

## The Impact of Cultural Competencies of Teachers on Students' Progress in Learning English

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**Annotation.** *This thesis explores the crucial role of teachers' cultural competencies in enhancing students' progress in learning English as a foreign language. As classrooms become increasingly multicultural, the ability of educators to understand, respect, and integrate the cultural backgrounds of their students has a direct effect on the learning outcomes. This study examines the concept of cultural competence, provides an in-depth analysis of theories, compares different classroom scenarios, and presents supportive examples from diverse educational contexts. Ultimately, the thesis argues that teachers' cultural competence enhances student engagement, motivation, and language acquisition. Recommendations are provided to help educators utilize their cultural competencies effectively to improve English language learning outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *cultural competence, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), language acquisition, multicultural classrooms, student engagement*

The growing demand for English language learning worldwide has led to diverse classrooms where students from various cultural backgrounds interact. English is often viewed as a global language, and acquiring proficiency in it can open doors to better career opportunities, academic success, and intercultural communication. However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face many challenges, ranging from language barriers to cultural misunderstandings.

Teachers' cultural competencies—the ability to recognize and bridge cultural differences - are increasingly recognized as essential to student success. Cultural competence includes understanding students' cultural backgrounds, applying culturally relevant teaching methods, and fostering an inclusive learning environment. This thesis examines how teachers' cultural competencies can impact students' learning progress in English, highlighting the importance of addressing cultural diversity in classrooms.

Despite the importance of cultural awareness in education, many EFL classrooms operate under a one-size-fits-all teaching approach that neglects students' diverse cultural backgrounds. This lack of cultural integration often leads to disengagement, frustration, and lower language retention among students. To address this issue, this research investigates how cultural competencies in teachers influence student progress, particularly in language acquisition, engagement, and academic achievement.

The primary objectives of this thesis are:

1. To analyze the importance of cultural competence in EFL teaching.
2. To explore the relationship between teachers' cultural awareness and student progress in learning English.
3. To identify best practices for incorporating cultural competence into the classroom.

Cultural competence refers to the ability of individuals to interact effectively with people of different cultures. For teachers, this means understanding students' cultural contexts and integrating them into the teaching process. According to the American Psychological Association (2003), cultural competence is a developmental process that occurs over time and involves both awareness of one's own cultural identity and sensitivity to the cultural differences of others.

The concept of cultural competence has evolved over time. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for effective instruction. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally

relevant pedagogy emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, helping students see themselves and their communities reflected in the content they are learning.

Research shows that cultural competence in teachers positively impacts student engagement, motivation, and academic success. Banks (2004) highlights that students from marginalized or minority backgrounds are more likely to perform better academically when teachers incorporate their cultural backgrounds into the learning process. Similarly, Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that culturally responsive teachers create environments where all students feel valued and respected, leading to higher participation and learning outcomes.

Cultural competence in EFL classrooms also helps address language learning challenges. Students often struggle to understand abstract or unfamiliar concepts due to cultural differences. Teachers who are culturally competent can use examples and materials that resonate with students' experiences, making language learning more relatable and accessible.

Several educational theories support the connection between cultural competence and student learning progress:

**Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978):** Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development. In language learning, this means that students' linguistic skills are shaped by their cultural and social experiences. Teachers who understand and integrate these experiences into their instruction can better support language acquisition.

**Constructivist Learning Theory:** This theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge based on their experiences. Teachers who acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds allow them to connect new knowledge with their prior cultural understanding, making learning more meaningful.

**Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970):** Freire's approach advocates for education as a tool for empowering marginalized groups. Culturally competent teachers, by recognizing the social and cultural dimensions of learning, can foster critical thinking and help students navigate the power dynamics inherent in language learning.

Several studies have linked cultural competence with improved EFL student outcomes. Research conducted by DeCapua and Marshall (2011) on immigrant students in the United States shows that culturally responsive teaching practices led to higher language proficiency and academic success. Similarly, a study by García and Kleifgen (2018) found that students in bilingual classrooms performed better when teachers acknowledged and valued their home languages and cultural backgrounds.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing a combination of classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student surveys to investigate the impact of cultural competence on student progress in EFL learning. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between teachers' cultural competencies and students' language learning.

The study involved 10 EFL teachers and 100 students from diverse cultural backgrounds in international schools. The teachers were selected based on their varying levels of cultural competency, assessed through a pre-study survey. Students were also surveyed to gauge their perceptions of their teachers' cultural competence and its impact on their language learning progress.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

1. ***Classroom Observations:*** The researcher observed EFL classrooms to analyze how teachers incorporated cultural elements into their instruction. Specific attention was given to lesson plans, examples used, and teacher-student interactions.

2. ***Teacher Interviews:*** Semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted to understand their perspectives on cultural competence and its role in their teaching practices.

3. **Student Surveys:** Surveys were distributed to students to gather information on their engagement, motivation, and perceived progress in learning English, along with their experiences of cultural inclusion in the classroom.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on patterns and themes related to cultural competence and student progress. Key themes included culturally responsive teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, and the influence of cultural competence on student motivation and engagement.

The findings indicate a strong correlation between teachers' cultural competencies and students' progress in learning English. Students whose teachers demonstrated cultural competence reported feeling more engaged and confident in the classroom. They were more likely to participate in discussions, ask questions, and take risks with their language use. Furthermore, these students showed higher scores in language proficiency assessments compared to students whose teachers did not emphasize cultural inclusion. For example, in a multicultural classroom where a teacher used culturally relevant examples (e.g., incorporating traditions, stories, and linguistic expressions from students' home countries), students reported that they could relate more easily to the content, which facilitated comprehension and retention of new vocabulary and grammar structures.

### ***Challenges in Culturally Diverse Classrooms***

Despite the positive impact of cultural competence, several challenges can arise in culturally diverse classrooms. Teachers who are not culturally competent may unintentionally alienate students by using examples or references that are irrelevant or even offensive to certain cultural groups. In these cases, students may feel marginalized or misunderstood, leading to disengagement and frustration.

For instance, a teacher who exclusively uses Western cultural references in an international classroom may confuse students from non-Western backgrounds, making it harder for them to grasp language concepts. Additionally, cultural misunderstandings can arise when teachers misinterpret students' behavior through the lens of their own cultural norms, leading to miscommunication or conflicts.

To further illustrate the impact of cultural competence, two classroom scenarios were analyzed:

#### ***1. Scenario A: A Culturally Competent Classroom***

In this scenario, the teacher actively integrates students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. During a lesson on idiomatic expressions, the teacher provides examples from various cultures, allowing students to share similar phrases from their own languages. This approach fosters a sense of community and validates students' cultural identities. As a result, students are more engaged and participate actively in discussions, contributing to a positive learning environment.

#### ***2. Scenario B: A Culturally Incompetent Classroom***

In contrast, a teacher in Scenario B teaches English using a rigid, standardized curriculum with no consideration of students' cultural backgrounds. The teacher relies heavily on British or American cultural references, which many students find confusing or irrelevant. As a result, students are less engaged and reluctant to participate in discussions. This lack of cultural inclusion negatively affects their language progress, with many students reporting lower motivation and retention.

The findings align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of social and cultural context in learning. In classrooms where teachers are culturally competent, students' social interactions and cultural backgrounds are leveraged to enhance.

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