

DESIGNING A POSITIVE AND PRODUCTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: MULTICULTURAL EFL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

The study explores the application of culturally responsive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and active learning strategies to foster a positive and productive learning environment for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Uzbekistan. The data consisted of semi-structured interviews with Uzbek State World Languages University students, the National University of Uzbekistan, and Tashkent State Pedagogical University. This research aims to identify effective teaching practices that meet the diverse needs of students. The findings, the importance of integrating culturally relevant materials and activities to increase student engagement and cultural understanding in the field of EFL education. The study's results that combine culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, and active learning can support the academic and social development of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach enhances language proficiency and promotes mutual respect and cultural appreciation among students. The study concludes with practical recommendations for educators to implement these strategies effectively, thus contributing to a broader discourse on equitable and inclusive education in multicultural settings. These findings offer valuable implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to improving EFL education for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learning environment, collaborative learning, active learning, culturally responsive pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Uzbekistan is a country with several nationalities. Based on the Republic of Uzbekistan portal data, over 80 % of the population is Uzbeks (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Uzbekistan). In contrast, others are people from other Central Asian ethnic groups, such as Turkmen, Tajiks karaka paks, Kazakhs Kyrgyz, and 10 % of them are Slavic and Russian people. Uzbeks and ethnic group students (Central Asian students) in Higher Education in Uzbekistan study English as a foreign language (EFL) in the same classroom. The learning environment is vital to the academic success and development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Keser et al.,

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2023; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Unlike their peers in English-speaking countries, EFL students face unique challenges, including language barriers (Huy, 2024), cultural differences (Wang & Wang, 2019), and varying levels of language proficiency (Tergujeff, 2021; Wulyani et al., 2019). Therefore, designing a positive and productive learning environment must address these challenges and facilitate effective language acquisition (Shernoff et al., 2016).

Multiculturalism within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning encompasses a rich linguistic diversity, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding (Alsubie, 2015). Inseparable from language and culture, EFL classrooms become vibrant spaces where learners negotiate various cultural norms and values while acquiring language proficiency (Bayley & Villarreal, 2018; Chenoweth, 2014). Exploring multilingualism also discusses the dynamic interplay between languages, highlighting the significance of embracing learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds (Kirss et al., 2021; Walworth et al., 2021). As EFL classrooms increasingly reflect global interconnectedness, scholars like David Crystal advocate for a plurilingual approach, recognizing the value of multiple languages and cultures in language acquisition (Chabert, 2020; Romanenko et al., 2020). By integrating multicultural perspectives into EFL pedagogy, educators foster linguistic and intercultural competence, preparing learners to navigate the complexities of our globalized world with empathy, respect, and proficiency in English (Huy, 2024; Molema, 2024).

A well-structured classroom environment enhances students' linguistic abilities and fosters confidence and motivation (Kansil et al., 2022; Nwokedi, 2023; Siadah, 2023). Educators can create a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere by understanding and integrating students' cultural backgrounds and individual learning styles (Setiawan & Qamariah, 2023). Effective classroom management, the strategic use of educational technology, and collaborative learning activities are critical components (Chabert, 2020; Nwokedi, 2023; Turan et al., 2022). In the context of EFL education, considering the cultural backgrounds of students from Uzbekistan and ethnic groups from other Central Asian countries is particularly important. Uzbekistan, Karakalpakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan share certain cultural similarities due to their historical connections but also possess unique cultural traits that influence their educational experiences and expectations. Uzbek students often come from a background where community and collectivism are highly valued, which can be leveraged to foster collaborative learning. The ethnic groups from other Central Asian countries, with their rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity, often exhibit a strong sense of identity and resilience, which can be harnessed to create a supportive and motivating learning environment (Arumugam et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021).

This article aims to provide a comprehensive guide for EFL educators on designing and maintaining a positive and productive learning environment, with a specific focus on accommodating the cultural backgrounds of Uzbek and Central Asian students. It will explore practical strategies for optimizing classroom layout and utilizing resources. Additionally, the importance of setting clear expectations, promoting positive behavior, and engaging students through interactive and collaborative methods will be discussed.

By prioritizing creating a positive and productive learning environment that respects and integrates the cultural backgrounds of Uzbek and other ethnic group students, educators can significantly enhance the EFL students' learning experience. This approach leads to better outcomes and a more enriching educational journey, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation for the English language and its global significance.

Understanding and integrating the cultural backgrounds of EFL students from Uzbekistan and ethnic groups from other Central Asian countries is crucial for creating an effective learning environment (Reeve et al., 2023; Wei, 2018). Research indicates culturally responsive teaching improves student engagement and academic achievement (Gay, 2018). In the context of Uzbek students, leveraging their cultural values can enhance collaborative learning (Arumugam et al., 2023). For ethnic groups from other Central Asian country students, incorporating elements of their rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity into the curriculum can foster a supportive and motivating learning environment (Chenowith, 2014). By acknowledging these cultural nuances, educators can create a more inclusive and productive EFL classroom, ultimately facilitating better language acquisition and student success.

Cultural competence is essential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, especially in classrooms with diverse cultural backgrounds, including Uzbek and other ethnic groups students of Central Asia. Cultural competence involves understanding, communicating, and effectively interacting with people across cultures (Mojini et al., 2024). In EFL education, culturally competent teachers can create more inclusive and effective learning environments by acknowledging and incorporating students' cultural perspectives into the curriculum. Heier & Hallsteinsdóttir (2024) underscore the importance of intercultural communicative competence, suggesting that language teaching should go beyond linguistic proficiency to include cultural understanding. Additionally, a study by Alsubaie (2015) highlights that culturally responsive teaching strategies improve student engagement and academic performance. By integrating these insights into their teaching practices, EFL educators can better address the needs of their Uzbek and other ethnic groups from Central Asia students to foster a more positive and productive learning environment.

Rajendran et al. (2024) emphasis on developing language skills aligns with creating a comprehensive language learning environment where students can effectively acquire English proficiency. Educators can ensure a well-rounded language learning experience tailored to target students' needs by addressing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Richards and Rodgers's (2014) exploration of different approaches and methods in language teaching provides educators with a toolkit of pedagogical strategies to engage diverse learners. Educators can draw upon communicative language teaching methods and other innovative approaches to design interactive and culturally relevant lessons that resonate with target students. Bensalem, Qazdar, and El Guabassi's (2023) work on cooperative learning is particularly relevant for promoting collaboration and inclusivity in the classroom. By implementing cooperative learning activities, educators can foster a supportive and cooperative learning environment where Uzbeks and ethnic groups from other Central Asian countries work together to achieve common language learning goals. This approach enhances language acquisition and promotes cultural understanding and empathy among students from different cultural backgrounds. The insights provided by Rajendran et al. (2024), Richards and Rodgers (2014), and Bousalem, Qazdar, & El Guabassi (2023) offer practical guidance for educators seeking to create a positive and productive learning environment that meets the needs of students in an English classroom. Educators can cultivate a dynamic and inclusive learning environment conducive to language acquisition and cultural exchange by incorporating elements of effective language teaching methodologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Culturally responsive pedagogy

Gay (2018) comprehensively explores the principles, research, and practical strategies behind culturally responsive teaching. Gay, a renowned scholar in multicultural education,

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delves into the theoretical underpinnings of culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of creating learning environments that affirm and value students' cultural identities and experiences. Drawing upon a wealth of research and case studies, Gay demonstrates how culturally responsive teaching can enhance student engagement, academic achievement, and cultural competence. By integrating insights from critical pedagogy, social justice education, and multicultural psychology, Gay provides educators with a framework for understanding and implementing culturally responsive strategies in diverse educational settings.

Nurbatra and Masyhud (2022) explore the intersection of neuroscience and culturally responsive pedagogy, offering insights into how educators can leverage brain-based learning principles to support the academic success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Hammond emphasizes the importance of creating a positive classroom culture that fosters all students' sense of belonging and safety. Nurbatra and Masyhud empower educators to create inclusive learning environments that honour students' cultural backgrounds and promote academic excellence through practical strategies such as asset-based instruction, culturally affirming feedback, and collaborative learning communities.

Moreover, it introduces the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, which centres on using culturally affirming instructional practices to empower students from marginalized backgrounds (Johnson & Elliott, 2020). Grounded in critical pedagogy and social justice principles, Johnson & Elliott's framework emphasizes the importance of cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic excellence. By incorporating culturally relevant curricula, instructional materials, and teaching methods, educators can create learning experiences that resonate with students' lived experiences and empower them to succeed academically and socially.

2. Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction, a foundational concept in education, is highlighted by Tomlinson (2001) as a crucial approach for addressing the diverse learning needs of students in the classroom. Tomlinson emphasizes recognizing and accommodating variations in students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles to promote academic growth and engagement. By providing customized learning experiences tailored to individual students, educators can create inclusive classrooms where all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) studied the practical implementation of differentiated instruction strategies. They outline various instructional approaches, such as flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and varied instructional materials, allowing educators to meet students' diverse needs effectively. Through these strategies, educators can provide targeted support and enrichment opportunities based on students' unique learning profiles, ultimately maximizing student learning outcomes.

Additionally, Tomlinson and Allan (2000) underscore the role of school leaders in fostering a culture of differentiation. The authors emphasize the importance of collaborative leadership, ongoing professional development, and supportive organizational structures in promoting effective differentiated instruction practices. By providing educators with the necessary resources, training, and support systems, school leaders can create environments where differentiated instruction flourishes, leading to improved student achievement and equitable learning opportunities for all.

3. Active Learning

Paradis (2023) emphasizes providing students with meaningful and authentic language experiences to facilitate language acquisition. Students are naturally immersed in language-

rich environments that promote language acquisition by engaging in active learning tasks such as discussions, role-plays, and problem-solving activities. Similarly, Chabert (2020) advocates using interactive and communicative activities in the language classroom to engage students actively in the learning process. Through games, simulations, and group projects, students are encouraged to use language in meaningful contexts, leading to a deeper understanding and retention of language skills.

Furthermore, Nwokedi (2023) emphasizes the importance of interactive and studentcentered approaches in language teaching. Nwokedi highlights the role of interactive activities such as pair work, small group discussions, and task-based learning in promoting active engagement and collaboration among students. Educators can create dynamic and engaging learning environments that foster language acquisition and communication skills development by providing opportunities for students to interact with each other and use language in authentic contexts.

Moreover, Romanenko et al. (2020) underscores the value of incorporating active learning techniques into the language classroom. Romanenko advocates for a communicative approach to language teaching that prioritizes student participation and interaction. Through activities such as role-plays, debates, and problem-solving tasks, students actively use language for real-life communication purposes. Educators can create dynamic, student-centered learning environments that promote language acquisition and proficiency development by adopting active learning strategies.

METHOD

The research method employed in this study involves interviews, offering a qualitative approach to gather in-depth insights into the experiences, perspectives, and needs of Uzbeks and students of other Central Asian countries who study English in the same classroom. Through semi-structured interviews, participants are provided with a platform to express their thoughts, challenges, and suggestions regarding their language learning journey. This method allows researchers to discuss the aspects of language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and classroom dynamics from the students' perspectives, gaining rich qualitative data that can inform the development of effective teaching strategies and interventions.

By conducting interviews, researchers can explore the unique cultural backgrounds, language learning experiences, and educational preferences of Uzbeks and ethnic groups from other Central Asian countries, thereby understanding their diverse needs and aspirations. Through open-ended questioning and active listening, researchers can uncover valuable insights into the factors influencing students' language proficiency, motivation, and engagement in the English language classroom. The qualitative data obtained from interviews can then be analyzed thematically to identify common themes, patterns, and discrepancies, providing valuable implications for promoting a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students.

Employing interviews as the research method, the study aligns with the qualitative research methodology advocated by Creswell (2017). This approach emphasizes collecting and analysing rich, descriptive data to explore phenomena in depth. It is particularly suitable for investigating the experiences and perspectives of different ethnicities of Central Asian students in the same English language classroom. Through semi-structured interviews, researchers can uncover the insights and understandings that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

In interviews with Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Turkmen students in the English classroom, open-ended and semi-structured questions were employed to elicit rich and

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insightful responses. Open-ended questions invite students to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about learning English, encouraging them to express themselves freely and provide detailed responses. For example, students shared their challenges, interests, and preferences related to language learning, offering valuable insights into their individual experiences and needs. On the other hand, semi-structured questions provided a framework for exploring specific topics or themes in more depth, allowing researchers to consider the aspects of students' language learning journey. By combining both types of questions, educators and researchers gathered comprehensive data that illuminated the complexities of language learning and informed the development of tailored teaching strategies and interventions to support Central Asian students in the English classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In analyzing the case study focused on fostering a positive and productive learning environment for Central Asian students in an English classroom in Uzbekistan, several key findings and implications emerge. Firstly, implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies, such as incorporating culturally relevant materials and activities, has increased student engagement and cultural understanding. By integrating elements of students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, educators have created a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where students feel valued and respected.

Secondly, adopting differentiated instruction techniques has facilitated personalized learning experiences tailored to the diverse language proficiency levels and learning styles of Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, Karakalpak, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz students. Educators have effectively addressed individual learning needs through scaffolded support and flexible grouping, improving language proficiency and academic achievement.

Thirdly, active learning strategies, including cooperative learning and multimedia presentations, have enhanced student participation and collaboration in the classroom. By providing opportunities for hands-on, interactive learning experiences, educators have fostered a dynamic and engaging learning environment conducive to language acquisition and cultural exchange. In the discussion section, drawing upon the works of researchers such as Gay (2018) and Kirss et al. (2021) is crucial to support the analysis of the effectiveness of teaching strategies and interventions. Gay's research on culturally responsive teaching provides insights into creating inclusive learning environments that honour students' cultural identities and backgrounds. Additionally, work on cultural dimensions offers a framework for understanding how cultural factors influence students' learning experiences and preferences (Johnson & Elliott, 2020). Integrating these perspectives into the discussion makes the analysis more robust and grounded in empirical evidence, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of English language teaching in multicultural classrooms.

The case study's analysis highlights the effectiveness of a multifaceted approach to creating a positive and productive learning environment for Uzbeks and other ethnic groups from Central Asia in an English classroom. By combining culturally responsive teaching strategies, differentiated instruction, and active learning techniques, educators can meet the diverse needs of their students and cultivate a supportive and inclusive learning community. This approach enhances language proficiency and promotes cultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect among students from different cultural backgrounds.

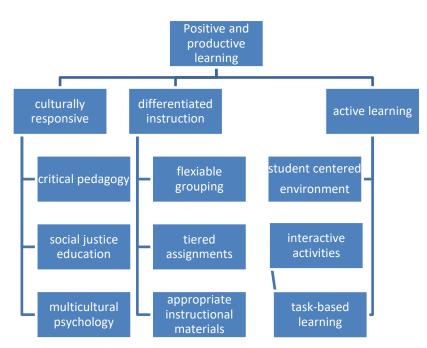


Figure 1. The model of a positive and productive learning environment for a classroom with diverse ethnic groups.

This model illustrates a comprehensive framework for fostering a positive and productive learning environment. It emphasizes three vital pedagogical approaches: culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, and active learning. Each approach is further broken down into specific strategies and concepts that contribute to its effectiveness in the classroom.

The approach is rooted in critical pedagogy, social justice education, and multicultural psychology. Critical pedagogy encourages educators to empower students by challenging traditional power structures and promoting critical thinking. Social justice education addresses and rectifies inequalities within the educational system, ensuring all students have equitable access to learning opportunities. Multicultural psychology emphasizes understanding and valuing students' diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel respected and valued. Differentiated Instruction involves flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and appropriate instructional materials. Flexible grouping allows students to work in varied groupings based on their learning needs and styles, promoting collaboration and peer learning. Tiered assignments provide different levels of challenge within the same lesson, catering to the diverse readiness Using appropriate instructional materials ensures that resources are levels of students. tailored to meet students' varying needs, facilitating personalized learning experiences. The active learning approach is characterized by creating a student-centered environment, employing interactive activities, and implementing task-based learning. A student-centered environment prioritizes students' needs, interests, and abilities, encouraging them to participate in their learning process actively. Interactive activities such as discussions, simulations, and cooperative learning tasks engage students actively in the learning process, making it more dynamic and engaging. Task-based learning focuses on completing meaningful tasks that require language and skills in real-world contexts, promoting practical application and deeper understanding.

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Overall, this model highlights the interconnectedness of these approaches and their collective contribution to creating a vibrant and compelling learning environment. By integrating culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, and active learning strategies, educators can address the diverse needs of their students, enhance engagement, and promote academic success. This holistic approach improves language proficiency and cultivates a classroom atmosphere of mutual respect and cultural appreciation, preparing students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

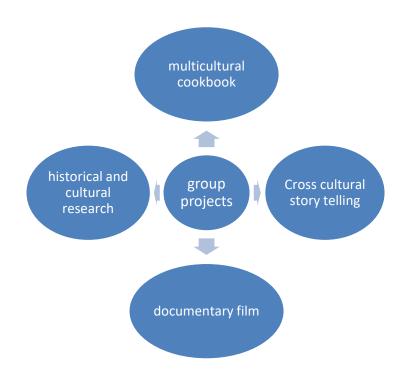


Figure 2 Group projects for the mixed ethnic group class students

Figure 2 represents a comprehensive framework of university projects incorporating Uzbek and other Asian ethnicities in an English classroom, fostering cultural understanding and language proficiency. Multicultural Cookbook Projects, Documentary Film Projects, Cross-Cultural Storytelling, and Historical and Cultural Research Projects represent unique approaches to engaging students with diverse cultural backgrounds through interactive, collaborative, and research-based activities. These projects aim to create an inclusive learning environment where students can share their cultural heritage, develop their English language skills, and build mutual respect and understanding among their peers. The visual layout highlights the interconnectedness of these projects, emphasizing the multifaceted approach to enhancing cultural competency and academic achievement in a multicultural educational setting.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings from the interviews with Uzbek and ethnic groups from other Central Asian countries in the English classroom discuss the importance of adopting a multifaceted approach to language teaching that integrates culturally responsive strategies, differentiated instruction, and active learning techniques. By creating a culturally inclusive learning environment that respects and honours students' diverse backgrounds, educators can foster a sense of belonging and engagement among students, ultimately enhancing their language learning experiences. Moreover, personalized instruction tailored to students' needs and preferences promotes language proficiency and academic achievement. Educators can create dynamic and engaging learning environments conducive to language acquisition and cultural exchange through active learning strategies that encourage collaboration and interaction. Overall, by prioritizing the diverse needs of students from different cultural backgrounds, educators can create a positive and productive learning environment that supports students' language learning journey and promotes cultural understanding and empathy. This approach enhances language proficiency and cultivates a deeper appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity among students, ultimately preparing them to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

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