

## **RAISING TEACHER CONSCIOUSNESS OF CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES IN THE CLASSROOM**

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### **Abstract**

The realm of teacher education is vast and multifaceted. The main aim of teacher education is universal, that is, to equip teachers with pedagogical knowledge and skills so that they will be able to produce students who are competent in the area of study they have pursued. However, there are differences in the objectives, some of which are overt and others covert. The objectives depend on the philosophy that is adopted by the entity, be it an institution, a state or a country. The professionalisation of teacher education lies not only in the pedagogical knowledge and skills that teachers have mastered. It encompasses attitudes and personal dispositions which enhance the concept of professionalism. The concept of education is understood by all involved in this field. However, cultural sensitivities are not easy to fathom if one is merely engrossed in imparting knowledge and skills. The content of the teaching-learning materials are generally based on pedagogical and curricular guidelines. However, in implementing teaching-learning activities, the teacher should be sensitive to the cultural background of the students. This is crucial because in a multicultural society, the teacher's cultural background may not be the same as that of the students'. This paper provides an analysis of cultural issues that potential teachers of English as a second language (ESL) are aware of before embarking on the profession. It looks into various aspects of sensitivities which may affect teaching and learning. These aspects of sensitivities have been identified by a group of potential ESL teachers as important for teaching and learning purposes. These issues are important in a society which is multicultural, multilingual, multireligious, and multiethnic. In a society such as Malaysia where three major ethnic groups, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians live side by side, respect towards each other's culture and beliefs is paramount in order to ensure unity and harmony. The results of the analysis will inform teachers of what they should be aware of when teaching in a class of mixed composition. It will also inform materials developers and curriculum designers of what they should be aware of producing materials and syllabus for teaching.

**Key words:** cultural sensitivities, multiculturalism

### **Introduction**

The aim of educating teacher trainees at university level is to equip them with pedagogical skills and competence in the field that they have selected. The trainees are exposed to various approaches, methods, and techniques of teaching. Their task is to apply

what they have been taught in real classroom situations. During the course of instruction, the trainees practice their pedagogical skills with their peers acting as their students. In the real classroom situation, the trainees are faced with students who are not familiar to them. However, they need to know how to act and react as classroom teachers.

Their students may come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Hence, apart from knowing how to teach the subject matter, the trainees need to know what to teach and how to respond based on different cultural values. In Malaysia there are basically three major cultural groups. They are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Each group has its own language and culture.

In school, the trainees have to abide by the stipulations in the school curriculum. Implicit in the curriculum is the National Philosophy of Education which aims to produce citizens who are knowledgeable, efficient, responsible, of good moral standing and capable of making contributions towards achieving harmony and prosperity in the country. Values such as good citizenship and patriotism are woven into the lessons taught. This paper concentrates on the teaching of English as a second language (TESL).

### **Background of the study**

Malaysia is a multicultural, multilingual and multiracial country. The intriguing question here is whether or not the school system has inculcated the appropriate values in the students to prepare them for the complexities of a multiethnic society (Chandra, 2010). Based on the products of the school system, Chandra (2010, p.1) claims that “the school system has failed to demolish ethnic stereotypes and communal generalisations which militate against mutual respect and harmonious relations between communities”. Ethnic stereotypes which include ‘Malays are lazy and fun people’, Chinese are greedy and selfish’, and ‘Indians are dirty and servile’ were created during the colonial period and have remained until today (Chandra, 2010). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school to provide knowledge, education and attitudinal change to counter these pernicious notions. Experience in the past, especially the incident of May 13 1969 which resulted in bloodshed, has shown the negative effects of antagonism among ethnic groups. Today more harmonious ways are used to prevent the occurrence of such an event. Any action which is tantamount to instigation or provocation will not be condoned. A recent incident (Appendix A) in the country shows such evidence. Changes in the school system have to be made to so that peace and harmony can prevail and be sustained. Changes in the school system can be effectuated by modifications in the content of teacher training programmes to include studies in multilingualism. It is therefore, imperative that teacher trainees be exposed to such studies.

### **The Concept of Multiculturalism**

In a simple sense, multiculturalism means that society is made up of different cultures. The term first emerged in the 70’s as a name for a government policy such as in Canada and Australia to deal with ethnic pluralism within the country (Ang, 2010). This governmental use of ‘multiculturalism’ is associated with the “values of equality, tolerance and inclusiveness toward migrants of ethnically different backgrounds” (Ang, 2010). It is done to avoid conflicts and violence. Group identity is an important element in multiculturalism. It requires people to see themselves as belonging to groups which are

defined by cultural markers such as religion, music, ethnic cuisine and so forth (Miller, 2004). To add to the meaning of multiculturalism is Gingrich's (2005) description that it is "a social response to diversity that includes ... norms of acceptance of, respect for, and tolerance of others" (p.2). However, the concept of multiculturalism depends on the context it is used. It can be used in a more harmonious and positive sense. To achieve this goal the school context has been taken.

Multiculturalism in schools is a view that "recognizes and values the uniqueness of diverse learners, cultural backgrounds, and identities" (Carroll, 2008). According to Thomas Oakland (2005), a school psychologist, multiculturalism is a process in which individuals "constructs reality through networks of social agreements that involve historical, cultural, and social experiences" (p.6). In the Malaysian context multiculturalism is incorporated in the English Language curriculum in a number of ways.

1. The content taught must be discussed from diverse perspective to reflect the various cultural groups.
2. Cultural events of all ethnic groups are included among the topics taught.
3. The characters used in the teaching-learning materials must portray the various ethnic groups.
4. Good moral values are highlighted in the lessons.
5. The content should reflect everyday aspects of living and experiences of students.

In terms of pedagogy, the teaching techniques should cater to the needs of the diverse ethnic groups. There should be whole class as well small group discussion, cooperative learning strategies, role-play, simulations and other activities which promote intercultural cooperation. Assessment in the multicultural classroom should also reflect the diversity shown in the curriculum as well as the teaching situation. Hence, a variety of assessment strategies need to be used. Apart from the written and oral forms, portfolios, performance projects, and observations should be carried out (Scott, 2010)

Therefore, there are some critical issues that a teacher in a Malaysian school has to be aware of and has to take action. First of all the teacher has to know whether or not he or she is prejudiced against certain groups. Then, he or she has to know what a multicultural classroom is like. The teacher should then be familiar with pedagogical strategies which should be employed in a multicultural classroom. It is therefore necessary for potential teachers to be aware of the sensitivities of each of the diverse cultural groups before venturing into the classroom. The need to study their readiness is paramount in view of national unity.

### **The Importance of Multiculturalism**

Malaysia is a home to three major ethnic groups comprising the Malay, Chinese and Indian and a few minor groups. Hence, multiculturalism prevails. It is inevitable for a citizen of Malaysia to be seriously aware of it and not to take it for granted. From a harmonious perspective, multiculturalism allows individuals from the respective groups to learn about each other's culture, history, and contributions to the country. Historically the Malays were mostly farmers and fishermen, the Chinese were merchants and traders, and the Indians were mostly rubber tappers. However, today the separation of employment is not clear cut. Apart from being farmers, the Malays are also rubber tapper and merchants. The Chinese have also ventured into farming, especially vegetable

farming. The Indians are also merchants and traders. The present situation shows what people from each ethnic group have learned from the other groups.

Multiculturalism enables the people to be aware of the cultures around them. Each cultural group has its own beliefs and customs. Respect for each others beliefs and customs is cultivated through mutual understanding. Hence, joyous occasions and festivals of each cultural group are often celebrated and enjoyed by everyone in the country. A public holiday is recognized as each group celebrates its festive event.

Knowing the beliefs and customs of each group promotes democratic values such as equality, that foster cultural pluralism. Tolerance towards each other’s beliefs and customs is generated so that people are non-discriminatory of each other.

The diverse cultural beliefs and customs in society enable students to be aware of the diversity in the classroom. The experiences within the society play a significant role in how students learn in school. When children of diverse ethnic background mingle well in the society outside the classroom, they tend to show the same disposition when they are in the classroom.

### **The Nature of Classrooms in Malaysian Schools**

In most cases, especially in the national schools, the classroom comprises students from diverse background. The students differ not only in terms of their native language but also in terms of culture and ability level. Teachers who teach the English language are also of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The classrooms in Malaysian schools can be depicted in the Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1.  
Ethnic composition in the classroom

Situation	Teacher	Students
1	a	a,a,a,
2	a	b,b,b,
3	a	a,b,c,

In situation 1, the teacher and the students come from one linguistic and cultural group. If the teacher is Malay, all the students are also Malay, or if the teacher is Chinese, all the students are Chinese, and if the teacher is Indian, all the students are Indian. In this situation the teacher is aware of the cultural norms of the group.

In situation 2, the teacher is from one cultural group and the students belong to a different cultural group. The teacher may be Malay and the students are either Chinese, or Indian, or the teacher is a Chinese and the students are either Malay or Indian. In this case the teacher may not know much about the sensitivities of that cultural group.

In situation 3, the students are from various cultural backgrounds. The teacher may be Malay, and the students are Malay, Chinese and Indian. Here the teacher has to deal with a variety of cultural issues.

It is in situations 2 and 3 that the teacher has to be sensitive to the students’ value systems. Carelessness or oversight on the part of the teacher can lead to disastrous consequences. This is evident in two recent cases which were reported in the national tabloid. In one case, the principal of a school had scolded some non-Malay students for

eating outside the school canteen during the fasting month. In another case, the principal of a school scolded some Chinese students and made remarks that were considered prejudiced.

Table 2.  
English Language Proficiency Levels

Situation	Teacher	Students
A	High Proficiency	High Proficiency
B	High Proficiency	Low Proficiency
C	Low Proficiency	High Proficiency
D	Low Proficiency	Low Proficiency

Table 2 shows situations where English language proficiency of the teacher and the students may or may not match. In situation A, both the teacher and the students are of high proficiency levels. In this situation whatever the teacher says can be understood by the students. The teacher may not have problems in teaching this class.

In situation B, the teacher’s level of language proficiency is high where that of the students is low. The teacher has to exercise a lot of tolerance teaching this class. Sometimes the students’ lack of proficiency and failure to understand what the teacher says may aggravate the teacher who then may hurl harsh words at the students.

Situation C shows a problematic relationship. When the teacher’s proficiency level is lower than that of the students’ the teacher may not be able to teach effectively. The students will be able to detect the teacher’s language errors and may even correct them. The teacher’s self-esteem may thus be affected. Sometimes, to compensate this shortcoming the teacher may be unfair to students.

Situation D is where both the teacher and the students are of low proficiency level. There may not be much teaching or learning. The teacher may depend heavily on the textbook and teaches based on what is provided in the textbook. There is no innovation or creativity from the teacher and students may not be motivated to learn.

### The Study

The study involved nine teacher trainees who were undergoing a degree programme in Teaching of English as a Second Language. There were two Malay trainees, three Indian and four Chinese. These trainees had already completed the necessary methodology courses in the programme and were taking the final course in Simulated Teaching to prepare them for the practicum. They were assigned to a group managed by the researcher. These trainees had had no experience in teaching and hence were being trained to teach English as a second language.

### Methodology

The trainees were told to list the sensitivities they need to be aware of when they go out to teach in the real schools. Since they were once school students, they should know something about the real situation. In addition, the group they were in for the Simulated Teaching course was a heterogeneous group. Therefore, they were able to identify the cultural sensitivities from their own experiences.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework proposed in this study in exploring awareness of cultural sensitivities is based on theoretical assumptions underlying Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural contexts of human development and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive development highlights the fact that human development is based on social and cultural activities. Children are born to engage in activities within the sociocultural environment (Rogoff, 1990). They develop higher mental processes with the assistance and guidance of people who are more competent than they are (Vygotsky, 1978). Their learning is shaped by the social influence they receive. They are able to extend their zone of proximal development with the help of adults or peers who are more competent than they are (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development is defined as the distance between what children can do on their own and what they can achieve under the guidance of an adult or peers.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory focuses on the relationship between the developing individual and the social and physical environment. According to Bronfenbrenner, the environment consists four structural contexts. They are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem. The microsystem refers to the immediate environment in which the individual operates, such as the family, the classroom, peer group, and neighbourhood. The child's beliefs, for example is affected by those of his or her parents. The mesosystem relates to how the people in the microsystems interact, for example, the relationship between a person's home and the school. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), if the relationship between the different microsystems is compatible, the individual's development will be smooth. A child's parents for example, taking part in the school sports will provide motivation to the child in school. The exosystem is the environment which is external to a person's experience. Nevertheless, it affects him or her. For example, if a parent has a bad day at work and is thus very bitter, this emotional disposition may have an impact on the family. The macrosystem is made up of the cultural context. It consists of cultural values, laws and customs (Berk, 2000) of a particular culture or cultures. These values and beliefs influence the interactions within and between mesosystems and exosystems (Fu, 2010). As a child grow up, he or she is affected by all the systems. The macrosystem encompasses the other systems. It influences the other systems and is also influenced by them.

In a multicultural society, the macrosystem is of paramount importance. Children are exposed to a multitude of values as they grow up in a society which contains several subcultures. Any mishap, conflict, or prejudice at this level will ripple through to the other levels. Cultural differences may promote or undermine the development of the individual. It is thus important to ensure that potential teachers are aware of the different values that students of different cultural backgrounds bring into the classroom.

In terms of administration and ethics, it thus is important for schools in Malaysia to promote multicultural competence. "An effective school professional is multiculturally competent and able to make sense of students' sociocultural, socioracial, and sociopolitical backgrounds that present themselves within a classroom setting" (Carroll, 2008, p.1). Teachers who are multiculturally competent know how to combine

the environmental, academic and community factors to assist student learning and development at various age and ability levels (Carroll, 2008).

Awareness marks the first stage of the march towards multicultural competence. “Awareness begins with the school professional realizing one’s own awareness as a cultural being” (Carroll, 2008, p.7). The teacher, who is the school professional, is also aware of cultural identities of others in the school community. Awareness also involves recognizing cultural bias issues in all forms and understanding their impact on the students. The multiculturally informed teacher is aware of the multiple cultural identities of his or her students. Awareness also involves the implications of decisions made in the present for future teaching and learning.

At this stage the teacher is then aware of not only her own personal cultural self-awareness but also of others. The teacher not only obtains knowledge regarding multiculturalism but also acknowledges it. The teacher then transforms the awareness, beliefs, knowledge and acknowledgement into positive action and commitment that will improve the students’ learning. This process of effectuating change is termed as ‘advocacy’ (Carroll, 2008). Advocacy is then realized in practice through proactive ways to promote multiculturalism. This stage presents the ‘action’ the outcome of which affects the lives of many people in society. The process from awareness to action is best presented through Carroll’s (2008, p.7) diagram in Figure 1.

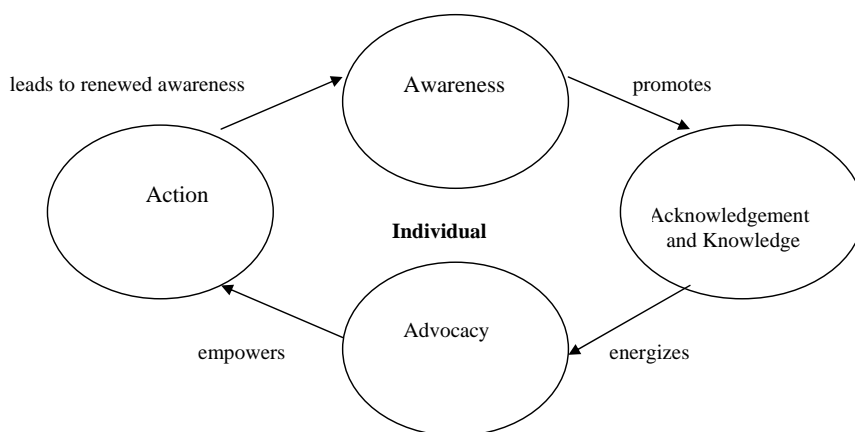


Figure 1.  
Multicultural Flashpoints for Change for the Individual Schoolpersonnel.

### Findings

The analysis of responses provided by the participants involved in the study reveals the results as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.  
Awareness of Sensitive Issues in a Multicultural Society

<u>Topics</u>	<u>Responses (N)</u>	
	(N)	(%)
1. Religion	9	100.00
2. Language	8	88.9
3. Politics	8	88.9
4. Teacher's attitude	7	77.8
5. Gender issues	6	66.7
6. Racial issues	6	66.7
7. Body language	5	55.6
8. Students' backgrounds	4	44.5
9. Food	4	44.5
10. Culture, customs	3	33.4

1. Religion

All the trainees indicated religion as a sensitive issue to be discussed in a sense that would promote one religion at the expense of the others. Teachers should be aware of the religions practiced by the different ethnic groups. The main religions are Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Teaching should not touch upon one place of worship only. It should not promote or condemn any type of attire based on any religious beliefs. It should also not belittle the practice of any religion or comment on the procedures of prayers of any religion. There should not be any comparison of the concepts of God. No religion should be criticized.

2. Language

Aspects of language which are sensitive to students include derogatory remarks such as comparing students to colour, for example 'Babu is as black as night' or teaching a proverb such as 'the black sheep of the family'. Using offensive words such as 'idiot', 'stupid', 'moron' and labeling students with names such as 'fatty', 'shorty', and 'specky' were also frowned upon.

3. Politics

Political issues which require students to show support for certain political parties are avoided. Students are not allowed to take part in politics. Political propaganda is avoided to maintain harmony in the classroom. Commenting about politics or politicians either in favour or otherwise is against the school norm.

4. Teacher's attitude

The teacher should avoid showing a negative attitude towards students who come from ethnic groups which are different from the teacher's. The teacher should not make negative remarks in anger and refer to students' parents' or ancestors. The teacher should not ignore students of another ethnic group although there may be only a few of them in the classroom.

5. Gender issues

Most of the schools are co-educational. The teacher should not embarrass the student particularly about their sexual orientations. The tendency towards bisexualism may arise, but it may not be very serious. Nevertheless, students cannot be ridiculed or



insulted. In a class full of girls, a male teacher has to be careful of what he says and how he says it. Likewise, in a class full of boys, a female teacher has to observe certain rules so that there is no tension in the classroom. Discussion on feminism, homosexuality, lesbianism may offend certain cultural and religious groups.

6. Racial issues

Most classrooms are of mixed composition. The teacher must be aware not to offend any race in whatever situation. Stereotyping the students according to race should be avoided. Comparison between performances of students of different ethnic groups is not condoned as it can arouse ethnic sentiments. Segregating students in class based on ethnicity is not encouraged.

7. Body language

The teacher should be careful of his or her actions and movements. Sitting on a student's table is not acceptable to the students. Touching a student's head may offend certain quarters. Teachers teaching a class consisting of students of the opposite gender need to be sensitive to the body language he or she displays. Knowledge of such restrictions is imperative particularly when religion is also affected.

8. Students' socio-economic background

Students in Malaysian schools come from a variety of backgrounds based on socio-economic factors. Students should not be discriminated based on their socio-economic status. Teachers should not favour students who come from well-to-do families and ignore those who are economically poor. Similarly, orphans should not be treated differently from other students. They should also be given the same consideration as students who still have their parents.

9. Food

There are types of food which are abstained by certain religious groups in Malaysia. It is important that the teacher is aware of such types of food. There should not be any question as to why a certain group abstains from a certain type of food as sometimes the answer may not be logical to other religious groups and at worst, may offend them. The discussion may create tension and problems. Knowledge about the different types of food avoided by certain groups of people is important especially in times of festivities. Preparing food for a class gathering for example, requires awareness of the foods abstained by the different groups, so that there is food for everyone.

10. Culture and customs

In a multicultural classroom, students show a variety of beliefs and behaviour. It is imperative that the teacher understand such beliefs and behaviour as the lifestyles of the different students. The teacher should not be hasty in passing negative comments on other people's lifestyles. The teacher should not show any prejudice against certain cultures no matter how primitive they may appear to the teacher.

### **Implications for Teaching and Learning**

Multiculturalism is an important element in the Malaysian school learning environment. It is an awareness that all involved in the school system should not take for granted. In fact, it should be emphasized. Failure to do so may lead to undesirable consequences. Thus, in the classroom, activities for learning should contain elements that will promote multiculturalism. The teacher must make sure that the cultural sensitivities

are avoided to enable students to give their cooperation. Positive aspects which are common among the religions practised in the country should be promoted. Students should also be made aware of the differences between the different ethnic groups and religions. Efforts should be made for them to understand and accept the differences. Mutual respect should be inculcated among the students. Materials writers must ensure that the content of what they write does not violate any cultural, linguistic or religious norms of any group. The school administration should monitor the situation from time to time to effectuate a harmonious atmosphere in the school.

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## **Appendix A**

Malaysia probes headmistress's alleged racial slurs

Malaysia ordered a probe on Friday into claims a high school headmistress used racial slurs, telling ethnic Chinese students to return to China and comparing Hindu prayer strings to dog leashes.

Education Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said a committee had been set up to investigate the comments allegedly delivered last week at an assembly at the school in southern Johor state.

“Up to now, the reactions may have been too emotional, but any follow-up action by the ministry must be fair,” he said, according to state media.

“We have to get the facts because some of the information has been contradictory, and there have been reports lodged with the police.”

In one of the police reports, a student said the headmistress, a member of Malaysia's majority Muslim Malay community, said prayer strings used by ethnic Indians “make them look like dogs because only dogs are tied like that”.

She was also accused of saying ethnic Chinese students were not needed and could go back to China -- an incendiary comment in a country where minorities are extremely sensitive to slurs about their status.

Muhyiddin said according to the state news agency Bernama that the principal had apologised and gone on leave but that these were only interim measures and that the civil service and the police would conduct their own probes.

Malaysia's minorities have complained that they are being marginalised as the country becomes increasingly “Islamised”, and are fearful that their rights are being eroded  
The New Straits Times. Saturday 21 2010