

Review research paper

## INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS, INCLUSION AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN ESP (ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES) COURSES - STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND VIEWS

Elena Spirovska Tevdovska

South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia

**Abstract.** *The purpose of this article is to review and examine students' perceptions and views on intercultural awareness and inclusivity in the context of tertiary education and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) setting. For the purpose of this article, a survey is conducted among students in the ESP groups, consisting of both local and international students, coming from diverse ethnic, national and cultural background. The research aims to explore students' awareness of inclusion and diversity existing in the groups and students' awareness of the intercultural similarities and differences. Furthermore, the study aims to explore students' attitude towards the learning environment in ESP courses and teaching and learning practices which foster students' intercultural awareness, the necessity of these practices and the ways to improve intercultural awareness and the awareness of the characteristics of diversity and inclusion. Finally, the article will suggest teaching practices which will facilitate inclusivity and promote intercultural awareness in the context of ESP courses.*

**Key words:** *intercultural awareness, cultural background, diversity and inclusion, students' perceptions*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore students' perceptions of inclusion, diversity and cultural awareness in the context of language courses and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses at South East European University in the Republic of North Macedonia. The study examines the views and opinions of students who attend the English for Information Technology courses in their third semester of studies, following a review of relevant literature on students' perceptions of intercultural awareness and results from the survey. The article attempts to provide insight into the necessity of teaching and learning practices which foster intercultural awareness and inclusivity in a language learning classroom, as well as recommendations regarding the ways to incorporate relevant teaching practices and methods.

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*Corresponding author:* Elena Spirovska Tevdovska, South East European University, Ilindenska n.335, 1200 Tetovo, North Macedonia

E-mail: [e.spirovska@seeu.edu.mk](mailto:e.spirovska@seeu.edu.mk)

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This article will attempt to provide the background and the definitions of the notions inclusivity and intercultural awareness. Furthermore, the article will attempt to analyse the implications of inclusivity and intercultural awareness in higher education teaching and learning processes, as well as to explore students' perceptions and views on the importance and necessity of inclusivity and intercultural awareness.

### 2.1. Inclusivity

The arguments to promote the incorporation of diversity, equity and inclusion and inclusive teaching practices in education are numerous and supported by substantial research. This article will present an overview of several theoretical foundations and definitions of the notions inclusivity and intercultural awareness.

Gonzales et al. (2021, p.2), define the values of diversity, equity and inclusion as follows: "Specifically, diversity work aims to increase the number of historically underrepresented people in a space, while inclusion work attempts to reform organizational cultures and structures so historically underrepresented people might feel a sense of belonging inside the organization. Equity work seeks to resolve organizational barriers that impede equitable outcomes for underrepresented people". According to this definition and applied in the context of teaching and education, inclusivity implies reforms in educational practices and structures in order to create the sense of fitting in an educational setting. The current trends in education show that these settings are becoming more diverse in every sense: international students are more frequently part of these educational settings, as well as students from different ethnic, national, linguistic or religious background. Thus, the need for inclusive education is more frequently (and accurately) perceived, especially in the context of higher education.

The need for inclusivity in education is analysed by Sorkos and Hajisoteriou (2020, p.4), who state the following: "Contemporary phenomena such as increased migration, globalisation and super-diversity intensify the urge to recognise the continuously evolving character of individual and group cultures and languages. Arguably, the need to develop culturally-sustainable education policies is imperative." Similarly, Doucette et al. (2021, p.1260) define the need to incorporate inclusive teaching practices in the following way: "It is imperative that educational leaders reflect on their ideas regarding equity pedagogy and social justice to improve the educational experience of students."

Sorkos and Hajisoteriou (2020, p.2), describe the need for inclusive education and the impact on empowering change and social culture: "In a globalised and super-diverse world, both paradigms of inclusive education and intercultural education are important in establishing a sustainable philosophy of change that particularly relies on empowering and transforming the school culture and social beliefs."

### 2.2. Intercultural and cultural awareness

An important aspect of inclusivity is raising and fostering students' intercultural awareness in education and language education. In order to describe the concept of intercultural awareness, Zhu, H. (2011, p.116) provides the following definition:

Intercultural awareness can be regarded as the foundation of communication. It involves two qualities: one is the awareness of one's own culture; the other is the awareness of another culture. In other words, it involves the ability of standing back from our own point and becoming aware of not only our own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions, but also those of other cultures. Cultural awareness becomes essential when people communicate with people from other cultures.

Zhu, H. (2011, p.116)

The definition above indicates that cultural awareness is essential in an array of different contexts, including educational context. The importance of intercultural awareness is crucial when educational realities reflect the diversity in the classroom. Furthermore, the emphasis on intercultural awareness has an impact on curriculum development. Intercultural awareness involves a shift from traditional teaching methods to more contemporary methods, which cater to students' needs and the needs arising from the diversity in the classroom.

Cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity are defined by Kopylovskaya and Ivanova (2014, p.719) as follows: "Here, we would view cultural awareness as general cultural knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of global cultural heritage. Cultural awareness involves cultural sensitivity which is often understood as desirable empathy or readiness for cooperation and communicative strategies in those cases where the multicultural communication is in focus."

Yilmaz and Özkan (2016), in their study analysing EFL instructors' and students' intercultural awareness, concluded that it is necessary to develop a curriculum and materials which will introduce the elements and increase intercultural awareness in English language courses, in addition to professional development and teacher training program which will equip the teachers to transmit intercultural awareness in EFL classroom.

Bandura (2011) argues that foreign language learning and teaching is inseparable from incorporating elements of intercultural awareness and learning about the target culture. However, Bandura emphasises that the status of English as *lingua franca* implies that it is both necessary and possible to incorporate a variety of cultural backgrounds, thus promoting intercultural competence.

The elements of intercultural awareness are integrated through a variety of teaching practices. Danowitz and Tuitt (2011, p.44) suggest the following teaching practices:

- Focus on students' intellectual and social development;
- Development of materials and educational resources to enhance students' learning;
- Creating appropriate educational setting and environment which is both challenging and encouraging for the students, aiming to reinforce learning and development;
- Exploring the potential of the cultural differences and the potential those differences have to enhance the teaching and learning environment;
- Forming a classroom setting which encourages individual and group learning.

When examining interculturality and teaching practices, Smaoui (2022, p.87) concludes that intercultural awareness can be presented through an array of range teaching practices.

Liddicoat (2004, p.4), when describing intercultural competence and awareness, refers to intercultural language users as a target population and provides the following characteristics:

- Intercultural language users are aware that cultures are relative and that different people use language in different ways to achieve similar goals.

- Intercultural language users know some of the common cultural conventions in the language they are learning.
- Intercultural language users have strategies for learning more about culture as they interact.
- Intercultural language users have the capacity to reflect on their own linguistic behaviour and that of their interlocutors.

Liddicoat (2004) recommends several pedagogical principles of intercultural language teaching and learning:

- Active construction: the principle that learners need to create their own knowledge about the culture, which means that the learners need to be able to notice intercultural differences, construct knowledge and learn. Thus, the role of the instructor is to facilitate these observations, rather than teaching and presenting culture.
- Making connections: learners are encouraged to make their own comparisons and connections between their cultures, language knowledge and compare with the new experiences in the classroom.
- Social interaction: intercultural awareness is through communication and social interaction with other individuals.
- Reflection: reflecting on differences is a crucial component in the development of intercultural awareness.
- Responsibility: learners should accept the responsibility for successful communication, thus developing awareness which values other cultures, individuals and languages.

Liddicoat (2004) recommends allowing the students in the language classroom to learn these skills through reflection, understanding and comparing their own culture with characteristics of other cultures. He emphasises that the effectiveness of implementing teaching practices which promote intercultural awareness depend largely on learners' experiences and insights.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS, TARGET POPULATION AND RESULTS

#### 3.1. Research methods and target population

One of the aims of this study was to explore students' awareness and perceptions on inclusivity and intercultural awareness. The target population of the study consisted of a cohort of 49 undergraduate students enrolled in the undergraduate program of the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies, Department of Computer Sciences at South East European University, Republic of North Macedonia. The target population consists of 25 female students and 24 male students. Their age range is between 20-22 years old. The study participants attend an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course, English for Information Technology, scheduled in two timeslots per week. The structure of the target population is diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, race, language and cultural background, thus contributing to the relevance of the study and the importance of examining students' perceptions and views. Out of 49 participants in the study, 38 participants are local students from the Republic of North Macedonia, and 11 are international students from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The diversity exists among local students as well: 24 are ethnic Albanians and 14 are ethnic Macedonians. The international students are from different regions of Pakistan. The undergraduate study programme for international students offered at the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies is conducted in English.

This study was guided by the following hypotheses:

- The learning environment in ESP courses can increase students' intercultural awareness.
- The learning environment in ESP courses can increase students' awareness of inclusivity.

For the purpose of research, the study adopted a survey distribution to the target population group. The survey included 12 statements based on the Likert scale and an open-ended comments section. The statements and the comments included in the survey examined students' perceptions of inclusivity and intercultural awareness the context of ESP and general English language courses. The survey was distributed through Google Forms and posted on the learning platform Google Classroom used for the course English for Information Technology.

### 3.2. Research results

Out of 49 participants in total, 39 responded to the questionnaire. The following section presents the summary of the results. The first section of the survey asked the participants to provide their opinion on the way to increase their intercultural awareness. The following section presents their opinion and perceptions. The comments are included in their original form as written by the students, with minor grammar and spelling corrections.

#### Section 1

**You have the opportunity to study with students coming from diverse cultural background. Provide your thoughts and comments about the learning environment and ways to increase your intercultural awareness.**

- *Interacting with students from diverse cultures has always been a great opportunity of learning. I think one of the way to increase intercultural awareness is by organizing debates, project and group work where students have different backgrounds can work together.*
- *It is the best thing ever, socializing with students coming from diverse cultural background helps you understand a lot of things, you learn more about their culture, about their religion, about their holidays, ways of living, you can find also similarities. You can accumulate these info to live your best life apart your culture.*
- *I would like to study with students and to learn about their culture.*
- *It is very interesting to study in a diversified environment. At first there were some issues but we time we were able to tackle them and now we are used to this environment. But I think there are no any out door or indoor activities through which we can make this environment more interesting and beautiful and we can learn more from each other .I found these activities only in our English course which was really fruitful.*
- *In order to increase intercultural awareness there should be events organized by the university where students could participate and interact.*
- *I appreciate the opportunity to share my positive experience studying with a diverse group of students in the English for IT course. It was truly a rewarding time spent engaging in discussions that covered a wide range of topics, allowing us to explore and understand each other's values, cultures, commonalities, and differences. I am grateful to the professor for creating such a conducive and enriching learning environment.*
- *Regardless of the fact that we study with students from a different cultural area, communication between students should be open for cooperation, tolerance and trust. My opinion is that language is not a barrier to communication and socializing and those different cultures should be exchanged and respected.*

- *Having this kind of opportunity is one of the best things in SEEU. We get to know other cultures and learn new things from them; also learn our similarities and diversities. This kind of interactions that we have with each other makes us more intercultural aware and we develop our social skills.*
- *In our class we have especially a big number of students coming from different cultures. It is always a pleasure to learn more about their lifestyle and their hardships, it grows me as a person and it also gives me an insight on how to avoid offending them due to different aspects of our cultures. I believe every person who's educated enough tends to do this but to this day I believe we're not so close with the international students. Be it different friend groups or discrimination against them. Even though I tend to say we're educated, discrimination still exists between us due to different races and ethnicities and I'm hoping one day this vanishes. I say proudly, especially in English class our professor always makes them included, shows interest and treats them the same. I'm thankful!*

The following chart presents the overview of the survey and the responses to the statements.

Table 1 Students' perceptions towards the importance of inclusivity and intercultural awareness

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The English language courses and ESP courses at SEEU raised my intercultural awareness.	17	19	3	0	0
2. I believe that intercultural awareness is very important.	26	12	0	0	1
3. I know the meaning of the words intercultural awareness and inclusivity.	21	14	3	0	1
4. I believe that our learning environment practices intercultural awareness and inclusivity.	21	14	0	2	2
5. I am aware of the existence of different cultural backgrounds in our English language and ESP groups.	24	15	0	0	0
6. Learning about differences and commonalities of different cultures is motivational.	22	13	4	0	0
7. Class debates and discussions help me develop intercultural awareness.	16	22	1	0	0
8. Working in groups with students from different backgrounds helps me develop intercultural awareness.	22	17	0	0	0
9. I believe that there is no real communication and willingness to communicate with students from other cultures in our learning environment.	4	9	12	9	5
10. I believe that learning about other cultures prepares the students for their future careers.	12	20	7	0	0
11. Language courses topics should include content about intercultural awareness.	21	13	4	1	0
12. I appreciate when the professors demonstrate interest in students' cultural background.	23	12	2	1	1

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### 4.1. Conclusions

Upon analysing the results of the survey and the comments provided on behalf of the study participants, several conclusions can be reached. According to the survey results, the following can be summarized:

1. The vast majority of the study participants (36 out of 39) strongly agree or agree with the statement that the learning environment in the language and ESP courses can promote students' intercultural awareness and 38 participants share the belief that intercultural awareness is important.
2. The majority of the study participants (35) believe that the learning environment practices inclusivity and intercultural awareness. However, 4 study participants disagreed with this statement. All of the study participants (39) confirm that they are aware of the existence of diversity among students in terms of the cultural background in the study sections.
3. The vast majority of the study participants stated that learning in a diverse learning environment is motivational and that class debates, discussions and group work help them develop their intercultural awareness. The majority of the study participants (32), agrees with the statement that learning about other cultures help students with their future career preparation.
4. The majority of the study participants (33) believe that English language courses and ESP courses should include content which develops intercultural awareness. The same number of study participants agrees that the professors need to demonstrate interest in the students' cultural background.
5. The participants' comments reflect the survey results. The majority of the comments confirm that studying in groups which are culturally diverse is motivational and an excellent opportunity to learn more about other cultures and to become more aware of the ways of communication in a culturally diverse environment. However, a participant's comment indicated that this communication should be improved in terms of inclusion of the international students. The comments indicated that events outside the learning environment contribute to inclusivity and foster interpersonal relationships among students from diverse cultural background.

##### 4.2. Recommendations

The review of the relevant literature and the survey conducted and described previously verify the importance of inclusivity and intercultural awareness in language learning and teaching contexts and in ESP courses, similarly to other educational contexts. In the dynamic setting of higher education which tends to be more and more diversified, both student and academic staff population wise, raising intercultural awareness and promoting inclusion is an imperative. Furthermore, the process of inclusion and inclusivity as the end product empowers the students and the academic institutions alike.

There are multiple ways to foster students' intercultural awareness in a language learning and ESP classroom. Cakir (2006) emphasises the importance of focusing on the similarities rather than differences, when teaching cultural elements in language instruction. Kuorova and Modianos (2013) suggest multidisciplinary project based work in groups.

Baker (2015) suggests exploring the relationships between culture, exploring the media and arts and engaging in intercultural communication via different media.

Ennis (2017) recommends exposing the students to various texts and a variety of contexts from diverse English speaking settings and different, even opposing perspectives on a specific issue. Related to the practice of exposing the students to two different perspectives in order to raise their intercultural awareness, Ennis (2017, p. 154) states the following: "This ensured that students were not only exposed to new perspectives but would also have to understand opposing perspectives in order to complete the unit. More importantly, this content offered the possibility for students to practice appropriating aspects of both views in the formulation of their own opinions during the capstone output task, which is not only a critical thinking skill associated with intercultural competence, but one that is associated with academic honesty."

Regarding the activities which reinforce learning about cultures and intercultural awareness is suggested by Bakić-Mirić et al. (2023, p. 504) stating the following: "One of the ways in which the ESP teacher can involve students more in the process of culture-specific language acquisition, is by assigning them activities that are both research-based and reflective in nature. Such exercises will encourage the learners to be actively involved in their learning by not only considering the experiences and expectations that they bring to the classroom, but also how they hope the learning of English (or any language, for that matter) and target cultures will be of benefit for their future endeavours." Thus, it can be concluded that research activities and reflections can be useful in the context of promoting inclusion and intercultural awareness.

Following the review of relevant literature, the following suggestions can be taken into consideration when working in culturally diverse environments and increasing students' intercultural awareness.

1. Curriculum and syllabus design which promotes inclusivity, including content and materials which present diverse cultural environments. Assessment which includes group assignments and projects which give an opportunity to the students from various cultural backgrounds to work together.
2. In class communication: discussions, group work and debates, where communication on various cultural aspects, stereotypes and bias is encouraged and both differences and similarities are addressed.
3. Integrating language and culture teaching, with activities which promote both intercultural awareness and understanding. Research-based activities and projects, as well as reflections, are examples of the activities which integrate both language and culture acquisition.
4. Development of cultural sensitivity, with emphasis on empathy, understanding and communicative skills development.

The abovementioned approaches are several options out of many which promote inclusivity and develop intercultural awareness. These approaches lead to meaningful and fulfilling participation in a language learning classroom and a learning environment in general. We, educators, have to remember that we are contributing to the development of future professionals, leaders and citizens.



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