

Overcoming Teaching Challenges in Multicultural and Multilingual Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Schooling nowadays still promotes the socio-cultural identities of the majority while marginalizing minority students. In this study, an effort will be made to justify intercultural education, illustrate the challenges of teaching in a multicultural classroom entail, and present the best teaching practices suitable to be employed in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. A challenge for educators, students, and their parents is that they should always remind themselves that when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds, they also interact with other cultural worldviews. Such interactions are closely related to power dynamics, hidden networks of meanings, values, and expectations that may not be entirely recognized or comprehended. Furthermore, language barriers may lead to misunderstandings and even escalate to critical incidents, while the teacher should ensure that no culture/language is perceived as superior/inferior.

In order to overcome the teaching challenges in multicultural classrooms, the teachers should adopt a whole-child education approach and demonstrate a genuine interest in getting to know each student's cultural background, hobbies, learning styles, and generally what makes them unique so as to form a bond with them and establish trust. Furthermore, teachers should strive to build a relationship with students based on equity and understanding so that students feel appreciated and comfortable with the teacher and inspired to follow their example of respecting all class members.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Multilingual classroom, Teaching Challenge

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that in our globalized world, increased mobility has changed the demographics of the student population, especially in refugees/ migrants host countries. Therefore, obsolete monocultural and monolingual school contexts and teaching practices must change to cater to the needs of the current multicultural and multilingual students. Schooling nowadays still promotes the socio-cultural identities of the majority while marginalizing the minority students. [1] As Stan observed the multicultural and multilingual classroom challenges can also be perceived as opportunities to create a new generation of students with global understanding. [2]

Intercultural education acknowledges that learners certainly bring more than one language and culture to the processes of meaning-making and interpretation when learning any additional

language. Furthermore, taking into consideration that power relations in the broader society are also reflected in the educational context, schools need to implement collaborative empowerment and demonstrate with deeds that every language and culture is equally valued in the school context. Moreover, as Cummins points out, students need to develop "intercultural literacy", i.e., both local and migrant/refugee/ex-pat students need to develop intercultural capabilities as global citizens of the 21st century [3]

Therefore, in this study, an effort will be made to justify intercultural education, illustrate the challenges of teaching in a multicultural classroom entail, and present the best teaching practices suitable to be employed in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. A challenge for educators, students, and their parents is that they should always remind themselves that when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds, they also interact with other cultural worldviews. Such interactions are closely related to power dynamics, hidden networks of meanings, values, and expectations that may not be entirely recognized or comprehended. Furthermore, language barriers may lead to misunderstandings and even escalate to critical incidents, while the teacher should ensure that no culture/language is perceived as superior/inferior. [4]

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

Firstly, all human beings have the inalienable right to access education in their language. Ergo, acknowledging different languages and cultures in the school setting affirms culturally and linguistically diverse students' fundamental rights, and it may also be a crucial first step towards reversing patterns of school failure and feelings of alienation.

Additionally, identity issues play a pivotal role in students' academic success. Therefore, a conflict between school and home cultures which may be exacerbated further by issues of racial, class, ethnic, and linguistic bigotry, is detrimental to students' wellbeing. Furthermore, it has been proven that students' academic success is subject to their ability to tap their social capital, including their communicative repertoires. However, having their languages acknowledged as legitimate cognitive tools in the school context translates into accepting the legitimacy of themselves and developing identities of competence. In the current sociopolitical context, it challenges the subordinate status of many cultural/linguistic minorities.

The Interdependence hypothesis or Common Underlying Proficiency [CUP] supports that literacy-related concepts and skills in L1 and L2 are interdependent, or manifestations of a

common underlying proficiency, and thus academic knowledge and literacy skills are transferable across languages. This is subject to appropriate conditions of development, namely educational support for both languages. According to this theory of transferability, instruction through a home language exerts no adverse consequences on students' academic development in the majority-speaking language despite less instructional exposure to the majority language. [5]

Moreover, students who are proficient in their native language do better in mastering the school language than students who are not literate in their mother tongue. Persuasive data illustrates that an average of five to seven years is required for migrant/refugee students to achieve grade levels, and the fallacy that merely more exposure to school language will increase students' academic proficiency has been debunked. [6]

If the educator-student interactions are oriented towards empowerment, and the former creates contexts of empowerment in the classroom, the coercive socio-economic environment will be dealt a decisive blow. Coercive power relations in interpersonal and intergroup relations have to do with the exercise of power by the dominant party to the detriment of the subordinate one on the assumption that there is a fixed quantity of power, and the more power has the former the less is left to the latter. [7] In contrast, in collaborative partnerships both parties are empowered via their cooperation, as power is viewed as dynamic and not a fixed pre-determined quantity, affirming their identities and developing new identities of efficacy concerning social mobility. In this case the powers relationship is cumulative and not subtractive. Power is created with other rather than being imposed on or exercised over other

In the early stages of language learning, activation and building on prior knowledge require linking school language concepts and knowledge with the learner's home language cognitive schemata as their prior knowledge is encoded in their mother tongue. [8] However, for this process to be done effectively, the students' home languages must be allowed in the classroom. Furthermore, encouraging newcomer students to write in their home language and to work with peers, community, or instructional resource people to translate home language writing into the school language scaffolds students' output in the school language and enables them to use higher-order and critical thinking skills much sooner than in the case the school language is the only legitimate language of intellectual expression in the classroom. [9]

According to Cummins (2000) there are three distinct features of successful schools. Firstly, they affirm students' cultural identity and encourage home language literacy. Secondly, they support active parental participation. Thirdly, they provide cognitively challenging instruction that acknowledges and utilizes students' background experiences and cultural and linguistic repertoires while studying issues that are relevant to their lives. [5]

In that milieu, mother tongue courses may be a significant acknowledgment of the learners' linguistic backgrounds and needs but cannot replace the validation of the learners' entire linguistic repertoires during regular teaching and learning hours. A repertoire approach avoids the categorization of learners into different language groups, opening a space for the speakers to bring into dialogue their repertoires, to engage in metalinguistic discussion and negotiation, and thereby to transform the language regime in the classrooms. As an example, In Austria, Sweden and Finland classes for a certain number of languages, subject to attaining the threshold number of 12 (5 in Sweden) learners per course, are provided within the mainstream system, as they are perceived to be conducive to migrant students' academic achievement and well-being. To that end, curriculums specifically for the teaching of home languages have been

devised. However, in Europe as a whole, most mother tongue courses take place outside the mainstream teaching hours and classrooms. [10]

State school systems across Europe, with primarily monolingual traditions, struggle with the linguistic needs of their super-diverse student population. However, monolingualism translates into educational and social injustices. The students may straddle multiple cultures and value systems and have become experts at oscillating between cultures and languages. Therefore, if their code-switching is viewed as detrimental to effective school language learning and written communication, they are denied part of themselves, and discontent will brew. Lastly, there is a peril that the students who are exposed in a monolingual and monocultural milieu will lack the contemporary social skills. [11] In the era of superdiversity, schools should abolish their role as enforcers of a unitary state language and culture and instead be at the forefront of creating inclusive societies. Despite pervasive xenophobic rhetoric, schools should be a beacon of egalitarianism and inclusivity, viewing human mobility as an opportunity and not a burden. Linguistic and cultural diversity within schools can enhance all students' learning experiences. In multilingual/multicultural classrooms, students are exposed to many cultures and languages and thus become cosmopolitan global citizens with a high level of empathy. The ability to view the world using diverse perceptual frameworks is a life skill that would make students efficient intercultural communicators. By learning to interact respectfully with peers from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds, students contribute to creating a welcoming, affirming environment that respects and appreciates all languages and cultures. In some European education systems intercultural education is a principle underpinning the whole curriculum as an educational response to the increasingly multicultural societies. In others, intercultural education is promoted as a cross-curricular theme. In the United Kingdom, citizenship education encompasses intercultural education. [10]

3. CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN A MULTILINGUAL & MULTICULTURAL CALSSROOM

A challenge for educators, students, and their parents is that they should always remind themselves that when interacting with people with a different cultural background, they are also interacting with other cultural worldviews. The "above the water part" of the "cultural iceberg", is the small part and easily perceivable as it includes elements such as outfits, cooking, hairstyles, literature, music, games, folk dancing, fine arts, drama, architecture. The "under the water" part of the iceberg, which is the biggest and not easily accessible, includes facial expressions, body language, nature of friendship, notion about logic and validity, preference for competition or cooperation, ordering of time, conception of "self", patterns of visual perception, roles in relation to status by age, sex, class, occupation, kinship and so forth. [12] Such interactions are closely related to power dynamics, hidden networks of meanings, values, and expectations that may not be entirely recognized or comprehended. Furthermore, language barriers may lead to misunderstandings and even escalate to critical incidents, while the teacher should ensure that no culture/language is perceived as superior/inferior. [13]

Probably the most crucial impediment in a multicultural/multilingual classroom is that instructors do not have the proper prior training for this challenge. Educators undergoing initial teacher education (ITE) or continuing professional development (CPD) are not provided with enough resources and guidance to

develop or strengthen a wide range of competencies essential for teaching migrant and refugee students, such as a sound background in intercultural education, differentiated instruction for multi-level classes, appropriate pedagogical methods to promote multiculturalism and multilingualism, and dealing effectively with xenophobia and stereotypes. Hidden cultural biases manifest themselves in broad generalizations about whole groups. Existing stereotypes may prove a significant hurdle for migrants/refugee students' effort to fit in and make progress as their social and individual identities might be perceived in a distorted manner in the host culture. Therefore, the school community needs to become aware of cultural differences and the importance of not pigeonholing individuals. For instance, complementary or pejorative stereotypes may illustrate an unfair preference for one culture over the other. In that milieu, words are not merely descriptive but judgmental as well. [12]

Furthermore, there is not adequate use of teaching assistants, translators, and intercultural mediators to support migrant students' academic and social integration holistically. Actually, only thirteen education systems in Europe advocate the use of intercultural mediators. [10] Moreover, the school staff may lack the skills and the knowledge to support students who have been exposed to severe stresses and traumatic experiences. Students' traumatic experiences in their home countries and during their migration may cause post-traumatic disorder and other psychological issues. Those issues can be exacerbated further in the host country due to pervasive xenophobia, instability in their lives with frequent relocations and overworked parents who are physically and emotionally unavailable. All these may result in social behavior disturbances and anxieties expressed by children and youth. [14]

Curriculum design for multilingual/multicultural classes is also one of the problematic areas in superdiverse communities. Even if there is a curriculum in place, in most cases, there is a significant lack of appropriate materials, despite some great efforts by individuals. Hence, teachers cannot attend to and support every student in his/her home language. [4] Lately, there have been some initiatives in culturally responsive curriculum design, as publishing companies in major host countries have started to target the needs of multilingual learners around the world, but it remains a major global problem. Therefore, teachers who have no access to culturally responsive learning materials and culturally authentic resources and materials, have no alternative but to design their own curriculum for their multilingual/multicultural learners. Activities that enable students to discuss, learn, and draw conclusions from their own experience of the host country's culture, along with the teachers' facilitation of comparative analysis of the cultures represented in the multilingual/multicultural classroom, can promote intercultural awareness and cross-cultural competencies. When adapting material or generating their own, teachers have to choose judiciously topics and activities that are suitable for their particular teaching context. [15]

Additionally, being unable to coordinate with hard-to-reach parents or failure in parent-school communication translates into not providing the support the students deserve and need. Parents' participation is crucial in their children's learning process and the decision-making regarding the provision of academic or emotional support to their children. Furthermore, there is little room for cooperation with other key players such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social and health services, and cultural societies that could play a crucial role in students' integration. The analysis of top-level regulations/recommendations shows that only a handful of education systems in Europe encourage schools and teachers to cooperate closely

with local organizations, with even less extending this collaboration to cater to students' psycho-social support needs in addition to their academic development and progress ones. [10] In many cases, there is a lack of information in schools about the academic and non-academic, such as social, emotional, and health background of migrant children, which leads to inappropriate grade placement and the inability of the student to cope with the class requirements. In most countries, there is no comprehensive initial assessment, such as the one administered in Sweden (best practice), of newly arrived migrant/refugee students' prior knowledge and competencies in the language of instruction and all school subjects, including students' mother tongue. Furthermore, trained teachers map the students' prior educational background and devise a personal education plan (PEP), an integral part of their overall care and support plan. PEPs provide tailor-made solutions to individual needs, minimize disengagement and early school leaving, highlight particular educational needs and thus determine what kind of support the student would need to close the achievement gap, establish distinct learning goals, and serve as a record of progress and achievement. The Swedish National Agency for Education provides teachers with mapping materials covering three aspects: firstly, the students' language and experience, interests and expectations, according to the students' and their parents' or guardians' perception and description; attention is also explicitly paid to emotional issues and problems, such as post-traumatic stress syndrome; secondly, the students' knowledge in the areas of literacy and numeracy; and thirdly, the students' knowledge in fifteen of the subjects in compulsory education. [16]

Some of the students (usually migrants and refugees) have interrupted formal education or might have never attended school before arriving in the multilingual/multicultural classroom, and home languages are not taught in most schools. Furthermore, if the local and school community is in general racist or xenophobic, children could feel insecure, isolated, and rejected, which causes emotional and behavioral problems, including a higher risk of early school leaving. The composition of multicultural/ multilingual classes constantly changes, reflecting the instability in students' lives, with new students arriving from refugee camps and others leaving the school entirely because of relocation or the aforementioned behavioral problems.

Acculturation stressors and language barriers may dim the initial enthusiasm, lead to frustration, anger, and elevated stress levels, and feelings of isolation. Behaviors range from complete withdrawal to defiance and stubbornness or even conscious or unconscious effort to impede their classmates' learning process and cause class management issues. Sometimes, a different problem may arise concerning high achievers, as in many cultures a student's academic failure may be viewed as a failure of the whole family. Therefore, frequently there is a negative correlation between high academic achievement and low-esteem and depression. Some migrant/refugee students find refuge in studying and becoming a good student, but their psychological state and their interpersonal relations with their families and classmates can be a cause for stress. Ergo, teachers have to be vigilant concerning their students' overall well-being and not to care only about their academic performance.

Another problematic area in the multilingual/multicultural classroom is the question of gender equity. In certain cultures, males are seen and treated with more respect than their female peers, and this can lead to both unacceptable behaviors toward female classmates but also female teachers by male parents and students. [15]. Gender biases against females are pervasive in the developing world. Furthermore, taking into consideration that in many patriarchal, highly conservative societies in the countries

of origin any sexual orientation other than the binary male/female is not only frowned upon but punishable by the law, carrying in many cases the death penalty one wonders about the behavior of students from the aforementioned countries toward classmates who belong to the LGBTQ community. In a western inclusive society where same sex relationships and unions are legal and accepted, they may experience a colossal culture shock which may translate to homophobic violence.

In many rigid centrally controlled education systems, such as the Greek one, educators are not given the autonomy to make decisions regarding the language of instruction, assessment, or the curriculum taught in a multilingual classroom even if all students are not familiar with the official language. Top-down directives concerning assessment and curriculum do not leave teachers much margin for innovation and promoting multilingualism. What is more, teachers are held accountable for student attainment, which is measured regularly via one-size-fits-all standardization, to ensure quality control. [3]. Furthermore, school policies may dictate, either implicitly or explicitly, that students are to leave their native language and culture outside the school premises. We stress again that the Swedish education system, which views linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset and has a holistic "whole-child" approach, is not commonplace. [17]

4. BEST TEACHING PRACTICES

As Alsubaie pointed out knowledge is less important than flexibility in multicultural classes. [18] Best practices should include the use of well-thought, country-specific, and pilot-tested multilingual materials to implement multicultural classroom strategies serves various purposes. Firstly, the co-presence of different languages is highly symbolic as it illustrates that the different cultures are of equal value. Secondly, these materials are practical tools that can help teachers and parents to integrate multilingualism into the learning process of students easily. For instance, bilingual posters and word lists enable students to acquire literacy and numeracy by familiarizing themselves with basic vocabulary as they can read the words themselves in both languages and use their entire language repertoire to make meaning. Moreover, the bilingual posters enable teachers to carry out their lesson through the translanguaging process and enhance an integrated communication with their students, as they can dramatize and exploit the material in a playful way. Bilingual materials, chosen by teachers according to their pupils' preferences, the curriculum, and the expected learning outcomes, can also be customized with parental involvement as well, for optimal effectiveness in their teaching context. They may include inter alia, fairytales, stories or word matching games and they can be both teacher-led and student-led. [19]

An added benefit is that bilingual/multilingual materials can help illiterate or those with limited education parents participate and learn as well, making them more linguistically confident in the host country's language but also develop a better understanding of their mother tongues. Graded fairytales and stories are used not only for reading comprehension and familiarization with grammar and syntactical structures but most notably as a springboard for teaching empathy, intercultural competencies, and socio-cultural awareness skills. Furthermore, the accompanying supportive material-indicative activities, including scenario-plots, heroes, and action teams, encourage and develop empathy, interaction, problem-solving, communication, and social skills amongst all children. They also foster global citizenship and familiarization with concepts such

as refuge and immigrant, racism, acceptance of diversity, equality, and social justice. Moreover, critical literacy and human rights education are propagated while intercultural values are instilled. [2]

An equally important practice has to do with parental participation in the children education. Striving for a successful collaboration between parents and schools by reciprocal information flow so as refugee/migrant parents to become more involved in their children's learning processes in schools and become more aware of their children's learning process can be universally beneficial. [20] Parents can be invited to read stories in their home languages to the entire class, while the teacher would repeat the story in the school language. By providing parents with multilingual material, they are able to help their children and create a rich language environment at home while gaining a greater understanding of what and how their child learns at school. The use of bilingual teaching material enables parents to provide their children with additional support at home or school, acting as translators. Research illustrates that parents are more engaged in school life and the learning process if they are confident that they can support their children's educational success. However, migrant/refugee parents are wary of being faced with implicit or explicit accusations, concerning their lack of education, knowledge, and unfamiliarity, with country-specific conditions and norms. [21]

Furthermore, teachers, could learn phrases and sentences in their students' home languages and encourage their use in class, thus creating not only multilingual class environments but also inclusive ones. In that way, these non-curricular languages are officially recognized by the teacher at the classroom level via their occasional or systematic use. Hence, their students have the opportunity to acquire rudimentary language skills in all their classmates' home languages via, for instance, vocabulary recycling games and repetition.

Gamification is also used to achieve a variety of learning objectives ranging from linguistic ones to social and cooperation skills, as well as boosting students' emotional health. Language Games, such as "Finding the Words" and "Word Puzzles" can help enhance students' vocabulary while having fun. Gamification can be very beneficial since the students/ pupils enjoy, learn and feel as equals at the same time. [2]

In general, teachers should adopt a whole-child education approach and demonstrate a genuine interest in getting to know each student's cultural background, hobbies, learning styles, and generally what makes them unique so as to form a bond with them and establish trust. Engagement in learning, particularly for newcomer students, is fueled not only by cognition but, most notably, by feelings and emotions. Ergo, despite their limited knowledge of the host country's language, they will try to communicate if they perceive their teachers are genuinely interested in their experiences and insights. Teachers should strive to build a relationship with students based on equity and understanding so that students feel appreciated by and comfortable with the teacher and inspired to follow their example of respecting all members of the class. [22]

Furthermore, by maintaining ongoing open communication channels throughout the school year, with quick chats or more formal one-on-one meetings, if need be, the teacher will keep close tabs on all students and consistently improve accessibility to the classroom for everyone. During these meetings, students and teachers can discuss how included the student feels, their progress, and the teacher can offer guidance based on the individual needs and profile of the student. Thus, students' resilience will be strengthened, which will positively impact their mental health, wellbeing, and academic performance. This is

imperative in the absence of formal diagnostic tests, where teachers should use a variety of assessment tools such as teachers' observation of student performance, teacher-student interactions, students' task performance, portfolios, and student self-assessment of their own work and knowledge, to identify what their students can and cannot do with language. [12]

Teachers must practice cultural sensitivity and exhibit tolerance and a high level of empathy and patience. Furthermore, apart from developing astute cultural awareness, as cultural norms and nuances may impact their students' learning style, motivation, wellbeing, and academic progress, they should also be cognizant of their own and others' biases and prejudices. For instance, teachers should be careful concerning body language signs, their tone of voice, linguistic nuances, and cultural inferences they use while interacting with their multicultural/multilingual students, especially with the newcomer ones. Dealing with traumatized children requires opportunities for consultation and supervision as well as further training. On the school level, cooperation and exchange between teachers is helpful to support the individual teacher. [23]

Furthermore, digital tools such as Google Translator, irrespective of its shortcomings concerning accuracy, and digital dictionaries or voluntary translators are indispensable concerning communication with students' families if parents lack linguistic skills in the host country's language. Digital tools also play a crucial role in creating communication channels and involving students' whole families in the learning process, and thus teachers should become digital savvy. [24]

Allowing translanguaging as a pedagogical practice in a multilingual/ multicultural classroom could make students' languages visible and audible. Classroom and school decoration are equally significant and could even be considered as teaching practice. For instance, flags of students' home countries and multilingual welcoming signs at a school's entrance can signify the school community's acceptance of diversity. Moreover, multilingual posters, with all the languages represented in the classroom, can be practical and symbolic. Similarly, bulletin boards with photos of landmarks and art of the students' countries of origin, along with their artwork depicting aspects of their culture or home country, can transform the classroom into an egalitarian discourse where all students are valued and represented. Additionally, labeling objects in multiple languages around the classroom to establish a culturally responsive print-rich environment can prove particularly useful for newcomers. Furthermore, samples of students' work in the school language and home languages could be prominently displayed in school corridors and at the entrance to the school aiming at reinforcing the message to parents and students that students' linguistic repertoires are perceived as educational and personal assets within the school and not as liabilities. School signs, constructed by students, could also be written in the school language and those represented in the school population. [14] [24]

By encouraging students to use their home languages for reading, research, or notetaking during group work or independent study time, if they wish, makes them feel comfortable, overcome language constraints, and gives them the freedom to choose the language in which can convey or make meaning most accurately. At the same time, they can claim some ownership in the educational process, achieve a more robust understanding of the subject area, and express individuality by conveying their linguistic and cultural identity.

Furthermore, teachers can incorporate diversity in lesson plans and assignments, employ Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and acting as facilitators, foster collaboration among students via Cooperative Learning (CL) to achieve shared

learning goals. Especially CL has proven one of the most motivating strategies for young learners. [25] Group assignments or group work could expose students to diverse perspectives and entail interpersonal communication, and thus learning could occur through brainstorming, joint problem solving, peer teaching, and individual study monitored by peers. Teachers become group members and participate on equal terms in exchanging ideas and information and providing constructive feedback. Furthermore, they could be flexible concerning the materials students read and present, on the condition they are relevant to the fundamental lesson, and thus give them the freedom to approach the topic from their own perspective. Both the educator and the other students could learn from a student's experiences, especially students with a different cultural background.

They can also provide their students with multilingual reading materials, if available, or allow them to produce bilingual projects and assignments in their home language and use alternate ways of assessment. Volunteers, if their presence is allowed on the school premises, can act as interpreters and help translate letters, forms, and homework into the students' language. Educators should also discuss the similarities and differences of different languages and cultures concerning, inter alia, traditions, customs, religious views, music, and everyday experiences. [12]

The use of technology is almost mandatory for the teachers in a multilingual and multicultural environment. Teachers should use resource books or digital tools creatively to produce custom-made teaching materials, especially for differentiated learning. They can also use them to create a classroom website and a class diary as well as to facilitate student learning and the development of intercultural knowledge and skills. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) can play a crucial role in multilingual/multicultural classrooms. For instance, learners can author and publish their own digital books; learners can collaborate with partner classes in distant locations to carry out a variety of projects involving dual or multiple languages; learners can take part in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) to improve their linguistic competence, Web games, and virtual worlds can facilitate online intercultural exchanges. Various European Union-funded programs such as the Comenius project 'ARGuing for multilingual' which has developed a multilingual Alternative Reality Game (ARG) to foster innovative and collaborative approaches to language learning at the secondary-school level for both learners and teachers, can provide an abundance of material. [26] [27]

Moreover, asynchronous tools like email, SMS, and instant messaging, blogs, wikis, forums, and the collaborative development of wikis facilitate the co-creation of content, as learners interact with peers since meaning has to be negotiated by composing, editing, and exchanging texts to produce comprehensible output. Actually, online cultural exchanges can also provoke critical cultural awareness through interactions with 'real' informants from the target culture, and they can assist learners to become aware of cultural differences in communicative practices and pragmatics. Moreover, digital game-based learning (DGBL) embraces children's interest in 'digital play', and thus, teachers can create learning opportunities through computer games, always within an educational context. Digital texts and e-books, many of which offer effective oral modeling via text-to-speech synthesis and access to other tools like electronic dictionaries, can be accessed on portable technologies and inspire children to read. [26]

5. ACTUAL CASE STUDY – “A YEAR OF CELEBRATIONS” PROJECT

Teachers could adopt an enhanced version of the “A year of celebrations” year-long project in which cultural activities are integrated into lesson plans so as to enrich the teaching content. [28] The “4-F” approach to teaching culture focuses on festivals, fairs, food and folk dances. Celebrations could be accompanied by relative extra-curricular events and paired with proper food motivators [29]

The goal is to create successive “Directed Motivational Currents” (DMC), which sustain and reinforce student motivation throughout the academic year. Motivation is not perceived as static and linear but as something dynamic, thus fluctuant. Therefore, teachers should strive to create motivational pathways so as students to be caught in a powerful flow of motivation that would impel them to engage in the learning process on their own volition and if possible, on their own initiative [30]

This project involves a socially realistic and credible “language generating” series of activities concerning celebrations of all cultures represented in the classroom. If possible, realia should be used, adding to the real-world credibility of the celebration and helping to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Students should be challenged to find information either by conducting research or being given clues to investigate, and they participate in a range of “hands-on” activities to make a “mind map” for every celebration aiming at grouping information from different sources. All this information would comprise a knowledge repository for the class. In every lesson leading to a celebration, a task related to it could be incorporated into the lesson plan, while every effort should be made for an interdisciplinary approach with the help of colleagues. [31] A multi-sensory approach appeals to all types of intelligence, so every effort should be made to include color, picture, body movement, sound, and touch. [32] Furthermore, using culturally sensitive and informed authentic tasks as well as opportunities for a firsthand experience of a variety of cultural and linguistic stimuli could be highly motivational. [33]

The aforementioned project makes learning personal, exploratory, and thus motivational. [30] Students are put in situations that they are first and foremost involved as individuals, and the language is used as a tool for reaching a goal rather than a goal itself. Another achievable result is the cultural familiarization with various cultures and how those cultures relate to the students’ own native culture. The learners on every occasion should be asked to compare and contrast the particular celebration with a celebration or elements of their own country’s culture aiming at raising their intercultural communicative competence in the sense that by raising the student’s awareness of their own culture, they are also enabled to interpret and understand the cultures of others appropriately. [31] Thus students “learn by doing rather than by being taught” [34] This intercultural communicative approach can facilitate implicit learning and using language as a tool to achieve learning goals. [31]

Teachers should encourage students to celebrate and respect their own as well as others’ diverse backgrounds. They could urge students to research and learn about their own culture and the differences with their peers’ ones. Presentations on culture, family traditions, and home country’s history by students would expose their peers to unfamiliar concepts and spark discussions on cultural differences, promoting understanding. Most importantly, students, in the safe space of the classroom, can learn how to talk about other cultures respectfully and maturely.

Last but not least, part of the project can be written in a language other than the one of the “host” countries. Thus, it promotes multiculturalism and multilingualism and address all the aforementioned challenges.

6. CONCLUSION

Concluding it becomes apparent that multicultural/multilingual classes deserve classrooms and schools conducive to fulfilling their potential. Thus, intercultural education and multilingual teaching practices are not only a respectful acknowledgment of their diverse identities but also can prove mutually beneficial for the host countries and the refugee/immigrant students. Schools should be beacons of inclusivity and egalitarianism, and teachers should strive to turn their multilingual/multicultural classrooms into a sanctuary where their students can thrive academically and emotionally.

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