an impression that we don’t know our second language very well, or that we are not competent. A throwaway comment like “Wow, despite your accent you speak quite good English!” could affect the self-esteem of a non-native speaker and make them feel hesitant or shy (Rahman, 2022).

This instructor considers the most crucial element at the undergraduate level to be firing up students’ motivation and creating a comfort zone for the English learning environment. Even students with excellent English ability can be afraid to speak in front of the class or express their opinions. In the following paragraphs, we’ll discuss how the instructor creates a comfort zone for EMI, and how he fosters a multicultural classroom.

5.2.2 Bridging the Gap Between Cultures—Expanding the Comfort Zone

The instructor noticed that international students tend to form separate groups for class projects because they are familiar with their classmates from the same cultural background. Therefore, he separates students from the same cultural background and assigns one or two local students to their team. He also prepares a camera to record what students say during class and only comments once they finish instead of interrupting their thought the processes. He then asks them to watch the recorded video after class and present the content again next time.

To help bridge the gap between local and international students, the assistant professor lets students share their favorite foods because the food is generally an excellent cultural product for bringing people together. “It always works and is effective for intercultural communication.”

Teachers who unite classrooms with activities both inside and outside of the classroom stand a better chance of boosting student achievement and ameliorating the negative effects that have been observed in multicultural classrooms in the past (Alsubaie, 2015). Likewise, the instructor leads intercultural activities within the

classroom to build the confidence of the students, using them to expand students' comfort zone from their own cultural group to the whole learning environment.

6 Conclusion

Culture and multiculturalism are at the heart of all international education and must be viewed accordingly. The tendency in the past has either been simply to ignore other cultures and remain true to the dominant model or to brush differences under the carpet and attempt to muddle through. Neither approach represents a sophisticated or even practical solution to the problem at hand. Perhaps it is this word, 'problem,' that is holding us back? Culture and multiculturalism are indeed factors present in the existence and delivery of international education, but viewing them as something to be harnessed and included rather than marginalized or ignored may prove more successful. This is no easy task, but an awareness of how and why people act, teach and learn the way they do provides opportunities for inclusion and advancement rather than exclusion and resentment.

A simple awareness of the difficulties inherent in delivering education on an international stage, while useful in the abstract, does not guarantee results. We must better prepare our students and our staff and allow them to develop using a combination of the existing model and their own skill set. Co-existence and cooperation will lay the groundwork for a fully integrated and comprehensive approach to international education that ensures continuity while incorporating local and international input. The challenges that face us as international educators are substantial but so are the rewards. The opportunity to shape and develop education policy based on a wealth of new research and collaboration with education professionals should be sufficient to promote the activity of this nature. The ability to better educate and prepare students on a global scale is motivation enough, but EMI must not be entered into blindly. There are many pitfalls along the way but the rewards are great. Preparation and awareness will increase the chances of success.

We should not devote our time and energy to breaking down and re-creating our students or ourselves, but rather work to develop a greater understanding of the nature of the diversity at hand and harness its latent potential. Great training and even greater awareness will provide the tools for this and enable a more balanced approach to education that rests on inclusion rather than elitist exclusion.

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