Preparing English Learners for a Multicultural World: Implications for Language Teachers

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Abstract
Amid the existing challenges facing minority groups, multicultural citizenship can be a solution to their full integration into a diverse world. Multicultural citizenship is an approach that recognizes community members' native cultures by educating all students (especially minorities) about the knowledge, skills, and values needed for them to assimilate into their current or new cultures. Some of these minority groups include English learners (ELs), who might have difficulties fitting into the dominant culture due to their limited English proficiency or cultural background. In this article, the author highlights the key role of schools and language teachers in helping ELs develop as multicultural citizens in a diverse world. Within a multicultural citizenship framework, it becomes incumbent upon teachers at all levels to instill in students a balance of cultural, national, and global identifications. Multicultural citizenship helps students become literate citizens who reflect and act morally in an interconnected, diverse, and global world. The study pinpoints that citizenship education help students to develop thoughtful and clarified identifications with their cultural and global communities. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for promoting multicultural education in the language classroom.

Keywords: English learners, language teaching and learning, Middle East, multicultural education, North Africa,

Background

Today's western classrooms are becoming more diverse and, as a result, scholars are investigating the role of diversity and civic education as factors contributing to citizens' experiences in multicultural societies (MCSs). Much discussion has centered on the positive attributes of multicultural education and the opportunities accessible to these groups. The present paper focuses on possible social justice and citizenship-related issues impeding the full integration of minority groups into MCSs and suggests ideas for promoting multicultural education in the language classroom.

Opportunities for citizenship education only sometimes reach all social strata because many citizens of color seem to endure incomplete citizenship (Banks, 2017). A situation of this sort likely prevents minority groups from functioning properly because of the perceived injustices and stigmas around them. The United States is an example of a multicultural society where social justice matters are most debated. A better understanding of the difficulties facing minority groups in MCSs may necessitate a closer look at the injustices that directly affect citizens of color in MCSs.

Securing a full integration into MCSs: One solution

Notwithstanding existing programs and initiatives supporting multicultural education, the full integration of minority groups into society has been a challenge. In the United States, for example, immigrants have for decades undergone a "citizenship dilemma" (Banks, 2020). This dilemma is especially manifested in the way educational programs navigate school contexts with little consideration of inherent values such as equality, justice, and human rights. Within a multicultural education context, this citizenship dilemma arose from the continuing systematic gender, class, and racial discrimination prevalent in society (Banks, 2020). Discussions concerning the decline in citizenship education in MCSs, such as in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States, generally target mainstream or dominant ethnic groups. They tend, however, to overlook other categories of citizens in these countries, where the status of minorities can be perceived as less important.

Researchers (e.g., Kohli et al., 2017) have found that rather than address social injustices, many schools reproduce societal inequality, whether intentionally or not. To examine the extent to which minority students perceived the impacts of social injustice on their lives, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) surveyed 2,366 high school seniors in California, who had completed a twelfth-grade U.S. government course. Their findings with respect to civic education and social justice revealed new trends. Students reported unequal access to opportunities because of their ethnicities. For instance, African-American students had less opportunity for a voice in the classroom or the school; many Latino students felt they had few opportunities for service learning in schools. Predictably, students identified as white were overrepresented in all activities geared toward building well-informed, multicultural citizens in schools (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

The barriers to full participation have long hindered ethnic minorities' access to important public services. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) reiterated the ongoing factors and challenges facing citizens of color, including social invisibility, socio-economic deprivation, the poor internal organization of the ethnic groups, unmet distinctive service needs, stereotyping, and cultural stigma. These missed opportunities also seem to deprive English learners (ELs) of acquiring language and cultural skills for a smooth transition.

Many of these barriers are based on racial classification that ELs ultimately have a difficult time overcoming. Of the many prevalent forms of racism impacting students' educational experiences epistemological racism looms large; it uses content and pedagogies that exclude, or willfully conceal, knowledge about and from people of color (Lachaud, 2020). Under this paradigm, ethnic minorities and ELs may lack essential knowledge and therefore risk being ranked and sorted in ways that work in concert to limit the opportunities and civil rights of these ethnic

groups (Pohlhaus, 2017). Nieto and Bode (2012) approached the concept of equality as it applies to educational settings. Most teachers would agree that educational opportunities should be equitable for students. Bartlett and Brayboy (2005) presented theoretical background information on race and education. For them, civic education ideally represents and reflects the needs and concerns of the people enduring hardship due to racial, gender, and social injustices in MCSs and worldwide. As a result, culture and civics should function in tandem with each other if better integration of minorities is to occur [starting from schools].

        Because of the challenges certain citizens might be experiencing in multicultural societies, Banks (2020) proposed multicultural citizenship as a new approach to integrating community members. Cultural integration in this context begins by recognizing community members' native cultures and helping them assimilate into their new communities. Multicultural citizenship is an approach to educating all students about the knowledge, skills, and values needed to function effectively within their communities. Multicultural citizenship can also be an alternative to certain failed policies because, as a new concept, it seeks to maintain and improve the quality of the opportunities available to citizens living in MCSs (Banks, 2020), including ELs. Although multicultural citizenship might successfully apply to other settings, this paper focuses more on schools.

Multicultural citizenship for more inclusive schools

        Researchers have demonstrated quite effectively that civic (or citizenship) education positively impacts students to become effective, responsible citizens (Bentahar & O'Brien, 2019), yet civic education may be insufficient to cater to the needs of all categories of people, including minorities and people of color. Campbell (2007) stressed the responsibility of schools in creating a coherent sense of identity and aiding with cultural assimilation. Schools play an even larger role than in the past thanks to the increased diversity of today's students. This is why, unsurprisingly, several liberal countries such as England and France feel the obligation to accommodate the cultural traditions of various subgroups by supporting their full integration into these western societies (Ford, 2012; Murray, 2017). Twenty-first-century requirements necessitate framing a new conceptualization of citizenship education, one that equips students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for them to participate actively and responsibly in their communities and democratic processes (Bentahar & O'Brien, 2019). Much multicultural education-oriented learning entails, inter alia, opportunities for students to engage in conversations clarifying their civic rights in a diverse world, and the classroom is a starting point.

        Helping young students develop cultural knowledge and skills is the responsibility of many stakeholders, such as governments, civil society, and educators. In addition to initiatives supported by federal and local governments (e.g., the United States Department of Education, state departments of education, as well as local school districts), schools have a paramount and unique role as the places where ELs first learn to acquire English as well as academic content. It is, therefore, no surprise that advocating for a multicultural world comes with high expectations for teachers in general and language teachers as supporters of ELs' success in schools. In other words, while not neglecting the importance of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, language teachers should seek opportunities to help ELs to function efficaciously and appropriately in a new society. Boosting language skills with culture and civics-oriented content is not an option anymore, given the key role of citizenship education in supporting marginalized groups (Banks, 2017) and promoting key cultural and language foundations (Bentahar, 2018).

        Within a multicultural citizenship framework, it becomes incumbent upon teachers at all levels to instill in students a balance of cultural, national, and global identifications. Multicultural citizenship is key to a better understanding of the connection between civics and diversity and forges a delicate balance between unity and diversity (Banks, 2020). It also helps students become literate citizens who reflect and act morally in an interconnected, diverse, and global world.

Citizenship education should help students to develop thoughtful and clarified identifications with their cultural and global communities.

Multicultural citizenship provides students with additional avenues to understand how civic knowledge is constructed in society (Bentahar & O'Brien, 2019). This approach potentially helps prepare all students to act as informed citizens with the necessary cultural knowledge, skills, and values in a diverse world. Citizenship education of this type can also instill in students an appreciation for the other cultures represented in their schools. Developing civic knowledge (e.g., understanding both how and why governments work); civic skills (e.g., discourse and debate); and civic values or dispositions (e.g., civility and patriotism) is not enough for students to function in MCSs. Students also need explicit instruction and strategically planned classroom activities to help them understand their cultures as they relate to the dominant culture and the world, known as intercultural awareness. Intercultural awareness paves the way for assimilating into and tolerating differences typical of MCSs. But as a new concept, how good is intercultural awareness?

Developing intercultural awareness

As the foundation of communication, intercultural awareness (ICA) encompasses two major qualities (Zhu, 2011). The first refers to "the awareness of one's own culture; the other is the awareness of another culture" (p. 116). For one to properly manifest ICA, one should be able to stand back from their points of view and recognize the cultural perceptions, values, and beliefs typical of both their and other cultures. More specifically, for them to develop ICA, students need to experience three levels [or components]. At the first level, basic cultural awareness, students need to be aware of the shared values, behaviors, and beliefs forming culture; they should also be cognizant of the role of culture and context in the interpretation of meaning. One element of this level relates to the student's awareness of other peoples' cultures (behavior, beliefs, and values) and the student's ability to compare these cultures to theirs (Baker, 2012).

The second level targets learners' awareness of the relative nature of cultural practices and norms, the different voices within a culture, and the common ground between specific cultures and the awareness of possible mismatches and miscommunication among specific cultures (Shahini et al., 2020). The third level of ICA presents elements through which language learners should ably function on a much higher level, that of intercultural awareness. Within the context of schools, students should be aware of the existing interaction in intercultural communication, possibly resulting from the existing generalizations and cultural stereotypes within and among cultures. At this level, however, students should also be able to move beyond expectations by negotiating and mediating different sociocultural modes and frames (Baker, 2012).

The three levels of intercultural awareness delineate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that might culturally empower students in general and users of English in particular. Schools should therefore enact innovative initiatives for students to develop as multicultural citizens. In fact, helping learners develop their intercultural awareness often leads to a greater acceptance of the diversity of human experience.

Fostering multicultural schools: Mission still incomplete

Schools play a pivotal role in helping English learners integrate into their new communities or cultures. The educational philosophies endorsed by school stakeholders and implemented by school leaders (including teachers) will help reduce failed policies by promoting and recognizing the contributions and participation of minority groups in their schools and beyond (Banks, 2017). The overarching goal is for teachers to contribute confidently and efficaciously to society's educational reforms and democratization processes, starting from their own classrooms.

Through the power invested in teachers, schools can successfully promote positive change to the existing educational status quo by improving the content and quality of student experiences. In so doing, multicultural education would contribute to improving the experiences

of minority groups and prepare students in non-multicultural societies to appreciate diversity and recognize cultural differences. To capitalize on the wealth of literature and resources at their disposal, language teachers could first begin by familiarizing themselves with key concepts in multicultural education. This way, they will gain the confidence and preparedness needed to help their learners become effective citizens of an interconnected, diverse, and global world.

Facing a diverse world: Are language teachers prepared?

Rather than questioning the preparedness of teachers, one might wonder whether language teachers have the means to effectively implement multicultural citizenship education on top of their onerous responsibility of teaching language and content simultaneously. The last part of this paper highlights possible resources for language teachers (pre-service and in-service) to inculcate in students a culture of diversity and appreciation for difference. In so doing, teachers would be contributing to diversifying classrooms and positively impacting the minds of their students. With the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) language teachers in mind, a few suggested ideas and resources follow.

Teachers' familiarity with content related to multicultural education is usually taken for granted, amidst their other priorities. Language teachers, for instance, appear to spend too much time ensuring the learning revolves around the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Bentahar, 2018). Another concern (legitimate though) teachers of English have is the completion of the curriculum. What follows summarizes a few suggestions based on the author's academic roles as both a former English language teacher and a junior scholar interested in researching the education of multilingual and English learners.

Regardless of background, teachers can help foster cultural and intercultural competence in the language classroom. One starting step or goal is to help students understand how and why societies are becoming more diverse and why this is important. More specifically, teachers could start with simple lessons based on other cultures. In the context of English language teaching (ELT) in the MENA region, for example, the target country or culture does not have to be always the United States or the United Kingdom. Content on multicultural education encompasses learning about peoples of diverse beliefs, religions, and values in non-English speaking parts of the world, as well.

Most multicultural education-based content is often associated with western cultures (Bentahar, 2018). Language teachers could include content on cultures sharing much, e.g., with Morocco or Saudi Arabia but have their own particularities that are probably uncommon in these countries. MENA and Southeast Asia regions are perfect examples.

In addition, language teachers could usefully supplement their curricula by considering culture-related topics that they can easily find online. Examples include ESLdiscussions, ESL conversation, and tens of culture-related websites and blogs where teachers can find ready-to-print handout, not to mention TEDEd lessons. These engaging online resources create avenues for language learners to not only practice the skill of speaking but also put into practice the knowledge they have developed in the forms of authentic conversations and debates (Bentahar, 2018).

Another proposition is to teach movies addressing controversial topics, which might prompt students to question and compare their and other peoples' cultures. It might work for teachers to start with general pre-viewing questions before delving further into the topic. The students could subsequently have the chance to further practice their productive skills through discussion boards (e.g., asynchronous recorded audios or written responses), this time using arguments from the movie and the in-class discussion.

A few teachers mistakenly think that a speaker on multicultural education is, and should be, fluent in English. In fact, the speakers could, but do not have to, be native speakers of English. An Italian volunteer or a tourist with satisfactory language proficiency might be able to help EFL/ESL students learn more about Italian and European cultures. In this situation, the focus is

not necessarily on pronunciation, but rather on background knowledge and cultural content. The lesson here is that embracing multicultural education inculcates an appreciation for *all* languages and cultures in teachers and, later, students.

Finally, whether the goal is to secure a guest speaker or examine funding opportunities, language teachers could always consider the local community resources and organizations interested in promoting intercultural awareness in schools. Examples of potential agencies or organizations include Fulbright scholars, Peace Corps volunteers, Moroccan-American Commission for Cultural and Educational Exchange (MACECE), Dar America [in Casablanca], the U.S. embassy, Regional English Language Office (RELO), the British Council, America-Mideast Educational, and Training Services Inc. (AMIDEAST), and Non-governmental organizations that occasionally host international volunteers (e.g., Moroccan Center for Civic Education, MCCE).

Conclusion

The present paper highlighted multicultural citizenship and its potential in raising community members' awareness to be informed, active citizens. One of the goals of multicultural citizenship is an appreciation for diversity. While multicultural education is usually depicted and presented favorably, the author addressed common challenges impeding the full integration of citizens in MCSs. The second half of the paper explained the important role of schools and teachers in helping students grow as multicultural citizens in a diverse world. A few suggestions were elucidated for language teachers in general, and language teachers in the MENA region in particular.

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I (the author of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of a dispute.

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