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TEACHING ENGLISH AS A BRIDGE TO INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, it is discussed that contemporary English language teaching (ELT) can and should function as a deliberate bridge to intercultural understanding in multilingual classrooms. Moving beyond narrow language skills, teachers who foreground intercultural competence prepare learners to communicate across cultural boundaries, negotiate meaning with speakers of diverse English varieties, and reflect critically on their own and others' cultural assumptions. The article synthesizes influential theoretical work on intercultural competence and multilingual subjectivity, discusses practical classroom strategies (literature-based exchange, task design, reflective journals, and collaborative projects), and offers reflective vignettes from teaching contexts that illustrate how these strategies play out in practice. Finally, it outlines implications for teacher education and curriculum design, arguing that intercultural aims must be explicit, assessed meaningfully, and woven into everyday language tasks.

Keywords: English language teaching, intercultural competence, multilingual classrooms, global communication, reflective teaching, cultural awareness, language pedagogy.

English classrooms today are rarely homogeneous. Globalization, migration, and digital communication have produced classrooms where students bring multiple languages, varied cultural backgrounds, and differing experiences with English (as a national language, a foreign language, or a lingua franca). In such contexts, teaching English only as a code — pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary — misses a critical opportunity: developing learners' capacity to interpret, respond to, and create meaning across cultural difference. Intercultural competence — the ability to communicate

effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures, and to reflect on one's own cultural positioning — should therefore be a central objective of ELT in multilingual classrooms (Deardorff, 2006). Intercultural competence has been conceptualized in various ways across applied linguistics and international education. Deardorff's (2006) framework emphasizes attitudes (openness, curiosity, respect), knowledge (cultural self-awareness and others' worldviews), skills (listening, observing, interpreting), and internal/external outcomes such as adaptability and effective communication — all framed as developmental and assessable. This model is especially useful for teachers because it links classroom activities to observable learning outcomes and suggests dimensions for formative assessment. Michael Byram and colleagues have extended the argument that language education should aim for *education for intercultural citizenship*, where language teaching fosters not only communicative ability but civic-mindedness, critical cultural awareness, and ethical engagement with difference (Byram, 2008). Byram's perspective pushes educators to ask: what sorts of citizens do we want English learners to become, and how can language lessons contribute to that formation? Parallel to these intercultural frameworks, research on the multilingual subject reminds us that learners inhabit complex linguistic identities. Claire Kramsch (2009) foregrounds the ways learners negotiate identity through language learning — carrying memories, emotions, and practices from their multiple languages into classrooms. This emphasis on the learner as a socially situated, identity-forming subject encourages teachers to value learners' linguistic repertoires as resources for intercultural exchange rather than deficits to be corrected. Finally, scholarship on English as a lingua franca (ELF) — notably Jennifer Jenkins's work — challenges native-speaker norms and invites teachers to prepare students for communication with diverse international interlocutors, not only with idealized native speakers. This means teaching strategies for negotiation, repair, and accommodation, and shifting the classroom gaze from accent elimination toward intelligibility and mutual comprehension. Such an orientation is crucial when intercultural understanding is an explicit learning aim.

Why make intercultural aims explicit in ELT?

There are pragmatic and ethical reasons. Pragmatically, learners who can navigate cultural differences communicate more successfully in real-world interactions — study-abroad, workplace exchanges, or online collaborations. Ethically, education that ignores culture risks reproducing stereotypes or perpetuating a one-dimensional, often

Anglocentric vision of English. Making intercultural aims explicit helps teachers select materials and tasks that expose learners to multiple perspectives and give them tools to reflect critically on culture. Empirical classroom action research also shows that structured intercultural activities (book clubs, exchange projects) can foster curiosity and reduce stereotyping when carefully scaffolded.

1. Literature-based cultural exchanges (close reading + global book clubs)

Short stories, poems, and children's literature are excellent vehicles for cultural exploration because they simultaneously engage language, empathy, and cultural context. Teachers can pair local texts with texts from partner classrooms abroad, or run in-class "culture circles" where students discuss characters' values and choices. The learning objectives include perspective-taking, vocabulary in socio-cultural contexts, and reflective dialogue. Scaffolding (pre-teaching key cultural background, guided questions, language prompts) is essential to ensure discussions go beyond superficial comparisons. Empirical reports of book-club style exchanges show gains in mutual curiosity and specific cultural knowledge when discussion prompts are focused on perspective and emotion rather than trivia.

2. Reflective journals and guided self-awareness activities

Intercultural competence requires self-knowledge. Short, regular journal prompts — e.g., "Describe a time you felt misunderstood because of cultural expectations" — encourage learners to notice their assumptions and track growth. Pair journals with occasional peer feedback or teacher comments that model empathic questioning. Over a semester, journals create an evidence base for assessing internal outcomes such as increased openness or empathy.

5. Classroom discourse norms that value linguistic diversity

Simple classroom practices — asking students to compare idioms from their languages, celebrating multilingual translations, or using students' home languages strategically for explanatory work — shift classroom identity away from monolingual normativity. Kramsch's notion of the multilingual subject supports such practices: learners' languages are assets that enrich classroom meaning-making and intercultural insight.

There are real challenges. Time constraints, high-stakes curricula focused on standardized tests, and teachers' limited training in intercultural facilitation can all impede efforts. Teachers must also avoid tokenism — learning activities that treat culture as a set of facts (holidays, food) rather than as systems of meaning. Finally, power asymmetries in classroom interactions (whose culture is normative?) must be addressed openly; otherwise, intercultural work can inadvertently reproduce inequalities. These challenges underscore the need for institutional support, realistic scope-setting, and ongoing professional learning. To mainstream intercultural aims, curricula should embed intercultural learning objectives at all levels (not only as optional modules). Textbooks and task banks should include materials that represent diverse cultural perspectives and provide teacher notes on scaffolding intercultural reflection. At the policy level, exam frameworks that reward communicative competence and intercultural skills (e.g., assessing negotiation or perspective-taking) would signal the importance of these aims to teachers and institutions.

Teaching English as a bridge to intercultural understanding is both feasible and necessary in multilingual classrooms. Theoretical advances (Deardorff's assessment-focused model, Byram's civic orientation, Kramsch's multilingual subjectivity) provide a strong intellectual foundation; practical strategies — literature-based exchange, task design for negotiation, reflective journals, and collaborative digital projects — show how these aims can be realized in daily practice. The work demands teacher preparation, supportive assessment approaches, and a curriculum that values cultural complexity over simplistic cultural facts. When English classrooms make intercultural aims explicit, they prepare learners not only to use a language but to engage ethically and effectively with an interconnected world.

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