

INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION:  
TEACHING AND LEARNING CHALLENGES  
IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

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*This article explores the potential of teaching intercultural competence in foreign language courses through the example of a pedagogical experience in a higher education institution.*

*It provides a picture of intercultural dimension of foreign language education and foreign language teachers' social and moral responsibilities. Successful intercultural interactions presuppose unprejudiced attitudes, hence learners' intercultural competence: tolerance and understanding of other cultures as well as cultural self-awareness. Intercultural communicative competence can therefore be considered as one of the central aims of foreign language education so that learners can successfully communicate with people from different linguistic and cultural worlds. However, this article calls again to the problem of assisting the integration of intercultural communicative abilities into classrooms.*

**Keywords:** *communicative competence, intercultural competence, higher education institution, foreign language education, cultures*

Everybody talks about the internationalisation of higher education and we see it everywhere on the agenda. The global competition for talents, the emergence of international branch campuses, the debate on use of agents for recruitment of students, the internationalisation of the curriculum, all this is widely debated on all levels and around the world.

The internationalization of higher education has intensified dramatically over the last fifteen years creating far reaching opportunities. The boundaries between re-

source countries and target countries of internationalisation have started to become blurred. The positive conclusion one could draw from this picture is that internationalisation is on the rise in higher education. But there are also concerns, threats and limitations in respect with teaching practices. More specifically, concerns revolve around problems which may arise in a classroom due to different teaching and learning cultures as well as preconceived cultural traits. From a teaching perspective it is important to discuss how the familiarity of

a student with a teaching tradition can create obstacles in an international classroom and what solutions can be provided.

So, which may be those potential challenges? According to Griffiths we use the term „learning shock“ in order to refer „to experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by some students... [that] find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations“ [10, p. 257]. Although to a great extent this shock is dependent on the individual student, a multicultural teaching and learning environment can definitely have a significant effect.

Thus, when referring to the internationalization of the classroom we can identify three main challenges related with language barriers, different learning styles and the preconceived cultural traits. Altogether, these realities pose significant limitations to teaching and lecturing practices while they also affect the assessment methods which can be used in a classroom. At the same time however, the fact must be stressed that many faculty members are not sufficiently prepared to confront the challenges which may arise in an international and intercultural classroom. The reason is that there is a similar cross-cultural environment. The lecturers and teachers have only a basic training based on the different learning styles which they might be confronted with but more importantly they are not well prepared for negotiating with other cultures.

One of the main problems with teaching in an international classroom can be limited participation. International students may have a different perception of the lecture practice and thus react differently in a more „open“ classroom environment of for instance a western classroom. They may think that it is not necessary to disrupt the lecture in order to ask questions as they deem the teacher's ideas and perceptions as authoritative and respectful. Another reason for limited participation could be a limited command of language which may discourage students from expressing themselves publicly. Even more so if the foreign students are a minority in the classroom.

Another problem with which a teacher or lecturer may be confronted with concerns the formation of groups in an intercultural classroom. I consider this to be an important challenge which undermines the ultimate goal and objective of an international classroom which is to promote interactive knowledge through a multicultural setting. It is generally believed that students who share similar cultural and educational backgrounds will tend to form groups together avoiding an interaction with native ones.

Overall, these more specific problems, if not taken under consideration and treated properly, can affect the motivation and self-image of the international student and hinder hers/his academic success. The lack of participation in the classroom or the formation of groups with always the same people that share similar cultural traits can foster the emergence of stereotypes among

the students and thus an unwillingness to open up and interact with the „others“. It is thus important that the students do not feel isolated from their local peers and the host culture.

After considering the above-mentioned problems it is worth asking what are the potential solutions to these challenges. Gopal provides an extensive discussion on the three core elements which can facilitate the acquisition of „intercultural competence“ for a teacher or lecturer [9, pp. 373-381]. These are based on Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence and center on attitudes, knowledge and comprehension and skills. Starting with attitudes, it mainly refers to the recognition from the teacher that she/he operates in a multicultural classroom. In this respect it is important to show respect and value other cultures but also self-reflect on hers/his motivations for teaching. As regards knowledge and comprehension, Gopal refers to the possibility in which faculty members receive some kind of cultural mentoring in order to become acquainted with potential cultural differences [9, p. 373-381]. Cultural selfawareness, some knowledge of how gender roles are viewed in different cultures and improving ones language skills are deemed as important. Finally, skills mainly refer to the individual's ability to self-reflect on her/his role in the classroom and choosing between being a lecturer or a teacher. Also, it refers to communication skills and specifically ones capacity to „negotiate different cultures“ by entering into a meaningful dialog which

overcomes misconceptions and fosters the building of collective meaning. It is evident that the internationalization of higher education implies a level of uncertainty regarding the level of understanding achieved between teacher/lecturer and students. It is the same kind in uncertainty that leads to the „learning shock“. For this reason, one basic solutions to this problem could be achieved through what is called a „getting to know“ strategy. Early on, from the first seminar, the students and the teacher should be allowed to present themselves. Additionally, the lecturer could pose some introductory exploratory questions in order to assess the students previous knowledge on the topic/theme to be lectured and in this way „break the ice“ within the group of students.

Faculty members can also play a central role in the formation of groups in a way forcing collaboration between students that may not necessarily share similar educational and cultural backgrounds. It is necessary to underline the importance of groups composition. Small groups that consider the composition balance between local and foreigner students with clearly defined tasks that expect every person to participate in the group work can remedy the problem.

In order to foster classroom participation, a special focus can be placed on the teaching language. For instance, when it comes to the use of English and the active participation in the classroom, the teacher/ lecturer should let the students know that the use of correct language is not an aim in itself.

It is rather more important that she/he feels relaxed and confident to express herself/himself and engage in the classroom as this is valued and appreciated more highly.

Finally, *feedback to learning* is considered very important for the advancement of the student's learning. From the study by Kingston and Forland it was observed that international students needed to have more detailed feedback and one suggestion was getting it in a written form [12]. Although time consuming, it is an effort which might help students relocate themselves in the new cultural-teaching environment they operate and possibly provide them with answers on whether they are referencing and drafting their papers properly. After all, teachers do not always achieve what they think that they are achieving, making the need for more constructive feedback strategies even more imperative. Additionally, it is important that the teacher or lecturer is aware of any support facilities in the institution which are primarily directed towards international students. The support facilities may also assist international students with psychological distress that they may experience. Gabb argues that although international students may perform equally well as the

local students, they do not experience the same levels of stress and frustration [8, p. 357-368]. Due to societal, teaching and learning cultural differences they need to spend more energy into adapting into the new reality.

To conclude, it is estimated that the efforts to combat teaching discrepancies that arise from the internationalization of the classroom should have as a starting point the building of good teaching practices that address all and should not target specific international students – a strategy which would reinforce stereotypes and any isolation feelings. The aim of a teacher/lecturer that acts in an international setting needs to promote intercultural learning. She/he should aim towards a „synergy of educational cultures“, where the expectations of international students (shaped by their different cultures and philosophies) are matched by the local institution's academic rules and cultural norms. When studying abroad, especially for a short period of time, students should not be expected to replace their cultures with those in the hosting country. On the contrary, the purpose is to familiarize with the new culture and through a process of adaptation and synthesis, manage to acquire the necessary knowledge.

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