

# Learning English in a culturally diverse classroom – the case of South East European University in Macedonia

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**Abstract:** Teaching in a culturally and ethnically diverse classroom can be an experience worth sharing because both students and teachers bring their own background into the classroom and that affects the process of teaching and learning. The presented study was carried out with students from the first and second year attending the South East European University in Macedonia during the fall term of the 2014/15 academic year. This is a culturally and ethnically diverse institution, which makes English language classroom a challenging place to teach and learn in. The students were given a set of questionnaires and the collected data were analyzed according to students' level of English. An interesting finding suggested that students from a higher level of English not only knew the English language better, but were more aware of the different cultural characteristics within Macedonia and were willing to learn more.

**Key words:** culture, EFL, ethnicities, multiculturalism, diverse classroom

## 1 Introduction

Teaching English in an ethnically and culturally diverse classroom can be both a daunting and motivating task. Daunting in the sense that neither the teacher nor the students know in advance what will happen in such a classroom, but motivating because that is the pure beauty of the teaching/learning process. "To always go beyond and reach for more than is usually expected" – should be the fundamental motive in education.

In today's world, mobility has become a part of every student's life. Most students now have an opportunity to visit other countries for educational purposes and learn more about other cultures. Therefore, acquiring foreign languages has become the norm in the globalized world. It is inevitable that students need a certain level of intercultural knowledge and competence to be able to survive in new cultures and educational contexts. In this respect, one's understanding of the new cultures, as well as his/her own culture, plays a crucial role into becoming a globalized citizen. Learning a language without culture is a recipe for becoming what Bennett (1993) calls a "fluent fool". A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well, but does not understand the social and philosophical context of that language. In this respect, the role of foreign language teachers has gained importance since they serve as a medium to teach both the language and the culture of the foreign language.

Language reflects culture and is influenced and shaped by it. Brown (2000) believes that language is the symbolic representation of people because it entails cultural and historical background as well as these people's approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. Therefore, language and culture are so interwoven that separating one from the other would lose the significance of another. Jiang (2000) states that without culture, language would be dead and without language, culture would have no shape. Considering the inseparable boundary between culture and language, it is difficult to imagine teaching a foreign language without dealing with its culture.

One issue that arises when it comes to the place where two different cultures collide or coexist is—how does the individual overcome personal barriers represented by both cultures in contact? What is the difference between learning a culture and learning a second language? Culture can serve as a great tool for overcoming the differences, and not only by valuing one's own culture, but also by valuing the culture of those who live on the same territory as us.

Macedonia, as a country, is rich in different ethnicities and different cultures that collide in everyday situations. The cultural characteristics of our country and the way of life in general are eloquently described by Markovska (2005:213) in which she writes that "*The wealth is in the differences*—with an emphasis on the concept for fruitful positive examples of cultural and religious tolerance and assistance. *The differences are imaginary*—with an emphasis on the fact that even in the most extreme examples of religious alienation, independently and unconsciously there are still cases of cultural interaction." In addition, language learning must also entail cultural learning, and it is left up to the teacher to choose the means and methods for a more successful completion of this task.

The present paper explores the obstacles (if any) that interfere with the learning of the English language in a culturally diverse classroom. It focuses on English language instruction carried out in the South East European University (SEEU) in Macedonia, specifically at its Language Centre (LC).

SEEU is a private-public, not for profit institution of higher learning, consisting of faculties, centres and institutes as its integral part, specialized in socio-economic sciences. The University is free to operate outside of government control and it preserves its sustainability through students' tuition. SEEU has five faculties: Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies (CST), Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication (LCC), Faculty of Law, Faculty of Public Administration and Political Science and Faculty of Business and Economics. Also, three different centres function within SEEU—the Language Centre, the eLearning Centre and the Business Development Centre. As of 2010, SEEU operates on two campuses, in Tetovo and Skopje, offering the same study programmes.

The primary aim under which the University is governed is to contribute to higher education in Macedonia through mutual interethnic understanding. It also aims to provide a multilingual and multicultural approach to teaching and research by developing study programmes according to European and international standards. SEEU is a multilingual university offering programmes in English, but also Albanian and Macedonian. All students study these languages at SEEU during their undergraduate years, but international students usually enrol in English-language programmes which are taught exclusively in this language.

The primary function of the Language Centre (LC) is to provide courses specified in the curricula of the five SEEU faculties. Due to these requirements and student interest, the LC is the largest teaching organization at the University, with more than three quarters of the entire student population taking classes there at any given time. The LC provides language courses from Level 1 to Level 4 (A1–B1 CEF) and English for Academic Purposes to all first year students at the University. Classes meet from two to eight hours per week, with the lower levels (Level 1 and Level 2 that correspond to A1 and A2 CEF) receiving the most hours of instruction. Each level comprises a full semester of instruction. Instruction is designed to take students from Common European Framework (CEF) levels A1 to C1 of English language proficiency. It also offers English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses specialized to different fields of study.

Part of the University's mission is to promote a multilingual approach to learning, stressing the importance of both local and international languages. The Language Centre has the crucial role in achieving this goal. The language teacher's goal is to make students linguistically and communicatively competent in learning English as a foreign language.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to shed some light on the cultural issues that interfere with English language learning in a multicultural and multilingual classroom. The study was carried at the LC where the language classes are held. The primary language of instruction is English, but the classes are comprised of students from different cultural and ethnical background. Therefore, the learning of the English language can be somewhat challenging and demanding as well as motivating for the teachers to some extent.

## **2 Literature review**

Culture is a way of life, a system of beliefs and experiences. It can refer to a whole country, a region or a nationality, but also, it can go beyond such borders and encompass several nationalities, several regions. Despite the fact that culture is seen as primarily symbolic and intangible aspect of human society, nevertheless it is not solely represented by artifacts or other cultural elements, but by the manner in which the members of the cultural group interpret them and use them.

In today's modern societies, people differ in the values, symbols, perspectives, and not by material objects. Or, as Damen (1987, p. 367) says, "Culture is the primary adaptive mechanism of society."

In the past, according to Furstenberg (2010) culture was viewed as a static entity without reference to variation. This means that it was believed that culture was formed from facts which can be taught and learned. Later, such point of view was changed and culture is now seen as dynamic and variable. Culture is not seen as providing factual information but as a process which shapes human behavior and interaction.

Language and culture are mutually interwoven. They are strongly linked to each other and it is difficult to imagine teaching and learning a language without dealing with its culture. Jiang (2000) points out that without culture, language would be dead and without language, culture would have no shape.

The degree to which a teacher teaches the foreign culture together with the language has been debatable for a long time. Krashen (1982) argues that the classroom setting is not an appropriate place to acquire either language or culture. In his view, classroom is only appropriate to teach language rules. Damen (1987) states that classroom based learning relies too much on rule ordered pedagogy, and teaching culture in this view can only reflect and integrate cultural facts rather than the dynamic view of culture. The knowledge of daily routines and behaviour are all connected to cultural behaviour. Conversely, the development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness, using the language are linked to cultural skills (Tomalin & Hurn, 2013).

However, there are scholars in favor of teaching the culture together with the language. Byram (1988) asserts that language is functionless without its proper cultural context. Bada (2000) also emphasizes the importance of teaching culture in foreign language classrooms. He states that when language learners are not exposed to cultural elements of the target society, they seem to have problems in communicating meaning with the speakers of that society.

Bearing this in mind, it can be said that what the students and the teachers bring into the classroom strongly influences the foreign language learning. Adler (1972:14) states the following: "cross-cultural learning occurs when the individual meets a different culture than his and as a result (a) examines the degree to which his own culture influences learning and (b) understands the culturally motivated attitudes and values of other people."

Byram (1988) and Byram and Kramsch (2008) assert that language is functionless without its proper cultural context. The proper cultural context in Byram's terms includes the language patterns particular people use when they come together in different social situations at a particular time and place. In this sense, the place

of culture teaching in the language classroom is straightforward. Teachers should find ways to implement the elements of context which influence language use. Parallel to this view, Bada (2000) emphasizes the importance of teaching culture in foreign language classrooms. He states that when language learners are not exposed to cultural elements of the target society, they seem to have problems in communicating meaning with the speakers of that society. Bada (2000) further proposes that through studying language in context, it is possible to highlight how native speakers of the target culture use language under certain circumstances.

Having said all of this, it is clear that language and culture are best learnt together. But nevertheless, the situation in the foreign language classroom does not always follow this. According to Dema (2012) although foreign languages may be no longer taught as a compilation of rules through drills and unnatural dialogues, culture is still often taught separately and not integrated in the process of foreign language learning. On the other hand, classroom activities that are not personalized, contextualized and are not connected to real life situations, do not help the students learn the language in question.

English has become a lingua franca and due to its globalization and internationalization and some researchers believe that its culture should be taught as the fifth skill, in addition to speaking, writing, listening and reading (Tomalin 2008). To fully understand the importance of learning the culture in a language class we need to know to what degree cultural background knowledge influences language learning and how can we take advantage of that influence.

Furthermore, what educators should always bear in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students' awareness of their own culture and the target culture. English language learners need to understand what native speakers mean when they use the language, even if they do not decide to replicate their behaviour.

### **3 The methodology**

From a broader perspective, as Gonen (2012) points out, this interaction of what students and teachers bring to the language classroom influences the way foreign language culture is taught. Moreover, the classroom itself has its own cultures, and the teacher should pay close attention to cultural variation within the language classroom. What is more, such teachers need to question whether they are aware of the cultural diversity within the classroom and whether they should consider this diversity or ignore it. More importantly, they should seek ways to make use of cultural diversity. From this perspective, Montgomery (2001) points out that culturally responsive classrooms recognize culturally diverse students and enlighten the way for these students to make necessary connections among themselves and the target language culture.

One of the problems that teachers may face is the overloaded curriculum. The study of culture requires time; therefore, many teachers feel they cannot spare time for teaching foreign language culture in an already overloaded curriculum. They believe that students will be exposed to cultural material later after they have mastered the basic grammar and vocabulary of the target language. Still, this “later” never seems to come for most students.

The teacher must be responsible for developing a classroom that fosters the understanding and respect for individual differences and discusses what fairness means as a class openly with the students.

As Furstenberg (2010) pinpoints, our goal as teachers is to help building intercultural competence along with the linguistic and communicative competence as well. Hence, the language class can become the cradle of teaching culture and intercultural communicative competence our students need.

### **3.1 Participants**

The participants in the study were 12 ESP 2 second year students, 7 Advanced Academic English (AAE) first year students and 14 Level 3 (pre-intermediate A2) first year students from Skopje campus. They were all ethnically mixed groups, consisted of Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and others, who learn English in the same classroom. The questionnaire was carried out during the fall semester of the 2014/15 academic year. It was carried out during class time and it took approximately 1, 5 of class time to complete the questions. The language of the questionnaire was English, which has proven to be a limitation, once the data was processed and summarized. This is explained more detailed later in the study. The students from the AAE and Level 3 were mixed faculties and the ESP group students came only from the CST Faculty.

### **3.2 Data Collection Instruments**

For the purpose of this research a three-part questionnaire was used. The first part consisted of 4 open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were chosen due to the fact that students would be more honest while answering and would actually read their reflections on what culture is. For more objective and easily measured answers two questionnaires based on 1–3 point Likert scale of—very familiar, sufficiently familiar, not sufficiently familiar-and-agree, undecided and disagree—were used. The two different types of answers were due to the fact that the questions were different and they could not have been put within the same answering scheme.

### **3.3 The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire in this research was adapted from Gonen (2012) who, on the other hand adapted it from Sercu (2005). The original questionnaire consisted of five parts, each focused on various aspects of teaching culture in a foreign language classroom. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus was shifted from the teachers to the students. The study explored the opinions of the students on the role that culture has on learning English as well as their own familiarity with different cultures in the classroom. This change of focus was due to the fact that culture has been more investigated from teacher's perspective and students' side was neglected. But the fact is that students bring a lot in the foreign language classroom, particularly if they come from different cultures themselves.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A focused on students' perceptions and opinions on what culture is and how do they deal with different cultures in the class. Part B focused on measuring students' familiarity with the cultures of the other ethnic groups in the classroom. Part C dealt with students' opinions on the role of the culture in learning English language.

### **3.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were collected and analyzed according to the following procedure:

- The questionnaire was distributed during class time and administered to total of 33 students, from three different levels of English. The gathered data were analyzed descriptively by calculating the means and the percentages.
- The qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions was translated and included in the study, shading important light on students' perceptions on culture.

## **4 Results and discussion**

### **4.1 Students' perceptions on culture, stereotypes and learning English in a diverse classroom**

In order to elicit students' thoughts and background knowledge on culture, open-ended questions were used. They are listed below:

1. What is your definition of "culture"?
2. What would you say is, from your perspective, the most commonly held misconception about people of your culture?
3. How do you overcome barriers when talking and working with students from different ethnicity/cultures?

4. Does studying in a culturally diverse classroom influence your English language learning? What way? Why not?

Some of the students' answers on the questions were as following:

1. A particular form of civilization of a nation. Behaviors, lifestyles, and values of a population or country. Culture is the way we think and act and what is accepted and what is not in the society where we live. I understand culture as a behavior of one nation.
2. That we hate the Greeks, and we don't. That we are old fashioned. That Albanian people are hot headed, which is not true. That we are unfaithful and dangerous.
3. I try not to offend them and understand their culture. I try to be friendly. I try to find common language. Barriers are created only by politicians. We live together with one another, so we don't have barriers.
4. No, we learn from each other. It doesn't, but it really depends on the people. I don't classify people by their ethnicity. No, because we all learn English in the classroom.

As it can be seen from the answers, students know what culture is and they are even willing to state the misconceptions of their own culture and the stereotypes that we come across with. Almost nobody answered that their English language learning is somewhat negatively influenced by the fact that they study in an ethnically mixed classroom. Moreover, they all find it challenging and motivating to study English in such a rare instructional environment.

It should be mentioned that these questions proved to be too difficult for the lower level students to answer. The problem was the language, since they are at A2 level of English and they found it hard to comment on such questions. Most of them chose not to answer these questions at all.

Nevertheless, the only students who provided full and complete answers to the first part of the questionnaire were the ones from the ESP and AAE group. They had no problem of understanding the notion of culture, stereotypes and were willing to answer on overcoming the barriers when working with students from different cultures. The other approximately 14 students felt reluctant to provide answers. One can only guess that the language barrier was the only problem, although when later asked they said they had problems with understanding culture and how it affects language learning. This finding was in line with an older research done by the author on culture but in a context of students' familiarity with the culture of the opposed ethnic group. Similarly, the students found the original language of the questionnaire to be a problem (the language then being Macedonian and not English). However, when translated in their native language



(Albanian) students were more than happy to provide answers to all questions. A deeper research with individual interview questions might be of use in this situation. It will relief the stress and more valuable descriptive data can be collected.

## 4.2 Students' familiarity with different cultures in the classroom

After the open-ended questions, the second part of the questionnaire was used in order to measure students' familiarity with the culture of the other ethnic group. The cumulative results are shown in the table below:

Tab. 1: *Results on students' familiarity with the culture of the other ethnic group*  
(Questionnaire adapted from Gonen, Saglam, 2012,  
<http://www.iojpe.org/ojs/index.php/ijge/article/viewFile/143/181>)

Questions	Very familiar	Sufficiently familiar	Not sufficiently familiar
1. Daily life and routines, living conditions, food, drinks	84%	8%	8%
2. Youth culture	84%	8%	8%
3. Education and professional life	75%	8%	17%
4. Traditions, folklore and tourist attractions	0%	92%	8%
5. Literature	66%	17%	17%
6. Other cultural expressions (music, drama)	0%	67%	33%
7. Values and beliefs	75%	25%	0%

As mentioned before English language classroom in the LC is an interesting and challenging place to learn English. Students from different ethnical and cultural background come together to learn English. In such a context, students are not only influenced by the target culture, but as well as by the culture of their classmates. The rationale for choosing this part of the questionnaire lies in the fact that students first need to grasp their nearest culture in order to fully understand the target culture. In the original questionnaire by Gonen this part was used to inspect teachers' familiarity with the target culture. In this study, the focus is on the students and not on the teachers.

When we analyze the results from Table 1, it is obvious that students are sufficiently familiar with their classmates' culture particularly when it comes to daily life, food, drinks (84%), youth culture (84%), education (75%), values and beliefs (75%). Rather large number of students is sufficiently familiar with traditions and folklore (92%), as well as cultural expressions such as drama and music (67%).

To sum up, the overview of the results shows that students are familiar with the culture of the other ethnical groups in the classroom. By understanding their nearest culture they are more acceptable of the target culture and they find culture to be inseparable part of the language learning.

### 4.3 Students' views on teaching culture with the language

Finally, the third part of the questionnaire identifying students' opinions about the role of the culture in learning English language was used. The results are presented below:

Tab. 2: *Results on students' opinions about the role of the culture in teaching English language (Questionnaire adapted from Gonen, Saglam, 2012, <http://www.iojpe.org/ojs/index.php/ijge/article/viewFile/143/181>)*

QUESTIONS	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1. In an English classroom, teaching culture is as important as teaching the language	100%	0%	0%
2. The more students know about the English culture, the more tolerant they are	17%	66%	17%
3. English language teaching should enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity	0%	92%	8%
4. Learning about the English culture can change the student's attitude towards her/his own culture	50%	17%	33%
5. An emphasis on the study of foreign cultures can contribute to the student's loss of cultural identity	33%	33%	34%
6. The most important goal in learning about a foreign culture is to develop a critical attitude towards both target (i.e. English) and native cultures	92%	8%	0%
7. The development of cultural awareness should be kept only for the most advanced levels	8%	34%	58%
8. Teaching culture motivates students	50%	50%	0%
9. Combining language and culture helps learners to improve their language skills	92%	8%	0%

When we look at the results from the last part of the questionnaire, it is clear that all of the students believe that in an English classroom teaching culture is as important as teaching the language (100%). Furthermore, most of the students think that the most important goal in learning about a foreign culture is to develop a critical attitude towards both target and native cultures (92%). Also, the same percent of students (92%) believe that combining language and culture helps learners to improve their language skills.

However, when it comes to the question about English language teaching enhancing students' understanding of their own cultural identity, most of the students (92%) are undecided. Consequently, students are divided between agreeing and being undecided when it comes to whether teaching the culture motivates them more to learn the language. A rather large number of students are undecided when it comes to the question whether they are more tolerant if they know more about the English culture (66%). Finally, more of the students disagree with the statement that the development of cultural awareness should be kept only for the most advanced levels (58%) and only 8% of the students agree with this idea.

To sum up, the findings of this study match to Byram (1988), Bada (2000) and Byram and Kramsch (2008), who support the integration of culture into the language classroom. They oppose Krashen (1982) who believes that culture cannot be learned in a classroom, but only in its natural context.

After the data processing and results analysis we could easily conclude that students from higher levels believe that their culture is heavily influenced by the American culture since they are in contact with that culture the most—through music, films, the Internet.

Another interesting conclusion that emerged was the fact that higher level of English meant better understanding of the other cultures. Again, this is connected to the greater exposure to the English language and the English/American culture in general.

To sum up, students know how to identify the elements that comprise culture; they are aware that knowing others' cultural features will improve their tolerance and decrease their fear and they understand that language/culture combination will advance their language skills.

However, culture as a concept for the students is still an abstract idea, intangible, vague and not easily understandable. We as teachers should focus more on exploring and introducing culture as an inseparable part of language learning, so that students get use to the idea that you cannot completely learn a language and not know the cultural elements that comprise it. We cannot let our students be the “fluent fools” mentioned before, but work on their full language knowledge and prepare them for the world outside the classroom as better as we can.

#### **4.4 Limitations of the study**

The culturally diverse classroom presents an opportunity for students and teachers to collaborate in creating a classroom environment that is comfortable for all involved. As it was seen, students enjoy learning in culturally diverse classroom as they see such classroom as beneficial both for enhancing their understanding of different cultures and learning the English language as well.

It should be mentioned though, that this type of short research had its limitations. The most important downside was the fact that the questionnaire was very difficult for the Level 3 students to answer. This is something that the author had not anticipated. Such level of difficulty led to anxiety and insecurity on the part of the students. Given in its base form, solely in English, the survey required additional explanations, which is not due to the questions and their level of difficulty, but of the students' poor command of the language. It can be recommended that for better results, the questionnaire should be given in students' mother tongue.

In addition, a wide range research should be conducted, including the family background, the education, the place of living, because all of these factors contribute to greater appreciation of other cultures. This can be done to further develop the study and validate its results.

Moreover, in the future teachers should also be included in the questionnaire. That way we can get teachers' perspective on culturally diverse classrooms and we can investigate where exactly teachers' and students' worlds collide. In this study we opted for the students' point of view feeling it was somewhat neglected.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, intercultural awareness as an essential mark of a language and an inseparable part of language learning must be present in education since the earliest of age. As Rose (2004) states, the student that is intercultural competent should:

- understand and be aware of his own culture
- be aware of how others see his culture
- be aware of what others think of their own culture and
- understand and be aware of the culture of others.

Only those students that have the ability to recognize the validity of learning the English culture as part of learning the language will be successful learners. The others will lack one very important aspect in the process of language learning. The Language Center at SEEU has always done its best in providing the authentic context for learning the English language and students have recognized that effort. To support this claim, we have carried out numerous students' evaluations and they are integral part of every academic year. As a result, English classes are always evaluated very high and students enjoy learning in a challenging and motivating atmosphere.

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