Classroom Diversity in Higher Education Institutions and EFL learners' Intercultural Sensitivity

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|---|---|--|--|--|
| | ABSTRACT: | | | |
| Keywords: Diversity , Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Sensitivity Scale | developing EFL students' IS. It sought How effective are diverse classes in developing their Intercultural Commun of FL education? To test the validity | k the contribution of classroom diversity in t to answer the following research question: eveloping learners' IS which is a key factor nicative Competence as it is the ultimate goal y of the hypothesis, both an Intercultural Ming and William Starosta's Model and a he Listening/Speaking Course. | | |

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I. Introduction

One of the main challenges facing Algerian Higher Education institutions is how to bring together the quantitative need for an unrestricted access to Higher Education and that qualitative prerequisite for training. Focus is being gradually put on the extension of the university network together with the establishment of high quality systems of research and training of teachers and policy makers. The ensuing need for the gradual amendment of the centralized educational system to build up a more decentralized one deems necessary.

Among the tangible results of these needs is the establishment of more Higher Education institutions integrating different departments to provide a university, at least, for each state/ Wilaya in the Algerian territory. The case of English language instruction is no exception. In the past, English was taught in institutions and universities where learners were obliged to leave their regions creating a cosmopolitan atmosphere where different regional cultures meet. Nowadays, with these new policies, students are no more obliged to travel too far to carry on their Higher Education studies, rather; they register in the nearest Higher Education institution possible. A 'study-where-you-live' policy then has gradually emerged in which fewer chances of regional cultures' junctions are made and, thus, less regional variety is produced among groups of students.

II. Review of Literature

Variety can be characterized by an individual's age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, political views, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and a host of other traits. Traditionally, the word cultural diversity has been tackled as a huge mass of cultural entities which share a dominant whole under the umbrella of one cultural trait used to distinguish them from one another. Edward T Hall, referred to as 'the father of intercultural communication', used to use the notion of cultural blocks like the Arab culture, the Germans, the Americans distinguishing cultures. Yet, if the Arab culture is further examined, we find that it is a mixture of many cultures and even the dimension of language, which is Arabic in this case, is not the only language used in the Arab world as it is the case in Algeria for instance (Hall, 1976).

Algeria is culturally rich including different cultures and subcultures which are dispersed on the Algerian territory on a regional geographical basis. Limited agreement has been reached on the definition of diversity (Chen & Yang, 2016). Since this study sought to understand the diversity setting in language classes in higher education institutions, the concept of diversity in this research paper is used to refer to culturally rich language classes where the existence of learners with varying regional/ territorial as well as linguistic backgrounds, cultures and experiences is noticeable. Rijamampinina's and Carmichael's categorization of human differences (Rijamampianina & Carmichael, 2005) is selected by the researcher for being all-encompassing, at least all individual differences needed in this paper are mentioned. These researchers categorized human differences including three main dimensions as follows: Primary Dimensions including race, ethnicity, gender, age, and disability; Secondary Dimensions including religion, culture, sexual orientation, thinking style, geographic origin, family status, lifestyle, economic status, political orientation, work experience, education, language, and nationality; and Tertiary Dimensions including beliefs, assumptions; perceptions, attitudes, feelings, values, and group norms.

Some countries are said to be diverse in some dimensions and aspects and more homogeneous in others (Huisman, 2016). Therefore, whether diversity is considerable or not is dependent on which aspects/ dimensions are the central focus. The main dimensions focused upon, in this work, in relation to EFL learners are geographical backgrounds (regions) and linguistic variations (dialects) in the Algerian context. As far as Higher Education is concerned, earlier research started from the belief that diversity leads to diversification and growth, and that governmental regulations would inhibit this. Then the body of research on the outcomes of diversity in colleges and universities has grown to give evidence, supporting differences in college admissions. Culturally diverse institutions would seem to provide opportunities to develop and practise intercultural skills, particularly through collaborative activities and group work ((Atamna, 2008); (Corder & Mackey, 2015); (Tabeti & Gazib, 2019); (Shaw, 2005)).

Intercultural Sensitivity, being the main focus of this study, refers to the quality and extent of the experience of individuals and groups with others within the organization/ Institution. It can be defined as "an individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in **intercultural communication**" (Chen G. M., 1997). Intercultural Sensitivity has been regarded as a prerequisite for achieving intercultural competence (Chen & Starosta, 1996)

Early organizational researchers defined diversity settings as the degree to which an inclusive place was developed and maintained. Some research literature conceptualized diversity settings as the perceptions of individuals within an organization/ institution regarding the degree to which an individual's diversity was appreciated as well as whether the organization/ institution advocated for fair

employment/ educational policies and practices while socially integrating underrepresented personnel. For example, organizational climate as (Northam, Gylo, Laurie, & Anita, 2015) defined is "the current common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life or its members' perceptions of and attitudes towards those dimensions" (p. 173).

The increasing importance of Intercultural Sensitivity triggered many definitions and perspectives to the term. Bronfenbrener, Harding, and Gallwey's study; cited in (Chen G. M., 1997) is one of the earliest studies dealing with the concept of sensitivity. They related the term 'sensitivity' to the generalized other and to individual differences (interpersonal sensitivity) covering all forms of social perception. McClelland (1958, p. 241; cited in (Chen G. M., 1997) associated sensitivity to the generalized other to the social norms of one's own group, while interpersonal sensitivity (Bronfenbrener, et al., 1958; cited in (Chen G. M., 1997) to the individual's ability to distinguish others' behaviours, perceptions, and feelings which is similar to intercultural sensitivity. They summarized the latter, then, in one's ability to accept personal complexity, to avoid inflexibility in communication, be conscious in interaction, appreciate the ideas exchanged, and tolerate intentional searching. (Bennett, 1984), however, summarized the term into five different stages that an individual undergoes shifting from ethnocentric stages to ethno relative stages; denial of cultural differences, defense of one's worldview, acceptance, adaptation to biculturalism and multiculturalism and integration accepting difference as an important life aspect. Intercultural sensitivity is related to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of interactional situations and deals mainly with the affective side of people.

Higher Education Diversity Studies

As far as the Algerian context is concerned, some Algerian studies proved Algerian learners' openness and readiness to exchange ideas with others on international levels. Algerian students revealed comprehension, partnership, and readiness to deal with German participants in German universities (Doring, et al., 2009).

The body of research on the outcomes of the diversity climate in colleges and universities has also grown over the last decade. For many higher education leaders, the need to increase campus diversity has become a practical imperative. In a comprehensive review of the research literature, the outcomes of diversity in higher education have found that campus diversity benefited individual students, the institution, the economy, private enterprise, and society at large. For example, the benefits included an educational experience that was enhanced by the presence of diversity (Hornbuckle, 2013).

Similarly, classroom and extracurricular interaction with diverse classmates, faculty and staff expanded the student's understanding of other cultures and prepared them for life outside the institution. In addition, diversity had the potential to enhance an institution's ability to meet its mission in areas of teaching and research and preparing students for life and work in a complex global society. It has benefited the economy, private sector, and society at large as diverse students, faculty, and staff have engaged the world around them. Students who had diverse experiences in college learned to work with and join others who also lived in a plural society and had a greater desire to advance racial harmony and openness. Higher education has a responsibility to prepare students to be positive citizens in a growing and diverse society. An essential component in the preparation of students to live and work in a pluralistic society is diverse faculty members. Studies found that students have greater success in college when they are mentored by a person of a different race. Then, when students graduate and enter the marketplace, they bring with them the ability to navigate within a rapidly changing demographic environment, which benefits the organizations in which they serve and society at large (Dogra, et al., 2013). A study in Algeria, done by Atamna El Khiar in November 2008, focused on the place of culture teaching in foreign language departments. The author of this thesis argued that teaching language as culture (language-culture) would compensate for the lack of direct contact with the natives, their language and their culture. He argued that teaching EFL in diverse language classes with appropriate programs rich in intercultural situations would enhance learners' intercultural understanding (Atamna, 2008). Relatively, recent studies have also focused on diversity benefits, if successfully managed, in many cultural settings like companies and other organizations through sharing expertise and ideas ensuring good individual as well as organizational results ((Cletus, Mahmood, Umar, & Ibrahim, 2018), (Sundari, 2018), (Itam & Bagali, 2019), (Mahmud, et al., 2020), (Shrestha & Parajuli, 2021)).

While many benefits of students' diversity have been found, this paper focused on whether cultural diversity inside EFL classes is useful when studying the relationships between EFL learners' cultural diversity and their positive attitudes towards the target culture and their intercultural skills.

III. Methodology

1. Research Participants

Two groups of fourteen and fifteen Algerian male and female students represent the sample for this study. They were first year English language students enrolling at the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Boumerdes, Algeria (IGEE Institut de Génie Electrique et Electronique).

Both groups one and two have been chosen in their first semester of English Language study in the IGEE institute in the listening/speaking module courses.

2. Research Tools and Data Collection

The main research tool used is a Likert scale to measure learners' attitudes and behaviours towards other cultures adapted from the main steps of *the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale* ISS developed by Guo-Ming and William Starosta (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2001). Likert scale items typically ask the respondents to rate their agreement with a given statement on a scale that ranges from one extreme to another (e.g., *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*).

This scale is originally written in the form of a questionnaire comprising 24 question items sequenced in a trial to measure individuals' intercultural sensitivity focusing on five main factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The adapted version used focused mainly on the above five dimensions within a national context with regard to the different cultures that exist within the Algerian territory considering the difference among them on mainly geographical and linguistic bases.

The new version labeled Intra-cultural Sensitivity Scale includes 24 question items sequenced on the basis of Bloom's Taxonomy (Armstrong, 2001) building in the different educational objectives that any learner undergoing a language course might go through, and also on the basis of Byram's prerequisites for building learners' Intercultural Competence (Byram, 1997).

The former has demystified the different concepts embedded in the whole learning/ teaching process and educational goals in relation to learners' thinking process. He has succeeded to *untangle this web* and improve student learning (Forhand, 2010). He has defined five main different steps for the thinking process in relation to learning objectives (Forhand, 2010) as follows:

1. Knowledge: Recall, or recognition of terms, ideas, procedure, and theories.

2. Comprehension: Translate, interpret, extrapolate, but not see full implications or transfer to other situations, closer to literal translation.

3. Application: Apply abstractions, general principles, or methods to specific concrete situations.

4. Analysis: Separation of a complex idea into its constituent parts and an understanding of organization and relationship between the parts. Includes realizing the distinction between hypothesis and fact as well as between relevant and extraneous variables

5. Synthesis: Creative, mental construction of ideas and concepts from multiple sources to form complex ideas into a new, integrated, and meaningful pattern subject to given constraints.

Through students' answers

The latter, however, has identified the main different steps for a language learner to be said to have an intercultural communicative competence as follows:1) Knowledge (*savoirs*), 2) Intercultural attitudes (savoir être), 3) Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), 4) Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), 5) Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*).

In a trial to combine learning objectives and intercultural competence prerequisites, the author of this study built the scales' questions as follows:

Mapping Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Byram's prerequisites for Intercultural Competence, and the Tntra-cultural Sensitivity Test in the Research Paper

| Bloom | Byram | ISS |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Knowledge | Knowledge | Interaction |
| | (savoirs) | Engagement |
| Comprehension | Intercultural | Respect for |
| _ | attitudes (savoir | Cultural |
| | être) | Differences |
| Application | Skills of | Interaction |
| | interpreting and | Confidence |
| | relating (savoir | |
| | comprendre) | |
| Analysis | Skills of | Interaction |
| | discovery and | Enjoyment |
| | interaction | |
| | (savoir | |
| | apprendre/faire) | |
| Synthesis | Critical cultural | Interaction |
| | awareness | Attentiveness |
| | (savoir | |
| | s'engager) | |

Table n° 01: Mapping the three blocks

The Scale and the Questionnaire were submitted on October, 18th, 2017 at 14h :30 during the Listening/ Speaking module. Students took almost half an hour during the course to give back the Questions' sheets. They were distributed after three months of study. Learners, then, were supposed to get used to study and to communication with one another. These modules are mainly taught to involve EFL learners more in listening and speaking tasks, group work, joint projects and group marks. This is mainly to focus on the interactional side of the English language through practice. Thus, making presentations and taking part in discussions on academic topics, discussing culturally rich topics including both native cultures and target cultures like food etiquette, ceremonies and celebrations, weddings and funerals, greetings and daily habits in addition to classroom incidents and cultural tasks engaging learners in different cultural contexts with diverse perspectives, and intercultural topics and courses organized by the teachers and the students are the mains interest of these modules as far as EFL is concerned. The main targeted objectives in that course are to make EFL learners able to make a presentation - the structure of presentations, use notes to speak from, introduce any topic, generalize, sequence, sign-post, describe similarities and differences, compare and contrast using visual aids, give examples and refer to research, emphasize, argue, disargue, summarize and conclude, control and lead a discussion, interrupt politely, ask and answer questions, start a point of view, agree or disagree, challenge and comment, make suggestions and draw conclusions.

3. **Results**

Results of both the questionnaire and the ISS match significantly with the hypothesis as a significant number of students came from different regions and portrayed notable cultural sensitivity through their answers.

a. The Questionnaire

Students' background questionnaire shows varied results in relation to their ages, gender, wilayas, and language dialects as follows:

| Students | Age | Gender | Wilaya/ City | Language/ Dialect |
|------------|-----|--------|--------------|----------------------|
| S1 | 17 | Μ | Msila | Arabic |
| S2 | 18 | Μ | Boumerdes | Arabic |
| S 3 | 18 | F | Bejaya | Kabyle |
| S4 | 17 | Μ | Setif | Arabic |
| S 5 | 18 | М | Ourgla | Targui/ Arabic |
| S6 | 17 | M | Chlef | Kabyle |

Table n° 02: Students' Background Questionnaire

| S7 | 18 | M | Boumerdes | Kabyle |
|------------|----|---|------------|---------|
| S8 | 19 | Μ | Ghardaia | Mzabi |
| S9 | 18 | Μ | Skikda | Arabic |
| S10 | 18 | Μ | Algiers | Kabyle |
| S11 | 18 | F | Tizi Ouzou | Kabyle |
| S12 | 18 | Μ | Jijel | Arabic |
| S13 | 18 | Μ | Batna | Chaoui |
| S14 | 18 | F | Liiol | Jijeli/ |
| 514 | 10 | Γ | Jijel | Arabic |
| S15 | 18 | Μ | Media | Arabic |
| S16 | 18 | F | Khenchla | Arabic |
| S17 | 18 | М | Algiers | Arabic |
| S18 | 18 | Μ | Msila | Arabic |
| S19 | 18 | Μ | Blida | Arabic |
| S20 | 18 | Μ | Bechar | Arabic |
| S21 | 18 | Μ | Biskra | Arbic |
| S22 | 17 | Μ | Batna | Arabic |
| S23 | 46 | F | Algiers | Arabic |
| S24 | 18 | F | Boumerdes | Arabic |
| S25 | 19 | Μ | Algiers | Arabic |
| S26 | 19 | Μ | Bejaya | Kabyle |
| S27 | 18 | Μ | Setif | Arabic |
| S28 | 17 | M | Boumerdes | Arabic |
| S29 | 17 | Μ | Tipaza | Arabic |

Results in columns 1 and 2 show that the majority of students are males (23 students), fourteen of them are aged 18 while 6 of them are aged 17. Only three of them are aged 19. There are only five females who are aged 18 and one aged 46.

Data in collumn four show that students' background wilaya/ city origins include 18 different wilayas.

In collumn five, however, results show six different Algerian dialects/ languages which all belong to Arabic and Amazigh languages.

b. The Scale

Groups One and Two/ IGEE: Twenty nine students Table n° 03: The Scale Results

| Number of Students/ The Attitude | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Somewha t agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|----------------------|----------|--------------------|-------|-------------------|
|--|----------------------|----------|--------------------|-------|-------------------|

| | Scale Questions | | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| | Q1 | 9 | 12 | 4 | 3 | 0 |
| | Q2 | 14 | 13 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| | Q3 | 14 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Q4 | 13 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 0 |
| | Q5 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 10 | 4 |
| | Q6 | 10 | 14 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| | Q7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 17 |
| respect for cultural | Q8 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 14 | 12 |
| differences | Q9 | 1 | | 6 | 14 | 6 |
| unterences | Q10 | 9 | 14 | 4 | 1 | |
| | Q11 | 0 | 2 | 10 | 6 | 4 |
| | Q12 | 5 | 14 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| interaction | Q13 | 13 | 11 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| confidence | Q14 | 4 | 10 | 9 | 4 | 1 |
| | Q15 | 0 | 8 | 10 | 9 | 2 |
| | Q16 | 1 | 4 | 9 | 10 | 5 |
| | Q17 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 16 | 5 |
| interaction | Q18 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 19 | 3 |
| enjoyment | Q19 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 8 | 2 |
| | Q20 | 1 | 2 | 11 | 10 | 2 |
| | Q21 | 2 | 1 | 14 | 6 | 2 |
| | Q22 | 0 | 2 | 13 | 7 | 4 |
| interaction | Q23 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 9 | |
| attentiveness | Q24 | 2 | 13 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| | Q25 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 7 |

Figure n° 01: Interaction Engagement



Results in figure 1 illustrate that disagreement of the students with the statements takes the biggest shares in the graph. As shown in the table, an average of 72% of the students expressed their disagreement with the five statements. Around 14% of the students have a middle position since they agree partially with the statement. An average of 13 % of the students, however, agree with the statements.



Results in figure 2 illustrate that in questions 6 and 10 respectively, an average of around 83% and 79.3 % students disagree with the statements. Around 7% and 14%, however, hold a middle position which reflects the fact that the majority of the students respect cultural differences. Two students only expressed their uneasiness with others with their agreement with the statements. In questions 7, 8, and 9, only two students disagreed with the questions which illustrates the same facts.



As illustrated in the above figure, in questions 11 and 15, more than 34% of the students agree with the statements while almost the same percentage holds a middle position. Only few students (6.89%, 27.58%) respectively, disagree with the statements.



In figure four, the degree of agreement holds the biggest share in the bar graphs above which shows learners' enjoyment of interaction and reflects their positive attitudes towards communicating with different others.



As far as students' interaction attentiveness is concerned (figure 5), learners' answers show a hesitating attitude for almost half the sample in both questions 21 and 22, while the remaining others expressed their agreement with the statements which reflects their attention while interacting with others. Little cultural differences among group members are noticed just by half the sample in Q23.

4. Discussion of the Results

Results reveal that the sample chosen is varied including both genders and three different ages. The sample chosen can be said to be a diverse population in terms of geographical location, linguistic background, and age. The twenty five scale's statements are divided into five groups interlinking the main prerequisites for Intercultural Sensitivity which mainly focus on the emotional side of the individuals, and Byram's prerequisites for developing an Intercultural Competence as clarified in the table above mapping all the components together with Bloom's Taxonomy for Educational objectives. The ISS questions were sequenced by the researcher in a trial to measure individuals' intercultural sensitivity: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness based on that mapping. The adapted version to be used focuses mainly on the above five dimensions within a **national context** with regard to the different cultures that exist within the Algerian territory considering mainly the geographical, linguistic/dialectical, as well as the ethnic differences.

Since the scale's statements express difficulties or uneasiness with different others, the more students agree with the statements of the scale, the more unconfortable they are out of their cultural milieu. In the first five statements, 72% of the students expressed their disagreement with the five statements which reveals the fact that they are more engaged in interaction with others and thus more interculturally sensitive and ready to build their intercultural competence. The 14% of the students who have a middle position since they agree partially with the statement reveals the fact that they are not ready enough for interaction. The 13% of the students, however, who agree with the statements reveal their uneasiness with interaction in a culturally different context.

In the five questions related to respect for cultural differences, the degree of agreement is sequenced in such a way that the more students disagree with the questions, the more they respect cultural differences in questions six and ten. While in questions seven, eight, and nine, the more students agree with the statements, the more respect they have for cultural differences.

In the five questions related to interaction confidence (Q11-15), however, results show that not all the students interact fluently with enough self-confidence necessary for interaction. This can be related to both their linguistic competences and intercultural readiness to interact with enough self-confidence.

Answers related to interaction enjoyment questions show that the degree of agreement holds the biggest share in the bar graphs above which shows learners' enjoyment of interaction and reflects their positive attitudes towards communicating with different others.

As far as Interaction attentiveness is concerned, little cultural differences among group members are noticed just by half the sample in Q23 which reflects

students ease awareness while communicating with their group mates. They are aware of linguistic differences expressed through different accents as shown in students' answers to Q24.

Since effective cross-cultural communication is based on the acquisition of a set of competences as suggested by Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), awareness of cultural differences is not enough to interact effectively with others. To test EFL learners' differences and similarities on cultural basis in relation to learning and behaviour in classroom created intercultural contexts deems necessary for preparing culturally sensitive students.

As seen in the results above, the participants have respect for cultural differences, they enjoy interacting with foreign people, they are confident while interacting with foreigners, they are eager and open minded to engage with foreigners but they are a bit concerned with knowing more about foreigners. The data then reveal that the participants in this research possess high intercultural sensitivity.

According to Chen and Yang (Chen & Yang, 2016), people with interaction attentive ability tend to be intercultural sensitive enough while interacting with others and maintain an appropriate interaction on intercultural measures. That was the case with these groups as results show.

IV. Conclusion

As diversity mirrors our natural evolution, it is necessary to prepare teaching programs that take into consideration these human differences, and with them, raising intercultural sensitivity skills that might build and strengthen learners' inherent outlooks. Creating culturally diverse classes and setting up made-up intercultural contexts inside EFL classes must be the starting point for extracting their inherent intercultural sensitivity genes to later broaden them to real intercultural contexts.

Intercultural Competence is necessary for learning a foreign language and unawareness of cultural barriers may hinder the whole process of English instruction. Intercultural Sensitivity is the starting point language education has to focus on to target the above objectives.

Making some practical realistic suggestions as to the way(s) the distribution of students on Higher Education institutions should take place in order to create a heterogeneous space where different regional cultures cross. Thus, building Intracultural and Interregional cultural competences of learners should be the starting point to reach an Intercultural Competence in foreign language education. In other words, language teaching success is deeply related to how varied are language classes with students coming from different territories holding different cultural identities.

In the light of the review of literature, culturally diverse institutions; then; seem to provide opportunities to develop and practise intercultural skills, particularly with collaborative activities and group work so as the case with the research group chosen in this study.

Therefore, EFL classrooms should provide students with practices that focus on acquiring and developing creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, self direction, and innovation skills and cross-cultural skills through diverse cultural activities taking into consideration all group diversity measures on well prepared cultural measures.

Since acquiring cross cultural skills is one of the key elements, the obligation of becoming fitting cultural milieus to develop intercultural communication skills among students must be added to the list of qualities and standards of any foreign language classroom.

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