

Inclusive Education in a Diverse Language Class: Challenges and Best Practices

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Abstract

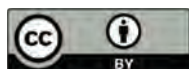
As language classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators face a daily challenge of navigating linguistic, cultural, and learning differences among students from different cultures and backgrounds. The diverse language environment, which many educators perceive to be challenging to manage, also presents valuable opportunities for implementing inclusive education, which promotes fair and equitable learning, especially for students from marginalized and under-represented groups and students with learning difficulties. This article examines some difficulties teachers face in the implementation of inclusive education and proposes strategies teachers can adopt in making their classes more inclusive.

Keywords: *inclusive education, diversity, equity, marginalization*

Introduction

For decades, U.S. policy makers, educators, parents, business leaders, and major research organizations have called for an education system that prepares students to become competent world citizens who can communicate effectively in languages other than English (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). The interest in promoting global citizenship led to the implementation of policies that require some high school and college students to demonstrate competency in a foreign language as a requirement for graduation. Donato and Tucker (2007) questioned the likelihood that students will graduate with bilingual proficiency and cross-cultural competence and highlighted the need for researching and documenting microlevel school-based language acquisition to bring to light important issues that concern the macrolevel national language educational policy.

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At the micro level, difficulty promoting inclusivity appears to be one of the major factors that influences the acquisition process. The heavily diversified nature of students' communities and the different experiences they bring to the classroom pose a challenge to the language teacher who is tasked with providing equal learning opportunities to all students. Providing equal learning opportunities implies the use of a transformative approach to learning that shifts from traditional classroom practices to provide students with equal access to education regardless of their needs, cultural backgrounds, and academic abilities. This transformative approach known as inclusive education supports settings where each student may study and feel appreciated as a member of the wider society (Moriña, 2017). According to Waitoller and Artiles (2013), inclusive education is a global movement that emerged as a response to the exclusion of students who were viewed as different by educational systems; for example, students of color, students from lower caste backgrounds, or students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Inclusive education goes beyond the mere accommodation of cultural differences and includes students with disabilities and other special challenges. Brown and Haihambo (2017) explained that inclusive education focuses on the provision of education for all children, youths, and adults with various special or educational needs arising from various circumstances. Practicing inclusive education is becoming a critical area of focus in a language class because classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. This results in the need for educators to create a learning environment that recognizes the needs of learners and to make the learning environment more accessible and democratic. Aguilar et al. (2017) suggested to educators to be inclusive of class, race, ethnicity, age, ability, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other socially constructed indicators of difference in our society to be effective in improving the environmental conditions of the classroom. However, implementing inclusive education is not without challenges and involves restructuring teaching methodology, classroom management, and curricula. This article presents some of the challenges identified in implementing inclusive education in a diversified language class and discusses ways educators can overcome these challenges.

Implementational Challenges

Language Barrier Problem

First and foremost, I have observed in my experience teaching grades 9 to 12 in the K–12 context that language barriers present a challenge in the implementation of inclusivity, which allows all students to benefit equally from instruction. I identified two phases of the language barrier problem. The first phase emanates from ACTFL's position statement that recommends teachers use 90% of the target language in the classroom (ACTFL, 2010). Personally, I find this recommendation to be subtractive of students' experiences because 90% of target language use implies an indirect replacement of students' own languages and cultural experiences in the classroom. Additionally, the target language often poses a problem of comprehension and communication between the teacher and the students, especially when the teacher does not use enough resources to facilitate understanding for all students. In larger classes and classes where there are students with a disability, it is even more difficult to differentiate instruction and get all students to participate or engage with one another at the same pace when the teacher delivers their lesson in the target language. The second phase of the language barrier problem manifests among students in language classes who do not properly under-

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stand the dominant language in their context and speak that dominant language as an additional language. In the context of the K–12 educational settings in the U.S., these students are mostly immigrant children from other countries who are often referred to as emergent bilinguals. Fine and Furtak (2020) described emergent bilinguals as English learners or English language learners who make up about 10% of students in U.S. K–12 public schools. While 75% speak Spanish, they speak over 400 different languages and dialects. These students face the challenge of acquiring the English language to function in the mainstream American educational system and the challenge of learning an additional language to satisfy a graduation requirement. In such a situation, there is the tendency for them to experience overwhelming confusion caused by their encounter with different languages and the alienation of their own linguistic background while navigating this new experience.

Undiversified Nature of Teaching Resources

While much is said about classroom strategies teachers can use to promote inclusivity, very little is said about improving teaching resources to reach this objective. As a French teacher, many resources such as textbooks, images, videos, and audio-visual materials I have encountered are Eurocentric and emphasize the French spoken in France and the culture of France as the most authentic variety that needs to be studied. Little emphasis is placed on the other varieties of French and the other Francophone cultures, which demonstrates the lower level of importance attached to the role other cultures play in learning. In some instances, too, language materials unintentionally marginalize students by exhibiting elements of misrepresentation, stereotype, or bias against minority cultures, which can cause students from other cultures not to feel good about their own backgrounds or cultures in the language classroom. In terms of gender, language materials overwhelmingly exclude genders such as agender, bigender, and demigender and describe people as either male or female, which is not inclusive to students who identify differently.

Specialized resources such as adaptive technology with accessibility features for students with learning disabilities, differentiated materials with simplified content for individualized learning, and accessible spaces are often not available in language classrooms. Jardinez and Natividad (2024) noted that this happens because some schools are not set up to serve students with disabilities. The absence of these specialized resources limits the type of activities students can engage in and how much scaffolding teachers can provide to all students. Ensuring that teaching becomes more inclusive and accessible to students with language-related difficulties can be challenging when there is little/no access to assistive technologies and accessible spaces to facilitate the process.

Systems Out of Teachers' Control

Among the challenges to the implementation of inclusive education, I identify the political nature of education as a factor that incapacitates teachers in the classroom and their ability to be more inclusive. Some school districts have expectations that are most of the time out of teachers' control. In my school district for instance, there is an expectation for a certain number of assessments per week, which is viewed as evidence of effective teaching. Many teachers resort to using standardized testing, which is easier to construct to meet the weekly requirement despite not being inclusive for all students. The educational system works against promoting inclusive practices with a significant trend toward standardized testing and increased standards in schools (Timmons, 2009).

Besides, not all language teachers receive adequate training about how to implement inclusive education in language classes or how to identify learning disorders in a diversified learning environment. For this reason, we often attribute students' struggles to other factors such as lack of interest in the subject matter or language of study. In research conducted by Mokalleng and Möwes (2020) about challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education, 94.4% of teachers recommended in-service training for teachers to equip them with such knowledge because they are the main implementors in the classroom. In other research by Delubom et al. (2020), evidence from document analysis, observations, and interviews revealed that inclusive education was not prioritized in the training of teachers.

Cultural Bias and Resistance to Change

Some language teachers have a resistance to change and exhibit cultural bias and inadequate knowledge of other cultures, which makes it challenging for them to implement inclusive education in their classrooms. Additionally, some teachers are susceptible to influences or certain unprofessional standards that potentially affect their integration of inclusivity. Muñiz (2020) brought to light that teachers understand that they, like everyone, can unwittingly internalize biases, use stereotypes, and commit microaggressions that shape their instruction and their interactions with students if they are not vigilant about how they think and act. Gay (2018) added that racial biases, ethnic stereotyping, cultural ethnocentrism, and personal rejections cause some teachers to devalue and fear some African American, Asian American, Latino American, and Native American students in their classrooms. Therefore, implementing a diverse curriculum may not be easy because of the fear, uncertainty, or discomfort of many teachers (Lin et al., 2008). This implies that teachers may be hesitant to fully embrace diversity if they are not comfortable with their students or are unsure of their own biases or aware of them. They may also feel unprepared to integrate diversity measures into their classrooms. Those who are resistant to change may hold on to practices and strategies that they are comfortable with and may not open up to new practices that embrace diverse learning needs. Knight (2009) noted that teachers are not likely to implement new practices unless they are powerful and easy to put into practice. Sometimes, language teachers overlook the relevance of students' cultural experiences in learning another language and focus entirely on teaching the culture of the target language communities. Cultural bias can be discriminatory and isolating, especially when students who are part of the target language community see their cultures represented in the classroom more than the others. It is important to recognize diversity by inviting students to share their cultural knowledge and perspectives from their respective cultures as they learn the target language culture.

Best Practices to Inclusivity

Having highlighted some challenges I have observed in the implementation of inclusive education in a diversified language class, I now turn to strategies educators can adopt as they redesign their classrooms and curricula to be intentionally inclusive and diversified.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

According to Casedy (2024), culturally responsive teaching is about using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. As a culturally responsive teacher, I critically examine the

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language teaching materials I present to my students to make sure they represent the diversity of students in my class. This helps me modify all elements in the materials that inappropriately represent students and their cultures. Again, I do not see students' languages, literacies, and cultures as marginal but as a useful resource in learning. I build on what students already know from their respective cultures or backgrounds as a gateway to constructing new knowledge in the target language. This also includes the incorporation of diverse perspectives from different cultures and the integration of examples that reflect diverse perspectives. Regarding students' native languages, it can be useful when students from the same cultures are paired to provide support to each other. Also, teachers who do not speak students' native languages can use translation apps in real time to bridge the communication gap. Being culturally responsive is important because it gives a voice, purpose, and visibility to students from minority cultures and ethnic groups who are often neglected pedagogically by the hegemonic structures of educational systems.

Systemic Changes and Improved Training on Inclusivity

Similarly, since educators deal with diverse student populations, there is the need for school districts to provide more flexibility around how teachers operate. Teachers need to be given more flexibility to decide what to teach and how to assess to reflect the diversity of students in their classes. There needs to be a gradual shift away from standardized testing to properly include students with learning disabilities. My experience with students has made me realized that the traditional method of paper-and-pencil tests does not always reflect the true performance or proficiency of students, especially those with dysgraphia and dyslexia. There have been instances where I have mistakenly marked students wrong because I could not read their responses on paper. Since one-size-fits-all assessments are not inclusive and not ideal for language learning, I suggest that language teachers adopt choice boards to offer a unique experience for students. Choice boards add a new dimension to the classroom by offering an alternative to standard assessments and empowering students to choose how they show their mastery of a topic (Allen & Phillips, 2022). Choice boards offer students the opportunity to select from various teacher-approved tasks based on their interests and strengths to show their progress in learning. For example, a student may present an aspect of the target language culture, while another writes a blog or designs a poster for a cultural event. The teacher's responsibility is to make sure that there is equity in the proposed tasks and that tasks efficiently measure what was taught. By developing a choice board assessment, students have important options and flexibility in how they demonstrate knowledge and skills they have learned after direct instruction has occurred; it also affords them the opportunity to make decisions and actively participate in their own learning (see also Algozzine & Anderson, 2007). Alternatively, I encourage language teachers to adopt the Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) prototype developed by ACTFL to assess language students' progress in language learning (Trojan et al., 2023). As indicated by Plengkham and Wasanasomsithi (2023), the IPA changes the focus of assessment from pure memorization to students' actual performance by themselves or with their peers. It assesses performance in the three communication modes and the other "Cs" (cultures, comparisons, connections, communities) enshrined in the ACTFL standards (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). There is an inextricable link between IPAs and ACTFL proficiency scales (Darhower & Smith-Sherwood, 2021). I consider these types of assessments inclusive because

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the choice board assessment offers students the flexibility to choose what works best for them while the IPA evaluates them holistically by looking at different aspects of their overall language development.

Of equal importance to implementing inclusivity in language education is the need for teacher training colleges and school districts to renew their efforts in providing training for teachers to become knowledgeable in inclusive education. Training for teachers must include how to use assistive technology for students with a learning disability who find themselves in mainstream language classrooms. Coleman and Cramer (2015) described assistive technology as anything that helps students with a disability perform a task that they otherwise would not be able to perform or would perform less efficiently. The most common way to ameliorate reading and writing difficulties, for example, is to use targeted exercises, such as practicing the relation between letters and sounds, that train students to become better readers using assistive technology (e.g., listening to text instead of reading; see Svensson et al., 2021). Klimova and Zamborova (2023) investigated the benefits of the use of assistive technology in learning English as a foreign language. They found that assistive technology helped with the inclusion of disabled students, however, they also confirmed that teachers needed to be better trained and educated in the use of these devices when teaching disabled students. Their findings showed that most learning technologies are available in English, followed by French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Some assistive technologies I recommend for language learning include:

- The articulation station (<https://rhinospike.com/>), which helps students with pronunciation.
- BeeLine Reader (<https://www.beeline reader.com/>), a Chrome extension which helps students with dyslexia develop fluency in reading by using a color gradient to display text rather than reading a plain text.
- ClassSwift (<https://www.classswift.viewsonic.io/features>), a learning platform that provides students with an individualized learning path with monitoring.

In my class, some students with diagnosed dyslexia find the gradient colors in the BeeLine reader helpful in tracking words and following lines of sentences they read. Those who use RhinoSpike have also found it helpful in engaging with people around the world, practicing the correct pronunciation of sounds and words, and reading simple sentences. RhinoSpike allows students to upload scripts, send them to native speakers who read and record themselves, and receive them back to listen to and practice pronunciation. Alternatively, students can upload an audio file and request it to be transcribed by native speakers. This helps the students to independently work on their oral competence and assess the extent they can be comprehended by native speakers. The ClassSwift learning platform has also been helpful to me as a teacher in designing assessments in different formats to meet the different learning needs of my students.

Embracing Adaptability

Teachers who want to promote equity in their classrooms need to understand that they cannot continue to do things the same way so long as innovative practices are constantly being incorporated into the education profession. Teachers need to embrace change and become resistant to bias as a way of embracing adaptability in their educational practices. Training on intercultural competence and reflection on personal assumptions will help teachers to better welcome other cultures into their classrooms and embrace innovative ideas or strategies that ben-

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efit all students regardless of race, gender, place of origin, and ability. When teachers adapt to change and become more culturally tolerant, students from underrepresented groups and students with learning differences are guaranteed access to a welcoming environment that helps them flourish academically.

Conclusion

I have shown in this article that the implementation of inclusive education is an important aspect of language learning in a diversified K–12 classroom setting. However, its implementation can pose many challenges to teachers including language barrier problems, the undiversified nature of teaching resources, systems out of teachers' control, and resistance to change. These problems, which can make language learning inequitable to students from diverse backgrounds, are not only limited to the K–12 language classrooms but extend beyond to institutions of higher learning, where there are also students of different races, genders, and ethnicities and students with disabilities in mainstream language classes who need to be included in learning and supported to reach their language learning goals. Higher education institutions also have structures that limit teachers' ability to be inclusive about some classroom practices. Hence, while navigating the challenges to inclusivity, the commitment to improve the practices of teachers in language classrooms must not be limited only to the K–12 settings but must be extended to higher institutions of learning to ensure fairness in learning regardless of students' backgrounds.

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