Multiculturalism in Turkish Classrooms

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Abstract:

Multilingualism and hence multiculturalism have become pervasive in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as English as International Language (EIL) has been widely acknowledged. Through this globalization, multiculturally-inspired approaches to teaching and learning have been of upmost importance. To shape a better teaching and learning context for those involved in the situation, it is important to gather their perceptions at first. Thus this study aimed to reveal the perceptions of Turkish learners, foreign learners, and the educators of the same context about their own culture, the other's culture, and the target language culture. Accordingly, questionnaires and interviews were administered and the findings revealed all positive attitudes towards being in a multicultural educational setting.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, teaching English, cross-cultural, learning, classrooms

English is a multinational and thus a multicultural language today. An international or a global language, it reflects a diversity of various cultures. Being an inseparable part of a language, culture is a component of our understanding of communicative competence; therefore, cultural awareness (CA) and intercultural awareness (ICA) are both critical in the learning process. While the former is significant in understanding and evaluating one's own culture, the latter is important in understanding the cultural practices and forms in intercultural communication (Baker). Whether it is CA or ICA, language learning requires building bridges between the language and its culture. As the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggests, the way people see the world is determined partly or completely by the structure of their native language (L1): when two people with different native

languages come together, their conceptualization of the world, patterns of behavior and beliefs reveal differences due to the cultural and cognitive processes involved. Through intercultural communicative competence, language learners can be prepared for intercultural communication, as well as being exposed to the experience of sharing with their fellow-learners their experience of different cultures. They can participate in a melting-pot of different cultures.

This article looks at how this process works through a case-study of language learning in Turkey. Although Turkey is a multicultural country that has for long been welcoming many cultures and peoples, multicultural classrooms have not been analyzed in language-related studies until recently (Damgacı & Aydın, "Attitudes"; Aydın, "Multicultural Education"; Kılımcı, "Integration"; Cırık, "Multicultural Education"). The perceptions of foreign learners studying in Turkey while learning English have not been compared to the perceptions of local learners and their educators. I aim to investigate the ICA of foreign learners, Turkish learners, and educators who are in the same classroom teaching/learning English as a foreign language. I shall address the following issues:

- How do foreign learners studying English in Turkey perceive the role of their own cultures, Turkish cultures, and English-speaking cultures in their language learning processes?

- How do Turkish learners perceive the role of their own cultures, English-speaking cultures, and the foreign learners' cultures in their language learning processes?

- How do non-native language educators in Turkey see the role of their own cultures, English-speaking culture, and the cultures of the foreign learners in language teaching?

We should expect that both foreign and Turkish learners will benefit from their multicultural learning environment. The educators should believe that language teaching can be facilitated through drawing on a number of different cultures: all participants should highlight the positive aspects of their own cultures, although they may experience minor problems of cultural adjustment.

The Goals, Advantages, and Problems of Multiculturalism

Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) creates a "melting pot" out of the learners from various cultures (Bennett). However, this metaphor fell into disuse while other metaphors such as that of the "tossed salad" or such kinds came into use in which the ingredients represent both differences and harmony as a whole at the same time. Therefore, he highlights the term "cultural pluralism" instead. The goal of multicultural education is to provide freedom for learners to develop cultural and cross-cultural knowledge and abilities for a democratic society seeing multiculturalism as a means of appreciating and respecting others (Tarman & Tarman).

The four basic goals of multicultural education for Derman-Sparks (qtd. in Tarman & Tarman) are building a confident self-identity, making empathetic interaction with different people, thinking critically about bias, and being able to stand for the rights of one's own and others. When these goals are met, multiculturalism in classrooms can allow learners to develop social, intellectual, and personal abilities, to maintain their identities, to be proud of their own cultural heritage, and, to increase the appreciation of diversity in their communities.

In spite of the seemingly brilliant goals and the advantages of multiculturalism in TEFL, it is inevitable that educators and learners encounter problems with it, including racial or ethnic problems, culture shock, communication problems due to poor language abilities, and insufficient knowledge across cultures that result in misunderstandings.

The Educator's Role in Multicultural Classrooms and Suggestions

If an educator originates from a different culture to the learners, then how can she or he teach them better? There are some crucial steps to follow. First of all, they should relate to learners from different cultures by making connections to their backgrounds. It can be achieved through connecting the values, attitudes, and experiences of the educators to the learners from different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Accomplishing such a goal depends on the educator who has the ability to build a democratic atmosphere in which equal treatment has been made for learners of diverse backgrounds.

Davidman and Davidman (qtd. in Tarman & Tarman 66) touch upon a critical role of early childhood educators who must be aware of the richness of diversity and must teach children to appreciate differences in a multicultural classroom. They should be sensitive and knowledgeable about other cultures and emphasize seeing positive sides of differences in multiculturalism (66). To this end, it is necessary for educators to be aware of their own values, knowledge, and teaching practices so as not to harbor any bias. Educators can become part of a new community and learners may feel more relaxed because one of the key factors in achieving communication in multicultural settings is the ability to adapt language so as to be closer to the natives and to avoid misunderstanding or miscommunication (Baker). For instance, a school in the Netherlands that has many Turkish learners as well as other learners from different nationalities is close to a *Türk Market* so that educators can easily integrate Turkish cultures into their teaching context and can motivate learners (Bezemer, Kroon, Wal Pasture, Ryen, & Wold).

Educators' beliefs and perspectives about other ethnic groups also influence teaching practices to a great extent. There is a need for educators in a multicultural classroom to question themselves and how they approach diversity in their own teaching context. They should not forget how important their role is in their learners' lives, and how much they affect their ideas and behavior. It is also the educators' responsibility to motivate learners of native or dominant cultures to be sensitive to the diversity in their surroundings. These learners should take part in social and cultural activities with representatives of different cultures. In similar fashion learners who are members of other cultures alternative to the dominant should be encouraged to find ways to familiarize themselves with such cultures, to observe and practice cultural differences. All learners in short should be motivated to take risks to participate in different cultures.

Another role of educators is to establish a curriculum that includes all diverse learners into an education program so as to promote intercultural literacy and mutual intelligibility. Materials for TEFL should meet this requirement. To fulfill this expectation, educators need to create opportunities for learners to read and talk about their cultures as well as other cultures. This is of course not to say that the target language culture -the culture of the inner circle- should be promoted alone in class. In contrast, this is to say that all cultures from inner, outer, and

expanding circles (Kachru) should be incorporated in this multiculturally-inspired approach: namely English, Turkish, and the cultures of foreign students in this case. Seen in this light, comparative cultural efforts such as creating stories of the lives of different people, their communities, and their lifestyles can be made as an effective way of bringing cultures into the classroom. Culture is what people deal with in their everyday lives, not something abstract. The way to achieve such comparisons can be provided through language learning materials like textbooks, films, television, radio, newspapers, novels, and magazines; electronic media; and cultural informants like educators, face-to-face communication with native educators or learners (Baker). However, cultural activities outside of the classroom are also necessary for educators to develop an intercultural understanding.

Through these ways, learners can easily build a multicultural identity which can further develop naturally through social interactions of people from various cultures (Kostoulas). Learning the linguistic code in such environments cannot be enough, rather there is a need for a socio-cultural education (Baker).

Methodology

Research Design

This study had a mixed approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Therefore, it had an exemplar-based typology; that is, a questionnaire survey with a follow-up interview (QUAN→qual) constructed the research design (Dörnyei).

Participants

The participants were 85 people from a public university in Turkey. The first group included 20 Turkish educators aged 33.85 on average. They taught English at the foreign languages department and had been teaching in multicultural classes for 2 months the least and 6 years the most. They were from different parts of Turkey and only 8 of them had been abroad varying from 3 to 18 months. The second group consisted of 25 foreign learners aged 22.2 on average coming from different countries:

11 from Saudi Arabia, 7 from Afghanistan, 4 from Indonesia, and 3 from Philistine. Most of them had arrived to Turkey a year before their undergraduate education to learn Turkish. Only two of the foreign learners had been to different countries other than Turkey. They had been taught in a multicultural classroom with a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 4 years. The last group involved 40 Turkish learners aged 18.2 on average studying at the same university in the same classroom with the foreign learners at elementary level. They came from different parts of Turkey. Only 3 of them had been abroad before. All these participants were selected through random sampling method to ensure the heterogeneity in the group to best represent the population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison).

Data Collection Tools

The data were collected through the Multicultural Perception Questionnaires (MPQ) and interviews. MPQ included a total of 20 items in four parts with 5 items in each: contentment, intercultural interactions, influence on language learning, and the role of the educator. MPQs were formed in a likert scale in three different but parallel question forms for three groups of participants. In other words, the items with the same numbers in each questionnaire aimed to test the same criterion. The MPQs were designed specifically for the purposes of this study. For the validity and reliability, they had first been piloted before administration. Accordingly, two items were dropped and two items were modified. Expert opinion was consulted in the process and the final versions were shaped. The reliability was found r=0.73.

A randomly selected group of 6 volunteers from each group were interviewed to have better understanding of the perceptions of the participants. Semi-structured interviews including 3 open-ended questions were conducted. The interviews were done separately with each participant and took about 5 minutes. Both the MPQs and the interviews were done in Turkish for more detailed findings.

Data Analysis

The MPQs were keyed into SPSS (paws 18+) and the results were examined quantitatively. The mean scores, standard deviations, variations,

and the frequencies were calculated. The quantitative data were turned into tables for meaningful interpretations. Based on the results of each participant group, a final table was formed so as to compare the results in parallel MPQs. The results obtained from three basic questions in the interviews were examined qualitatively through content analysis. They were examined thoroughly in line with the results of the questionnaires for analysis using coding and comparison. These findings were brief; however, they revealed more comprehensible beliefs of the participants.

Findings

The findings revealed that the perspectives of the three groups of participants were similar to a certain extent. All groups stated that they were content with multicultural classrooms. Turkish learners revealed the highest amount (95%) while educators revealed the lowest amount (60%). It was 84% for the foreign learners. All groups believed that multiculturalism had a positive effect on language learning. For example, foreign learners mostly believed that their motivation to go abroad increased (72%) after this experience in a multicultural classroom. In the same line, educators' motivation (75%) to work abroad also increased. Turkish learners, on the other hand, showed little increase (35%) in their motivation to go abroad. In short, all the groups agreed on the benefits of multiculturalism, particularly Turkish learners had a more positive perspective on multicultural education (87.5%).

Another aspect that the questionnaire investigated was the perspectives of the participants on intercultural interactions in multicultural classrooms. In this respect, foreign learners were asked whether their being in a multicultural classroom helped them learn more about the Turkish culture. They believed it did to a great extent (92%). Turkish learners and educators were asked whether multiculturalism helped them learn about the culture of foreign learners; and also agreed (77.5% and 85% respectively). On the other hand, when the participants were asked whether it helped them learn about their own culture, foreign learners (60%) and Turkish learners (50%) agreed but the educators couldn't all agree and were split into two in this respect. Finally, the participants were also asked whether multicultural strategies helped them learn about the target language cultures (British or American), where there were no native

English learners, mostly they disagreed. However, all the participants did believe that this situation helped them learn about the characteristics of the cultures of one another and get interested in other cultures.

The questions in the third phase were related to the influence of multiculturalism on language learning. Regarding the four abilities in language, speaking abilities were thought by educators (85%), foreign learners (76%) and Turkish learners (80%) to have improved the most in a multicultural classroom. It was followed by listening abilities (70%, 52%, and 73% respectively). However, the participants did not believe that it had an effect on improving reading and writing abilities. On the other hand, vocabulary building, a sub-component of a language, was also believed to have improved a lot by all the participants.

The last category of the questionnaire concentrated on the role of the educators in multicultural classrooms. In this respect, both the educators (65%) and Turkish learners (57.5%) thought that it was not difficult for the educators to teach to diverse learners whereas foreign learners did not (%40) apparently agree that much. All of the participants believed that educators need to choose the techniques according to diverse classrooms. When the participants asked whether educators needed to learn how to teach in multicultural classrooms, foreign learners (60%) and Turkish learners (57.5%) agreed more than educators (50%) did. A final issue was whether there was a need for foreign learners to know Turkish, the native language of most of the learners in the classes in this study, as educators were also Turks and employ the native language in classes. Foreign learners agreed most that they should know Turkish (76%), while Turkish learners (55%) and educators (35%) did not agree that much.

The results of the interviews also revealed mostly positive beliefs in all three groups. To begin with, foreign learners really enjoyed improving their survival abilities in a different country and learning the characteristics of a new culture as well as a new language. They were mostly content with their classes. They could also learn Turkish better in Turkey. Thus they said they really benefited from studying in Turkey. They believed they could improve their communication abilities. However, they stated that they did not improve their English language abilities that quickly except for speaking. They also suffered from the misunderstanding caused by the cultural differences:

> "I learn new cultures. I improve my Turkish as well as my English." (Foreign Learner 6)

> "Sometimes there are problems due to communication flaws." (Foreign Learner 7)

> *"We learn different cultures, but sometimes we get away from our own culture."* (Foreign Learner 19)

In the same way, Turkish learners also stated that they benefitted from multiculturalism. They were happy to study with foreign learners from so many different countries. They liked having foreign friends. It encouraged them to speak English in class rather than Turkish. However, there was a corresponding increase in misunderstandings. They believed the reason might be because of language differences.

> "It is good to be in a multicultural class in terms of foreign language and communication." (Turkish Learner 23)

> "We learn new traditions. We sometimes have challenges in mutual understanding." (Turkish Learner 38)

The educators revealed parallel perceptions. They did not see any difficulty in teaching to diverse learners. In contrast, they enjoyed it and believed that they learned a lot from this experience. They dealt with the individual differences stemmed from cultural differences as well. They thought it was a great chance for them to encourage all the learners to speak English more so as to improve their target language, rather than speaking Turkish, so that both groups of learners can benefit from one another. However, they encountered certain misunderstandings due to the differences across cultures. In addition, they found it difficult to manage classes of such diverse cultural expectations; they could employ a variety of activities, but they took a long time to prepare.

> "It is a great opportunity to teach English to learners other than Turkish. It broadens one's perspective of the world. I really enjoy teaching this group." (Educator 3)

"Meeting new people, new cultures, having one common target language… It enables us to respect various cultures, appreciate individual differences, and to apply a number of teaching methods to diverse learners." (Educator 12)

"Of course we do encounter misunderstandings, so we need to learn a bit of their cultures." (Educator 14)

Discussion

It can be inferred from the results that Turkish learners are highly motivated by the presence of foreign learners in their classes. It may be because of the fact that in their previous educational backgrounds, they mostly had not encountered anyone of any diversity in class and they mostly had not been abroad before. Therefore, they were quite interested in foreign learners and their cultures. They showed a willingness to become good friends with them and share common things together. Aydın also highlights the positive impacts of multicultural education including increased self-esteem, social interaction, tolerance for diversity, social justice, democracy, and so on.

Although Turkish learners appreciated their foreign classmates' ability to survive in a new country, this situation did not influence their motivation to go abroad -- probably because of the fact that they dislike the prospect of being alone in a totally different place where they did not share a common language. However, still the Turkish learners showed more eagerness in studying in a multicultural classroom and believed in its benefits since they saw this situation as an opportunity for their personal development. There are several advantages of multicultural education such as eradicating prejudice and racism while building harmony and tolerance.

On the other hand, educators showed their contentment to a certain extent, probably because of pedagogical reasons. As they stated in the interviews, one of the challenges in multicultural classrooms was classroom management. They believed that it was not the same as in monolingual classrooms. However, the overall impact on the participants was quite positive due to the invaluable benefits gained from cultural diversity.

The participants enjoyed the experience of cultural exchange; but when they were asked about the extent to which they learned about their own cultures, only foreign learners revealed a high score -- probably because they were faced with a number of situations in which they had to clarify cultural differences because they were the ones living in a different cultural context. However, Turkish participants showed a lower score obviously because they did not have to discover new things, except when they were explaining new phenomena to foreign learners. For the educators, it was important that they had to be aware of their own cultures.

In terms of its influence on improving awareness of the characteristics of foreign cultures, participants did not believe that they gained such an advantage as a result of studying in a multicultural classroom. It may be due to the fact that there were no English native learners among the foreign learners. Had there been some, they would have probably offered a more enthusiastic response. The effect of having native speakers around has already been proved to motivate language learners (Bernard; Schneider).

Nonetheless the participants' overall idea of multiculturalism was positive and they believed in the benefits of diversity in their classes. The biggest advantage was that participants thought they had gained was the intercultural interactions among all the learners and their educators. While Turkish and foreign learners all liked the idea that they learned about new cultures, understood different personalities, and had new friends, educators enjoyed the challenges of dealing with potential misunderstandings, issues of classroom management, and the extra effort involved.

How does multiculturalism help to develop language abilities? When one tries to communicate with a foreigner, s/he uses speaking and listening abilities more than reading and writing abilities, except for written interactions. Most of the participants believed that they could improve their speaking abilities: studying in a multicultural class was found to be a great opportunity to improve their communication abilities.

Another conclusion emerging from this research was the foreign learners' perception that it might be difficult for educators to teach in a multicultural classroom. It may be due to the expectations of the foreign learners or the problems presented by cultural adjustment. On the contrary, the educators' spent far more time preparing to deal with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. All participants agreed that different

techniques should be adopted by educators in multicultural classrooms designed to help the entire group as a whole deal with issues such as validating the cultures of all learners, understanding the host culture and its adaptability to other cultures, and considering previous experiences in light of present necessities. Therefore, educators have to spend a lot more time ascertaining the needs of the learners.

When the classroom is monolingual and the learners and the educators share the same native language, they tend to employ their native language while teaching/learning English (Horasan). In contrast, when the classroom is multilingual and the learners and the educators do not share the same native language, educators need to be careful in the selection of the language they speak in class. Due to the tendency to speak Turkish most of the time, they might also use it in their multicultural classroom. Some foreign learners believed that they needed to know Turkish so that they could follow Turkish instruction, especially if they felt that their English language abilities were somehow deficient. On the other hand, some educators admitted that the presence of foreign learners in their classes helped them motivate all the learners to use the target language, namely English. It can be well-concluded that multiculturalism leads to increased use of the target language. Or it may cause more use of code-switching, which is mostly perceived positively in language learning (Horasan).

Conclusion

EFL contexts are the places where learners and educators have to engage in multilingual and multicultural practices, and hence it creates the ideal environment to prepare learners to deal with issues such as globalization (Baker). Hence multiculturally-inspired approaches to teaching and learning are essential – based on promoting a greater learner awareness of source and target cultures. The questionnaires revealed that teaching language in a multicultural style is not as easy as it seems. The aims of this approach should be set out clearly in advance and educators should strive to create a learning environment that offers opportunities both for the learners and the educators to foster their abilities to "stand as one" through diversity (Banks & Tucker). Educators could ease learners' stress by creating opportunities to interact with everyone not only in the classroom but also through informal contacts or online communication.

It is important both for educators and for other stakeholders such as colleagues, administrators, and parents to be knowledgeable about the pros and cons of multiculturalism so as to make positive contributions to the learning environment.

In terms of local issues, the survey revealed that through a multiculturally-inspired approach foreign learners can learn more about local cultures, as well as increasing inter- or cross-cultural awareness. Perhaps more research needs to be done in this area so as to develop new and innovative strategies of multicultural education as well as developing their learners' awareness. This can be achieved through observations, interviews, teaching journals, as well as further theoretical innovation (Tarman & Tarman).

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