



TEACHING MULTICULTURAL LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND CONTEMPORARY PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity of higher education requires teachers to adapt their instructional methods so that students from different backgrounds can participate confidently and effectively. This article examines common challenges instructors face when teaching multicultural groups and outlines pedagogical approaches that support student engagement and learning. The discussion focuses on communication differences, varied academic preparation, and contrasting expectations about teaching and learning. It also highlights evidence-based strategies—such as culturally responsive planning, clear communication, collaborative activities, and student-centered tasks—that help teachers work more effectively with diverse student populations.

Introduction

Universities today serve students from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This diversity enriches classroom discussions and broadens academic perspectives, but it also presents new teaching responsibilities. Research shows that students' participation patterns, communication styles, and expectations about learning are often shaped by their cultural experiences (UNESCO, 2023). Therefore, a single approach to teaching rarely fits all learners. Teachers must understand how cultural and linguistic factors influence students' classroom behavior, motivation, and confidence. This article examines the main challenges of teaching multicultural learners in higher education and discusses practical approaches that can strengthen their learning experience.

Challenges in teaching multicultural students

One of the most frequently noted challenges involves communication. Students may share the same academic goals but differ in how they express ideas, show agreement, or ask questions. Some learners may hesitate to contribute because they fear making mistakes in the language of instruction, while others may be more confident or direct. Studies show that culturally influenced communication styles can lead to misinterpretations or silence in the classroom if teachers are unaware of these differences (Siwatu, 2021).

Academic expectations also vary widely. Students accustomed to teacher-centered classrooms may find open discussion or critical thinking tasks unfamiliar, while students from more

interactive learning traditions may expect frequent dialogue. These differences can affect engagement and create uncertainty about what the teacher expects (Chen&Hong, 2020).

Language proficiency is another key factor. Multilingual learners may understand content but struggle to express ideas clearly or quickly during discussions. This affects both classroom communication and academic writing. Research indicates that this gap can influence confidence and willingness to participate (Li&Wang, 2023).

In addition, teachers sometimes face challenges when lessons include culturally sensitive issues. Students may interpret certain topics differently depending on their backgrounds, which can lead to discomfort or confusion. Without sufficient preparation, teachers may unintentionally use examples that some students do not relate to or understand (Gorski, 2020).

Contemporary pedagogical approaches for multicultural learners

Several teaching approaches have been found effective in multicultural classrooms. One of the most well-supported is culturally responsive teaching, which encourages teachers to connect course material to students' lived experiences and cultural knowledge. This helps learners feel recognized and makes academic content easier to relate to (UNESCO, 2023).

Clear and structured communication also plays an important role. Providing explicit instructions, modelling tasks, and checking understanding can reduce confusion, especially for multilingual learners. Research suggests that clear expectations and step-by-step guidance improve students' confidence and participation (Li&Wang, 2023).

Collaborative learning is another valuable strategy. Group work allows students to learn from one another, compare perspectives, and practice communication in a supportive environment. When groups are thoughtfully formed, they foster interaction across cultural boundaries and help reduce stereotypes (Chen&Hong, 2020).

Differentiated instruction can also support students with varying levels of language proficiency or academic preparation. Offering multiple task options, adjusting workload, or allowing varied types of responses enables students to demonstrate what they know without feeling overwhelmed.

Teachers also benefit from continuous reflection and professional development. Studies emphasize that teaching diverse groups requires ongoing learning about cultural communication, student expectations, and teaching methods that work across backgrounds (Gorski, 2020).

Conclusion

Teaching multicultural learners in higher education requires an understanding of how cultural and linguistic differences influence communication, motivation, and academic performance. While challenges such as communication barriers, varied expectations, and language proficiency differences can complicate instruction, research shows that these difficulties can be addressed with thoughtful and flexible teaching approaches. Culturally responsive pedagogy, clear communication, collaborative work, and differentiated tasks help students participate more actively and develop greater confidence in their abilities. As university environments continue to diversify, teachers who commit to adapting their methods and deepening their knowledge of multicultural education contribute significantly to students' academic growth

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