

INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: INSIGHTS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

Olivera Presi

"Aleksandër Moisiu" University, Albania, oliverapresi@uamd.edu.al

Abstract: The internationalization of higher education has significantly transformed the goals of English language teaching, shifting the focus from linguistic proficiency toward the development of intercultural competence, student engagement, and cultural adaptability. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between intercultural competence, language learning theories, and innovative teaching techniques in university English language classrooms. The research investigates how contemporary pedagogical practices contribute to the development of intercultural competence and enhance student engagement in higher education. The study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on document analysis, semi-structured interviews with university lecturers, and classroom observations. Thematic and comparative analysis were used to identify recurring patterns linking intercultural competence, sociocultural language learning theories, and innovative teaching practices. The results indicate that the integration of communicative language teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and reflective teaching was perceived by lecturers and observed in classroom interaction as increasing student participation and promoting openness to diverse perspectives. Authentic communication tasks, collaborative learning, and technology-mediated intercultural interaction emerged as key factors supporting cultural adaptability. The findings highlight the importance of integrating intercultural competence into curriculum design and assessment in order to prepare students for communication in multicultural academic and professional environments. The study contributes to the ongoing discussion on internationalization in higher education and provides recommendations for lecturers, institutions, and researchers interested in innovative language teaching practices.

Keywords: intercultural competence, English language teaching, student engagement, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the internationalization of higher education have significantly reshaped the objectives of English language teaching (ELT). Universities increasingly operate within global academic networks and expect graduates to communicate effectively in multicultural environments and collaborate across cultural boundaries (Baker & Fang, 2023). In this context, English language classrooms are required to foster intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency, as effective communication involves not only language accuracy but also the ability to interpret and negotiate cultural meaning (Bennett, 1986; Byram, 1997).

Intercultural competence has therefore become a central outcome of foreign language education. It encompasses attitudes of openness and curiosity, knowledge of social groups and cultural practices, skills of interaction and interpretation, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). Contemporary perspectives further emphasize that intercultural competence involves the development of flexibility and adaptability in communication across diverse cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2020). Despite this growing recognition, research still provides limited empirical insight into how innovative teaching techniques simultaneously enhance intercultural competence and student engagement in higher education settings (Luo & Chan, 2023; Zheng & Gao, 2021).

Language learning theories offer an important theoretical foundation for integrating intercultural learning into ELT. Sociocultural perspectives highlight the central role of interaction, collaboration, and cultural mediation in language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, communicative approaches to language teaching emphasize authentic communication and meaningful use of language as core principles of instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 2020). These theoretical frameworks suggest that language learning is inherently social and culturally situated, reinforcing the need to embed intercultural dimensions within classroom practice.

In recent years, the expansion of international mobility programmes, digital intercultural exchanges, and multicultural university environments has further intensified the demand for pedagogical approaches that integrate language learning with intercultural awareness (Helm & Beaven, 2021; Akande et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2023). European policy frameworks, such as the Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, explicitly highlight mediation, plurilingualism, and intercultural competence as essential components of language education in contemporary higher education (Council of Europe, 2020). This evolving educational landscape requires a shift from traditional teacher-centred instruction toward learner-centred and interaction-based pedagogies that encourage collaboration, reflection, and real-world communication.

Innovative teaching techniques—including project-based learning, technology-mediated interaction, and collaborative problem-solving tasks—provide opportunities to create meaningful learning experiences that connect linguistic development with cultural understanding. Research on student engagement indicates that meaningful, participatory, and contextually relevant tasks significantly increase motivation and active involvement in higher education (Leach & Zepke, 2011). Therefore, examining the role of innovative pedagogy in fostering intercultural competence and student engagement represents an important contribution to the ongoing transformation of English language teaching in higher education.

The present study addresses this need by exploring how innovative teaching practices contribute to intercultural competence development and student engagement in university English language classrooms, offering insights relevant to the broader process of higher education internationalization. In this paper, innovative techniques refer to classroom-based and technology-mediated practices such as project-based learning, virtual intercultural exchanges, intercultural case discussions, role-play/simulation tasks, collaborative problem-solving, and structured reflective writing.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design aimed at exploring the relationship between intercultural competence, language learning theories, and innovative teaching techniques in English language teaching within higher education. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on understanding teaching practices, classroom interaction, and lecturers' perspectives on intercultural learning rather than measuring predefined variables. The comparative dimension of the research enabled the identification of recurring patterns and relationships across different data sources. The comparative element involved cross-source comparison (documents, interviews, observations) to identify convergent and divergent patterns.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in university English language courses in higher education. Participants included English language lecturers with experience in integrating intercultural elements into their teaching practices. The participants were selected using purposive sampling in order to ensure that they had relevant experience in communicative, student-centred, and culturally oriented teaching approaches. The study was conducted within the Department of Foreign Languages at “Aleksandër Moisiu” University in Albania. A total of six university lecturers participated in the semi-structured interviews. All participants had experience teaching undergraduate English language courses that incorporated intercultural elements into classroom practice. Classroom observations were carried out in four undergraduate courses over a period of eight weeks, allowing for the examination of different instructional strategies and interaction patterns across multiple teaching contexts.

Although the study is situated within one institution, insights are drawn from multiple undergraduate courses and lecturers, offering a contextualized view of higher education ELT practice.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using three complementary methods:

Document Analysis.

A review of relevant literature on intercultural competence, language learning theories, and innovative teaching practices was conducted to establish the theoretical framework of the study. This step provided the conceptual basis for interpreting the empirical findings.

Semi-Structured Interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university lecturers to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to integrating intercultural competence into English language teaching. The interviews focused on teaching strategies, classroom activities, and the perceived impact of innovative techniques on student engagement and cultural awareness.

Classroom Observations.

Classroom observations were carried out in English language courses where lecturers implemented communicative and intercultural teaching practices. Observations focused on student participation, interaction patterns, collaborative learning activities, and the use of culturally oriented teaching materials.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were coded to identify recurring themes related to intercultural competence, student engagement, and innovative pedagogy. The themes were then compared across data sources to identify similarities and differences. This comparative analysis allowed the study to explore how theoretical principles were reflected in classroom practice.

Research Validity and Reliability

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing data from document analysis, interviews, and classroom observations. Member checking was used by reviewing interpretations to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives. These procedures strengthened the reliability and trustworthiness of the study.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and document review revealed several recurring themes related to the relationship between intercultural competence, innovative teaching techniques, and student engagement in university English language classrooms. The findings are presented according to three major thematic categories: student engagement, development of cultural adaptability, and the role of innovative pedagogy in classroom interaction.

Student Engagement and Active Participation

One of the most consistent findings across all data sources was the positive impact of interactive and communicative activities on student engagement. Lecturers reported that students were more motivated and willing to participate when lessons included collaborative tasks such as group discussions, project-based activities, role plays, and intercultural case studies. Classroom observations confirmed that these activities generated higher levels of participation compared to traditional lecture-based instruction.

Students demonstrated increased willingness to express opinions, ask questions, and contribute to discussions when tasks were connected to real-life communication and global topics. Activities that required problem solving and collaboration were particularly effective in promoting active participation and sustained attention.

One lecturer noted that “students became significantly more confident when discussing intercultural misunderstandings through structured role-play scenarios,” highlighting the practical impact of simulation-based tasks on communicative engagement.

Development of Cultural Adaptability

The findings also indicate that exposure to intercultural learning activities contributed to the development of cultural adaptability. Students engaged in tasks involving cultural comparison, intercultural communication scenarios, and reflection on cultural perspectives showed greater openness to diverse viewpoints. Lecturers observed that students gradually became more confident in interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds and more aware of cultural differences in communication styles.

Classroom observations revealed that students increasingly demonstrated flexibility in communication strategies, including negotiation of meaning, clarification requests, and respectful disagreement. These behaviours were interpreted as indicators of growing intercultural awareness and adaptability.

Impact of Innovative Teaching Techniques

Innovative teaching techniques emerged as a key factor linking intercultural competence and student engagement. Technology-mediated communication, multimedia materials, and project-based learning were frequently identified as effective tools for creating authentic and meaningful learning environments. Activities such as online discussions, presentations on global topics, and collaborative projects enhanced both engagement and intercultural understanding.

Lecturers emphasized that these approaches helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Students were more likely to perceive language learning as relevant and meaningful when classroom activities reflected real-world communication contexts. The most frequently reported techniques were

- a) intercultural projects (project-based learning),
- b) technology-mediated intercultural communication (online discussions/virtual exchanges),
- c) intercultural case studies and simulations (role plays), and
- d) reflective tasks (journals, reflection prompts).

Overall, the results demonstrate that integrating intercultural learning and innovative pedagogy into English language teaching contributes to increased student engagement, improved interaction, and the development of cultural adaptability in higher education contexts.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm the growing consensus that intercultural competence, student engagement, and innovative pedagogy are closely interconnected in higher education English language teaching. The results demonstrate that when intercultural learning is integrated into classroom practice through interactive and student-centred approaches, students become more actively involved in the learning process and develop skills that extend beyond linguistic proficiency. This section discusses the pedagogical implications of these findings and situates them within the broader context of internationalization in higher education.

Intercultural Competence as a Driver of Engagement

One of the most significant outcomes of the study is the strong relationship between intercultural learning and student engagement. The results suggest that intercultural content does not function as an additional component of language teaching but rather as a catalyst that increases students' motivation and participation. When classroom activities address global issues, cultural differences, or real-life communication scenarios, students perceive the learning process as more meaningful and relevant to their future academic and professional lives.

This finding supports the view that engagement increases when learners see the practical value of what they are studying. Intercultural tasks create authentic communicative needs, encouraging students to use English as a tool for expression and interaction rather than as an abstract academic subject. As a result, students become more willing to participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, and express personal opinions. Students were not passive recipients of intercultural content but active co-constructors of meaning within collaborative tasks. This shift from passive reception to active participation reinforces the learner-centred orientation of innovative intercultural pedagogy in higher education contexts.

The Role of Innovative Teaching Techniques in Higher Education

The study highlights the importance of innovative teaching techniques in creating active learning environments. Traditional lecture-based instruction often limits opportunities for interaction and meaningful communication. In contrast, the use of project-based learning, collaborative tasks, and technology-mediated communication creates opportunities for experiential learning and real-world application.

In higher education contexts, these techniques are particularly relevant because university students are expected to develop independent learning skills and critical thinking abilities. The findings indicate that innovative pedagogical practices encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning, work collaboratively, and engage in reflective thinking. These competencies are essential not only for language development but also for lifelong learning and professional adaptability.

Technology-mediated intercultural interaction emerged as an especially valuable tool. Digital communication platforms allow students to interact with international peers, access diverse cultural perspectives, and participate in global discussions. Such experiences extend learning beyond the classroom and reinforce the connection between language learning and real-world communication.

However, the integration of innovative techniques may be constrained by institutional curriculum structures and time limitations, which can affect the systematic implementation of intercultural activities.

Development of Cultural Adaptability in University Classrooms

Another important finding concerns the development of cultural adaptability. Students exposed to intercultural tasks demonstrated greater openness, tolerance, and flexibility in communication. These outcomes reflect the gradual transition from ethnocentric perspectives toward more interculturally sensitive attitudes.

Cultural adaptability is particularly important in higher education, where students increasingly participate in international exchange programmes, online collaborations, and multicultural academic environments. The findings suggest that classroom activities can serve as preparatory spaces where students develop the confidence and skills needed to navigate these experiences successfully.

The results also emphasize the importance of reflective learning. Activities such as discussions, presentations, and reflective writing encourage students to examine their own cultural assumptions and consider alternative perspectives. This reflective dimension is crucial for the development of intercultural competence, as it promotes critical thinking and self-awareness.

Implications for Curriculum Design

The findings of this study have important implications for curriculum development in higher education. First, intercultural competence should be explicitly integrated into course objectives and learning outcomes. Rather than being treated as an optional component, intercultural learning should be recognized as a core objective of English language education.

Second, assessment methods should reflect this broader focus. Traditional language assessments often prioritize grammar and vocabulary, while intercultural competence remains difficult to evaluate (Luo & Chan, 2023). The results suggest that alternative assessment methods—such as presentations, projects, portfolios, and reflective journals—can provide valuable insights into students' intercultural development (Akanke et al., 2021; Dimitrov & Haque, 2022).

Third, teacher training and professional development play a crucial role. Lecturers need support in designing and implementing intercultural activities, using digital tools, and adopting reflective teaching practices. Continuous professional development can help educators adapt to the evolving demands of internationalized higher education (Dimitrov & Haque, 2022).

Practical Implications for Classroom Practice

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several strategies that can be implemented in university English language classrooms:

- Incorporating collaborative projects on global topics
- Using case studies and intercultural scenarios for discussion
- Encouraging student presentations on cultural themes
- Integrating online intercultural exchanges and digital communication
- Using reflective tasks to promote self-awareness and critical thinking

These practices create a learning environment in which language learning becomes a meaningful and socially relevant process.

Technique-to-Outcome Alignment in Intercultural Development

A closer analysis of classroom practices reveals a clear relationship between specific innovative techniques and particular dimensions of intercultural competence. Project-based learning was strongly associated with increased student engagement and a greater sense of ownership over the learning process, as students were required to research, negotiate roles, and present culturally informed content collaboratively. Technology-mediated intercultural exchanges, including online discussions and virtual interaction with international peers, enhanced authenticity and supported the development of communicative adaptability in real-time intercultural contexts. Intercultural case studies and simulation tasks, such as role plays, promoted perspective-taking by encouraging students to examine situations from multiple cultural viewpoints and respond to culturally sensitive scenarios. Structured reflective tasks, including journals and guided reflection prompts, contributed to the development of critical cultural awareness by fostering self-examination of assumptions and attitudes. Finally, collaborative problem-solving activities strengthened students' ability to negotiate meaning, manage misunderstandings, and co-construct knowledge in culturally diverse interactional settings. Together, these findings demonstrate that innovative techniques are not merely methodological variations but targeted pedagogical tools that correspond to specific components of intercultural competence development in higher education.

Contribution to the Internationalization of Higher Education

The results of this study contribute to ongoing discussions on the internationalization of higher education. English language classrooms play a central role in preparing students for participation in global academic and professional communities. By integrating intercultural competence into language teaching, universities can support students' readiness for international collaboration and mobility.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for a shift from traditional language teaching toward a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach. English language education in higher education must move beyond linguistic accuracy and embrace the broader goal of preparing students to communicate effectively in diverse cultural contexts.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its qualitative design and the relatively small number of participants involved. As the research was conducted within a single institutional context, the findings reflect a specific higher education environment and may not be directly generalizable to other educational systems. Furthermore, the study relied primarily on lecturers' perspectives and classroom observations, without incorporating direct student interviews or quantitative measurement tools. Future research could expand the sample size, include multiple institutions, and employ mixed-method approaches to provide a broader and more comprehensive understanding of intercultural competence development in higher education.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationship between intercultural competence, innovative teaching techniques, and student engagement in higher education English language classrooms. The findings demonstrate that the integration of intercultural learning with communicative and student-centred pedagogical approaches significantly enhances active participation, motivation, and cultural adaptability among university students.

The results confirm that intercultural competence is not a peripheral component of language education but a central objective aligned with the internationalization of higher education. When innovative teaching techniques—such as collaborative projects, technology-mediated communication, reflective tasks, and culturally oriented discussions—are systematically integrated into classroom practice, students demonstrate greater openness to diverse perspectives, improved interaction skills, and increased engagement in the learning process.

The study also highlights the importance of reflective teaching and curriculum alignment. Intercultural competence should be embedded within course objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. English language classrooms in higher education can function as dynamic spaces for preparing students to communicate effectively in multicultural academic and professional contexts.

In terms of implications for the field, the findings contribute to contemporary discussions on transforming English language teaching from a linguistically focused discipline into a holistic educational framework that supports intercultural development and global readiness. Future research should further explore innovative assessment tools and digital intercultural learning environments to strengthen the integration of intercultural competence within higher education curricula.

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