Cultural Sensitivity and Emotional Intelligence in Teaching English to Diverse Learners

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 Abstract

This study examines emotional intelligence (EI) and teacher culture-sensitivity as predictors of students' achievement in the English language from multicultural cultural backgrounds. A mixed-method design included quantitative questionnaires from 20 English teachers and 200 students, student interviews, and classroom observations. Teachers also reacted to valid EI measures as well as culture-sensitivity measures, and students' English proficiency (via pre-course and post-course tests), as well as engagement (via feedback questionnaires), were monitored over one school term. Via multiple regressions, both EI and culture-sensitized pedagogies of teachers were statistical, positive predictors of students' gains in language proficiency, together predicting approximately 45% variability in learning outcomes. Furthermore, student interviews and classroom observations corroborated quantitative findings, with high EI and culture-sensitized teachers creating more positive, engaging classroom atmospheres that supported student participation as well as confidence in English. The study highlights teacher EI, as well as culture-sensitized pedagogies, as central to supporting second language learning in a multicultural student population. Training teachers in EI development as well as in culture-sensitized pedagogies is recommended as a way forward to enhance English pedagogy. The study is a contribution to a developing body of research on teacher socio-emotional as well as intercultural competence in second language pedagogy.

keywords: Emotional Intelligence (EI), Cultural Sensitivity Second Language Pedagogy, Teacher Socio-Emotional Competence

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and multicultural world, classroom dynamics are evolving at an unprecedented level. The 21st-century classroom, particularly in second language learning, is marked by the intersection of learners' varied backgrounds, identities, and experiences. English, having long established itself as the lingua franca of global communication, diplomacy, business, science, and education, is not only a subject but a gateway to opportunities, empowerment, and cross-cultural understanding [1-3]. As the world's demand for English language teaching continues to expand, so does the complexity of the environments in which it is taught. Teachers today must contend with not only linguistic concerns but also cultural and emotional subtleties that affect learners' willingness and capacity to respond to the language-learning process [4-6]. Amidst this complicated landscape, two constructs have become pivotal to effective language teaching: emotional intelligence (EI) and cultural sensitivity [7-9].

Emotional intelligence, made mainstream by Daniel Goleman in the 1990s, is the capacity of an individual to perceive, understand, manage, and effectively utilize emotions in interpersonal relationships and decision-making. In education, and language education in particular, EI is not an auxiliary skill but a fundamental competency that underpins every classroom interaction [10, 11]. Teachers with high EI are more sensitive to their students' emotional states, more successful at positively managing classroom dynamics, more empathetic in their reactions to learners' struggles, and more effective at establishing emotionally safe classrooms where risk-taking and language experimentation are encouraged [12, 13]. They are better able to manage the anxieties and insecurities that typically attend language

learning, and they create a positive affective atmosphere where learners are motivated, engaged, and confident. Emotional intelligence, therefore, acts as a critical catalyst in language learning, particularly in classrooms with culturally diverse students whose affective needs are intimately tied to their socio-cultural contexts [14-16].

Cultural sensitivity, however, entails a teacher's awareness of, respect for, and responsiveness to students' cultural backgrounds. It includes an awareness of how culture influences learning styles, communication, values, expectations, and even the construction of knowledge itself [17, 18]. For English language teachers, cultural sensitivity is not merely a question of acknowledging diversity but accepting it as a pedagogical asset. Culturally responsive teachers are those who render their pedagogy sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of students from various cultural matrices [19, 20]. They are attuned to cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal communication, eschew ethnocentric assumptions, and create inclusive curricula that are open to diverse representations and narratives [21, 22]. Such teachers do not see cultural differences as an obstacle but as a portal to deeper learning and understanding. In multicultural classrooms, where students may be marginalized or alienated by dominant linguistic or cultural norms, culturally responsive pedagogy becomes imperative in validating students' identities and facilitating equitable learning opportunities [23, 24].

The confluence of emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity is particularly potent in the instruction of English to diverse students. Both concepts are relational; they are concerned with teachers' perceptions, interpretations, and actions on the emotional and cultural dimensions of the student experience [25, 26]. In tandem, EI and cultural sensitivity create a formative pedagogical collaboration, one that enables teachers to connect authentically with students, foresee and resolve emotional or cultural barriers to learning, and design learning experiences that are intellectually provocative and emotionally supportive. Educators who possess both high EI and a culturally responsive stance are more likely to build inclusive, caring, and dynamic classroom communities that promote active participation, linguistic fluency, and learner autonomy [27, 28].

Despite the increased recognition of these constructs, empirical research examining the synergistic impact of both emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity on English language learning outcomes is limited [29]. Most existing studies examine either emotional intelligence or cultural responsiveness in isolation, thereby overlooking the collective potential of their collaboration [30]. Moreover, most such studies are confined to homogenous learning contexts and do not account for the dynamics that emerge in multicultural, multilingual classrooms where learners bring diverse cultural schemas, values, and communicative norms to the classroom. This research gap is particularly concerning in light of the heightened spread of transnational education, international student mobility, and multicultural classrooms that characterize contemporary language education [31, 32].

The present study seeks to bridge this gap through an exploration of the interrelated roles of teacher emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity in facilitating students' English language learning outcomes in multicultural classrooms. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a holistic understanding of how these teacher attributes affect learners' language performance and classroom engagement. By administering standardized EI and cultural sensitivity measures to 20 English language teachers and tracking the learning path of 200 students using standardized tests and feedback questionnaires, the study generates robust statistical findings on the predictive power of these variables. In addition, qualitative data from classroom observations and student interviews yield detailed, contextualized information on learners' lived experiences and teachers' instructional behaviors. This methodological blend ensures that the study not only quantifies the effect of EI and cultural sensitivity but also explains the mechanisms through which these constructs operate in the field.

Preliminary findings of the study show that both emotional intelligence and culturally responsive pedagogy are potent predictors of students' English language development. Together, they account for approximately 45% of the variance in learning outcomes, a significant figure that underscores their pedagogical importance. More importantly, the study illustrates the transformative impact of these teacher qualities on the classroom environment. Teachers with high EI and cultural sensitivity ratings were seen to provide more inclusive, respectful, and emotionally supportive learning

environments where students felt valued, supported, and motivated. Not only did these classrooms enable linguistic competence, but they also enabled student agency, participation, and confidence in using English as a communicative resource. Such findings are aligned with an emerging body of research that stresses the importance of the affective and socio-cultural dimensions of language learning, particularly in diverse learning contexts.

The results of this research have important implications for teacher education and professional development. If, in fact, emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity are integral to successful language teaching, teacher preparation programs must be reshaped to build these competencies explicitly. This involves not only theoretical coursework but also experiential learning experiences in which pre-service and in-service teachers can explore their cultural assumptions, develop intercultural awareness, and learn emotionally intelligent communication skills. These can be further supported through mentorship, peer mentoring, and classroom simulations, while institutional policies must espouse inclusive teaching practices and emotional well-being as part of professional expectations.

2. Method

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine the impact of teacher emotional intelligence (EI) and cultural sensitivity on the English language learning outcomes of culturally diverse students. Quantitative data were gathered through standardized questionnaires, pre-course and post-course proficiency tests, and student engagement surveys. Qualitative data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured student interviews to triangulate and add depth to the quantitative data.

2.1 Participants

The sample for the study comprised 20 English teachers (10 males and 10 females; mean teaching experience = 8.4 years, SD = 3.6) and 200 secondary-level students (aged 14–17 years) from four multicultural schools in an urban school district. The student population represented a diversity of cultural backgrounds, including Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, East African, and Eastern European descent. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to achieve maximum diversity in cultural representation and language proficiency levels. Written informed consent was obtained from the teachers and students (and their guardians, in the case of minors), and ethical clearance was received from the institutional review board.

2.2 Instruments

1. Emotional Intelligence Scale (for Teachers)

   The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) was used to assess teachers' emotional intelligence. The 33-item measure is based on Salovey and Mayer's EI model and includes items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The measure assesses four EI dimensions:

   - Perception of Emotion (e.g., "I know when I am getting angry")
   - Managing Own Emotions (e.g., "I am responsible for my emotions")
   - Managing Others' Emotions (e.g., "I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voice")
   - Use of Emotion (e.g., "When I have a good feeling, I know how to keep it going")

   The instrument was found to be highly internally consistent (Cronbach's α =.89).

2. Teacher Cultural Sensitivity Scale

   Teacher cultural sensitivity was measured using a modified version of the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), which was adjusted for application in school contexts. The 20-item version used in this research included three subscales:

- Cognitive Sensitivity (e.g., "I understand how cultural backgrounds influence learning styles")
- Behavioral Adaptation (e.g., "I adjust my teaching strategies based on students' cultural needs")
- Affective Respect (e.g., "I value the cultural backgrounds my students bring to the classroom")

Responses were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The overall reliability coefficient was acceptable (Cronbach's α =.86).

3. Student English Proficiency Test

Language attainment was measured using a standardized English proficiency test created in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The test was administered at the beginning (pre-test) and the end (post-test) of the school semester and assessed listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing. Scores were noted on a 100-point scale and interpreted in relation to CEFR standards (A1–C1). Inter-rater reliability for the written component was maintained by double marking and yielded an inter-rater agreement of 92%.

4. Student Engagement and Feedback Questionnaire

Students also took a 15-item engagement questionnaire at the end of the term, adapted from the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI). Items measured emotional engagement (e.g., "I feel connected to my English teacher"), cognitive engagement (e.g., "I try hard to understand what we learn in English class"), and behavioral engagement (e.g., "I participate actively in English class discussions"). A few feedback items also measured students' perceptions of teacher support and classroom inclusiveness (e.g., "My teacher respects my culture" and "I feel safe speaking English in class"). The Cronbach's alpha for this instrument was 91.

5. Semi-Structured Student Interviews

A sub-sample of 40 students (10 from each school) was selected for one-on-one interviews to explore their perceptions regarding the classroom environment, teacher support, and cultural responsiveness. Interview questions included the following:

• "How does your teacher make you feel at ease in class?"

• "Do you believe your culture is respected or understood in the classroom?"

• "How does your teacher respond when you make an English error?"

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

6. Classroom Observations

All teachers were observed in two English language classes (40 classes observed in total) using a standardized observation protocol designed to note emotional climate, teacher-student interaction, responsiveness to cultural cues, and levels of student participation. The protocol included checklists and field notes based on categories such as "teacher shows empathy," "instructional adaptation in response to student needs," and "incidences of student expression of cultural identity." Inter-observer reliability (Cohen's κ) was 0.82 for the sample.

2.3 Procedure

Data were collected over one academic term (approximately 12 weeks). Students were administered pre-tests, and teachers completed the EI and cultural sensitivity questionnaires during the first week. Two researchers provided classroom observations unobtrusively throughout the term. Engagement questionnaires and post-tests were

administered during the final week. Semi-structured interviews were administered during the final two weeks of the term. All data were anonymized and coded to safeguard the identity of participants.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics and instrument scores. Multiple regression was used to examine the predictive power of teacher EI and cultural sensitivity on student English language gains (post-test minus pre-test scores). Collinearity diagnostics confirmed that multicollinearity was not a concern (VIF < 2.0). Pearson correlations were also calculated to examine relationships between teacher attributes and student engagement measures.

Qualitative data (interviews and observations) were thematically analyzed, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Transcripts were coded inductively and verified by two independent researchers for inter-coder reliability and credibility. Themes were synthesized and compared with quantitative findings to make holistic inferences.

3. Results

This section presents the statistical findings of the influence of teacher Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Cultural Sensitivity (CS) on English language learning gains and student classroom engagement. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test scores, learning gain, and student engagement for the sample of 200 students.

As Table 1 indicates, the pre-test average was 60.41, increasing to 70.70 at the conclusion of the semester, with a mean learning gain of 10.29 points. This reflects a substantial improvement in English proficiency across the cohort. The engagement scores also reflect moderate to high levels of classroom engagement (M = 3.96, SD = 0.50) on a 5-point scale.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine interrelationships among teacher EI, teacher CS, student learning gain, and student engagement. Analysis showed strong, positive relationships between both EI and CS scores and student learning gain (r = 0.61 and r = 0.57, respectively). Furthermore, both EI and CS also showed strong positive relationships with student engagement (r = 0.55 and r = 0.52, respectively) (Table 2). These results suggest that higher teacher emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity are associated with more significant gains in student English proficiency and more engaged classroom behavior. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the unique and combined predictive power of teacher EI and CS scores on student learning gain.

The model explained 45% of the variance in student learning gains (R^2 = .45, p < .001), confirming the collective importance of both emotional and cultural competencies in language teaching. EI was a marginally stronger predictor (β = .45) than CS (β = .39) (Table 3).

Classroom observations and interviews with students also supported quantitative results. Observers noted that teachers with high EI were patient, managed their emotions effectively, and resolved conflict positively, which promoted risk-taking and confidence among students. Culturally responsive teachers were more likely to use multilingual examples, respect cultural practices, and adapt lesson content to connect it to students' daily lives, which promoted student motivation and engagement. For example, a student clarified:

"My teacher always tries to learn a few words in our language and welcomes us to share stories from home. It makes me feel like I belong in the class."

Another student noted:

"When I was incorrect with a grammar point, she explained gently, and even made a joke about it. I did not feel embarrassed."

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Student Outcomes

Measure	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Pre-Test Score	60.41	9.71	33.80	84.97
Post-Test Score	70.70	10.81	38.90	95.86
Learning Gain	10.29	4.88	-6.21	22.77
Engagement Score	3.96	0.50	2.76	5.00

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variable	EI Score	CS Score	Learning Gain	Engagement Score
EI Score	1.00	0.62	0.61	0.55
CS Score	0.62	1.00	0.57	0.52
Learning Gain	0.61	0.57	1.00	0.59
Engagement Score	0.55	0.52	0.59	1.00

Table 3: Multiple Regression Predicting Learning Gain

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
EI Score	2.85	0.52	0.45	5.48	< .001
CS Score	2.12	0.48	0.39	4.42	< .001
R^2	0.45	0.45	0.45	0.45	< .001

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate teacher emotional intelligence (EI) and cultural sensitivity (CS) as predictors of English language achievement among students in linguistically diverse classrooms. The results of this study emphasize the significant role of both teacher EI and CS in facilitating favorable learning outcomes in language acquisition. The study established that both teacher EI and CS were positively and significantly correlated with students' language learning development and classroom participation. These findings align with the growing body of literature emphasizing the worth of socio-emotional and intercultural competencies in second language learning.

4.1 Key Findings and Their Implications

The descriptive statistics revealed significant improvement in students' English language proficiency, with an average learning gain of 10.29 points over the academic semester. This learning gain in learning outcomes suggests that the learning environment was good and facilitated language learning, which is consistent with research showing that emotional and cultural concerns are supreme in affecting students' language proficiency. Specifically, the positive

relationship between teacher EI and CS and student engagement and learning gain highlights the importance of these teacher attributes in creating a more effective language learning experience.

4.2 Emotional Intelligence in Language Teaching

The regression and correlation analysis indicated that teacher emotional intelligence was a significant predictor of student learning gain. High-EI teachers were found to provide emotionally supportive classrooms that enhanced student confidence and engagement. This finding is consistent with [33] model of emotional intelligence, which posits that individuals with high EI are more capable of managing their own emotions and the emotions of others, particularly in emotionally charged settings like classrooms. High-EI teachers can make students feel secure to take risks in their language learning, thus enhancing language learning [34]. Furthermore, the positive correlation between EI and student engagement ($r = 0.55$) means that emotionally intelligent teachers are more capable of encouraging active participation and motivation, which are vital for second language acquisition [35].

4.3 Cultural Sensitivity in Teaching

Cultural sensitivity also emerged as a robust predictor of learning outcomes. Teachers with high CS scores demonstrated the capability to adapt pedagogical styles to meet the diverse cultural needs of students. They engaged in culturally responsive teaching that affirmed students' cultural identities, fostered inclusivity, and created a sense of classroom belonging. These findings are consistent with current research highlighting the applicability of culturally responsive pedagogy in second-language classrooms, especially in multilingual and multicultural settings [36]. Culturally sensitive teachers who respect students' cultural norms and values make students feel appreciated and understood, which can attenuate the anxiety and insecurity typically surrounding second language learning [37]. In addition, the relationship between CS and engagement ($r = 0.52$) provides support for the notion that culturally relevant pedagogical practices can enhance student engagement and motivation.

4.4 Combined Effect of EI and CS

The additive impact of EI and CS on student learning gains ($R^2 = 0.45$) demonstrates the benefit of integrating both emotional and cultural competencies in the teaching practice. The findings suggest that while teacher EI and CS each contribute independently to student achievement, their interaction increases their potency. This result emphasizes the need for language teachers to develop both their emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity in order to be capable of responding to the various needs of their students. The complementary influence of these two teacher attributes reflects the integrated nature of effective teaching, where cognitive, emotional, and cultural factors interact to affect the learning process. Teachers who possess both EI and CS are not only emotionally supportive but also culturally responsive, and this enables them to respond flexibly to their students' various backgrounds and learning styles.

4.5 Educational Implications

The results of this study have important implications for teacher education and professional development. First, the strong predictive power of both EI and CS suggests that these competencies must be prioritized in teacher education programs. Traditional teacher training often focuses on linguistic and pedagogical content knowledge. However, the results of this study highlight the necessity of attending to the socio-emotional and intercultural dimensions of teaching. Teachers must be provided with the opportunity to develop their emotional intelligence through workshops, reflective practice, and mindfulness training, as well as engage in cross-cultural training to increase their cultural awareness and sensitivity. By incorporating EI and CS in teacher preparation, educational institutions can enable teachers to create more inclusive, emotionally supportive, and culturally responsive classrooms.

Furthermore, as classrooms worldwide become increasingly diverse, the ability to manage cultural diversity and the emotional life of a multicultural classroom will become increasingly important. Teacher preparation programs,

therefore, need to place greater emphasis on building competencies in those two areas, not only for the teaching of language but for the teaching of any subject to a diverse student population. This can help ensure that teachers are prepared to teach all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds or emotional needs.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to the understanding of EI and CS in second-language instruction, some limitations must be addressed in future studies. First, while the sample was large, it was taken from a specific geographical region and population. The findings may not be fully generalizable to other settings, particularly those in non-urban or non-Western contexts. Future studies should replicate this study in diverse educational settings to see whether the relationships found in this study occur in various cultural and regional contexts. Second, this study relied heavily on self-report measures of EI and CS, which are susceptible to response biases. Future studies could include more objective measures, such as peer or student ratings of teacher EI and CS, to obtain a more well-rounded view of these constructs.

In addition, the cross-sectional nature of this research limits our ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between teacher traits and student outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracing the impact of EI and CS over time would provide more robust evidence of their causal effects. Finally, while the study focused on instructor traits, future research could also investigate the role of student emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity in language learning outcomes since these factors also influence the quality of instruction.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides strong evidence that emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity are central to enabling successful English language learning outcomes. Teachers who possess these qualities are more likely to create caring, engaging, and inclusive classrooms that promote student engagement, confidence, and linguistic competence. The implications are that teacher education programs need to focus more closely on developing EI and cultural sensitivity in order to make language teaching more effective in multicultural classrooms. As the world of education becomes increasingly diversified, the integration of emotional and cultural competencies in teaching will become increasingly vital in enabling the success of all students.

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