

The RICH Model for Teaching in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the challenges of teaching English to culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) students and to design an educational model to address these challenges in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. In this regard, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with five English instructors working at university. Two studies on revealing these challenges and the researcher's own teaching experience were the other data collection instruments. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of twelve key challenges. Considering these challenges, the RICH, a four-stage model, was designed, and presented with its core principles.

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1. Introduction

Language classrooms have evolved from homogeneous environments where teachers and students shared the same language and culture to diverse settings where individuals from different cultural backgrounds and with varied linguistic repertoires converge. With factors such as increased globalization, immigration, and exchange programs, these classrooms are very likely to keep their new role in the future. This transformation has challenged traditional language teaching approaches, including methodologies, materials, and pedagogical beliefs. This paper focuses on how English is taught and studied in culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) classrooms at university level in Türkiye. It first describes the context in reference to people, procedures, and goals. After that, the paper highlights the potential problems that teachers and students face as well as their needs regarding the issue. It presents some of the relevant studies that have been conducted in Türkiye and abroad. Finally, this paper proposes an educational model to address these identified needs.

In this paper, the term *culturally diverse* is used to refer to “students who may be distinguished by ethnicity, social class, and/or language” (Perez, 1998: 6) whereas the term *linguistically diverse* is used to refer to students whose first language is a language other than Turkish. The context that is taken into consideration here is the English preparatory school of a public university in Türkiye. It is assumed that other schools of the same type in the country have similar student and instructor profiles and language programs. The majority of students and instructors in these schools are Turkish. However, because of the factors mentioned, most of the classrooms consist of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Limited instructor awareness and knowledge regarding how to leverage this diversity may result in various teaching challenges, including cultural misunderstandings and communication barriers. On the other hand, students from different

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cultural and linguistic backgrounds might encounter several difficulties when communicating with others such as discrimination or educational gaps. The theory guiding this educational model stems from Banks' (1993) five dimensions of multicultural education. First, content integration is related to how often teachers make use of elements and information from a variety of cultures to demonstrate key concepts and principles in their fields. The second dimension, called knowledge construction, refers to the process of how they assist their students in understanding how knowledge is created and how it is affected by their ethnicities. The third one is prejudice reduction that deals with learners' racial attitudes and strategies to be employed to create more democratic values. Equity pedagogy, on the other hand, requires the use of various methods to ensure the language learning success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Lastly, empowering the culture and social structure at school is seen as necessary when it comes to creating educational equality for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds.

2. Literature

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity in language classrooms has prompted extensive research examining the challenges and opportunities this presents for educators. Research in this area has mainly focused on several key themes such as teacher preparedness and confidence, classroom management strategies, the role of teacher education, and the need for systematic approaches to multicultural pedagogy.

Wong, Indiatsi, and Wong (2016) investigated the preparedness of English as a second language (ESL) teacher candidates to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Their study revealed a significant gap between teachers' perceived strengths and actual competencies. While participants identified their strengths as employing relevant teaching strategies and possessing appropriate personality traits, they acknowledged substantial weaknesses in their knowledge of students' first languages and cultural backgrounds. This knowledge deficit created considerable anxiety among teacher candidates regarding their ability to meet the diverse needs of CaLD students, particularly given the varied proficiency levels and background knowledge these students brought to the classroom.

This finding is further supported by Yildirim's (2019) research conducted with Turkish instructors of English working in preparatory schools. Using both quantitative scales and qualitative interviews, the study demonstrated that instructors experienced considerable difficulty addressing the academic and linguistic needs of their CaLD students. The primary barrier identified was the lack of formal training in teaching diverse student populations, highlighting a critical gap in professional development that directly impacts instructional effectiveness in multicultural settings.

The complexity of managing diverse classrooms extends beyond linguistic considerations to encompass broader cultural dynamics. Van Tartwijk, den Brok, Veldman, and Wubbels (2009) examined the practical knowledge of teachers successful in creating positive working atmospheres in Dutch multicultural secondary classrooms. Through video-stimulated interviews with twelve experienced educators, they identified key strategies that effective teachers employed. These teachers demonstrated awareness of the importance of establishing clear rules and correcting student behavior, when necessary, while simultaneously working to minimize the potential negative impact of corrections on classroom atmosphere. Interestingly, the study revealed that successful teachers focused on developing positive teacher-student relationships and adjusting their pedagogical approaches based on anticipated student responses. However, a notable finding was teachers' reluctance to explicitly address the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their students, suggesting a missed opportunity to leverage diversity as a pedagogical resource. This reluctance indicates a need for more systematic approaches that help teachers confidently incorporate cultural elements into their instruction.

The preparation of teachers for multicultural classrooms represents a critical area requiring substantial attention. Stunell's (2020) research with student primary school teachers in France revealed significant gaps in teacher education programs' ability to prepare educators for cultural and linguistic diversity. The study, based on interviews with student teachers engaged in a two-year initial teacher education program, examined their readiness to meet multicultural classroom challenges and their attitudes toward cultural and linguistic diversity. The findings indicated that while student teachers encountered diverse classrooms, they were primarily focused on "managing" the situation rather than utilizing diversity as a constructive educational resource. Stunell concluded that without major changes in teacher education approaches, school administration policies, and institutional support systems, the rich possibilities for developing positive attitudes toward inclusion and interculturality would continue to be overlooked. This research underscores the need for systematic, institutionally supported frameworks that move beyond mere accommodation to active engagement with diversity.

Collectively, these studies highlight several critical gaps in current approaches to CaLD instruction. First, there is a consistent pattern of teacher unpreparedness and lack of confidence when working with diverse student populations. Second, while some effective classroom management strategies have been identified, teachers often avoid directly engaging with cultural and linguistic diversity, missing opportunities for enhanced learning. Third, current teacher education programs appear inadequate in preparing educators for the realities of multicultural classrooms.

Most significantly, existing research has focused primarily on identifying challenges and describing current practices, with limited attention to developing systematic, theoretically grounded frameworks that address these challenges comprehensively. The studies reviewed suggest a need for models that integrate identification of student needs, preparation of culturally responsive resources, systematic implementation of inclusive practices, and ongoing evaluation for continuous improvement.

These findings highlight the need to address the challenges encountered in CaLD teaching contexts through the development of a comprehensive educational model. This study contributes to filling this gap by utilizing literature review findings, personal teaching experiences, and data collected through semi-structured interviews with five experienced instructors teaching English in CaLD classrooms at university level in Türkiye to develop a systematic framework for multicultural language instruction.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This design research study employed a systematic approach to identify specific challenges in CaLD instruction and develop a practical solution framework. Following Barab and Squire's (2004) definition of design research as "a series of approaches, with the intent of producing new theories, artifacts, and practices that account for and potentially impact learning and teaching in naturalistic settings," this study combined problem identification with solution development. The research process involved three integrated data sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with five experienced English instructors, (2) analysis of relevant literature, and (3) researcher reflection on teaching experience in CaLD contexts. Through thematic analysis, twelve specific challenges were identified and categorized into communication, cultural, pedagogical, and resource-related domains. These findings informed the development of the RICH model—a four-stage framework providing systematic procedures for identification, preparation, implementation, and evaluation of culturally responsive English instruction. This methodological approach aligns with the study's objective to create practical, theoretically grounded solutions for CaLD instruction rather than merely exploring challenges. The resulting RICH model represents a systematic intervention framework designed for immediate application in Turkish university preparatory programs.

3.2. Research Questions

This study addresses the following primary research questions and related sub-questions:

1. How can a systematic and instructional framework address specific pedagogical challenges encountered by English instructors in CaLD classrooms within Turkish university preparatory programs?
 - 1.1. What specific communication, cultural, pedagogical, and resource-related challenges do English instructors experience when teaching CaLD students in Turkish preparatory programs?
 - 1.2. How can these challenges be systematically addressed in an educational model to be constructed for CaLD students through structured identification, preparation, implementation, and evaluation procedures?

3.3 Setting and Participants

The educational model in this paper was designed in order to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) students who generally spend a year at the school of foreign languages at a university in Ankara to have a good command of English before they commence their studies in their departments. Considered as a center of research in social sciences, the university has a considerable number of international students as well as academics from various countries. Regarding the implementation of the school program, at the beginning of each academic year, all the incoming students have a chance to take a placement test which consists of grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension parts. Those who get over sixty points are entitled to take a proficiency test. This test additionally includes a writing task and a speaking part and scoring over seventy-five points gives the test takers the right to start their departmental programs right away. The ones who fail to obtain this result are placed at appropriate levels based on their placement test scores. The program is made up of four levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate.

The present study was conducted with five participants who have worked as English instructors at university. One of the participants was Iranian while the others were Turkish. They were intentionally selected by the researcher because of their teaching experience in CaLD classrooms. This implies the use of purposive sampling. It should be noted that the integration of the researcher's teaching experience and findings from relevant studies in the model design extends the scope beyond the interview participants alone.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

For the purpose of collecting qualitative data, the researcher made use of semi-structured interviews. Thanks to their flexible and engaging nature, these interviews allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions, creating ample opportunities to explore unforeseeable issues contrary to surveys or questionnaires. From the perspective of the present study, this type of data is considered essential to support the researcher's experience and findings obtained from relevant studies. Furthermore, this tool made it possible to uncover challenges that were not experienced by participants in previous studies. Regarding the content of the present interview, a set of close/ open ended questions followed by *how* and *why* was prepared by the researcher in an attempt to stimulate participants' critical thinking and encourage them to reflect on their personal language teaching experience. The interview questions were translated into Turkish as some participants might feel more comfortable with having the interview in their mother tongue. The interview questions are presented below.

- Do you like to teach English in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms?
- Are there any challenges that you face when teaching English in such classrooms?
- If yes, what are these challenges?

Regarding the researcher's own teaching experience as a source, Kuehner et al. (2016) defines reflexivity as "a strategy of using subjectivity to examine social and psychosocial phenomena, assuming that social discourses are inscribed in and social practices are embodied by the researcher". It should be noted that this experience has inspired the attempt to design the model in the present study. On the other hand, two studies (Bhandari, 2015 & Sarı and Yüce, 2020) conducted with the aim of revealing the challenges in teaching English to such a student population significantly contributed to the specifications in the present model through their findings. The elements of a linguistically responsive teaching framework for multilingual contexts suggested by Oliveira (2014) also provided valuable insights for the researcher to be able to design the present model. In conclusion, addressing the challenges from three different perspectives is believed to enhance the breadth of the forthcoming model.

3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and translated into English if conducted in Turkish. Thematic analysis was carried out manually in order to reveal challenges that the participants, who are working at preparatory schools in Türkiye, experience when teaching English in culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) classrooms and identified the key challenges. Relevant statements were extracted for further analysis. Additionally, the researcher's own teaching experience and a review of relevant literature informed the identification of potential challenges. Finally, all data sources were compared, culminating in the identification of twelve key challenges.

4. Findings

Revealing common challenges when teaching English in CaLD classrooms plays a key role in designing a model to create a culturally and linguistically responsive atmosphere. Twelve key challenges were compiled based on three sources : Interview(I), Literature (L); and Researcher's experience (R) (Table 1.), all of which were used to construct the bases of education model intended for CaLD classrooms.

Table 1 Key Challenges When Teaching English in CaLD Classrooms

No.	Challenge	Level(s) Affected
1	Communication-related problems	I – L – R
2	Misunderstandings arising from cultural differences	I – L
3	Classroom management problems	I – L – R
4	Diverse language proficiency levels	I – L – R
5	Diverse learning styles	I – L – R
6	Challenges when giving feedback	L
7	Instructors' use of native language, i.e., Turkish	I – L – R
8	The absence of diverse cultural elements in materials	I – L – R
9	The lack of knowledge about learners' interests	L – R
10	Being biased against/in favor of certain cultural groups	L
11	Socioeconomic factors	L – R
12	Learners' varied expectations regarding the learning process	L

Note. I = Interview; L = Literature; R = Researcher's experience. CaLD = Culturally and Linguistically Diverse.

Based on the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, a number of statements regarding the participants' (P) teaching experience in CaLD classrooms are as follows:

"After the lecture, I instruct students to complete activities. However, a notable challenge arises in linguistically diverse classrooms, where some individuals may encounter difficulties comprehending even the simplest instructions." (P3 – challenge no.1)

"I think it is very likely that misunderstandings due to cultural differences occur in such classes. For example, in casual conversations in the classroom, discussions about slaughtering cows after Eid-al-Adha may arise, potentially leading to feelings of disappointment or anger, particularly among certain groups, such as Indian students." (P2 – challenge no.2)

"Foreign students from certain cultures can act extremely friendly towards me. This may inevitably cause me to have negative feelings towards them." (P5 – challenge no.3)

"A linguistically diverse class challenges the teacher. Although it's challenging, it helps teachers grow and gain experience through these challenges. For example, you would need to create a learning environment for those with low levels at the same time without disrupting the progress of those with high levels. (P4 – challenge no.4)

"I observe that students from Far Eastern countries may face challenges participating comfortably in group activities due to their introverted tendencies." (P4 – challenge no.5)

"In elementary classes, providing the Turkish counterpart of an English word can be a practical solution. However, I am concerned that foreign students may feel isolated during such instances." (P1 – challenge no.7)

"I think certain cultural elements are more dominant in the materials we use. I can say that this situation harms the atmosphere based on equality that I try to create in the classroom." (P3 – challenge no.8)

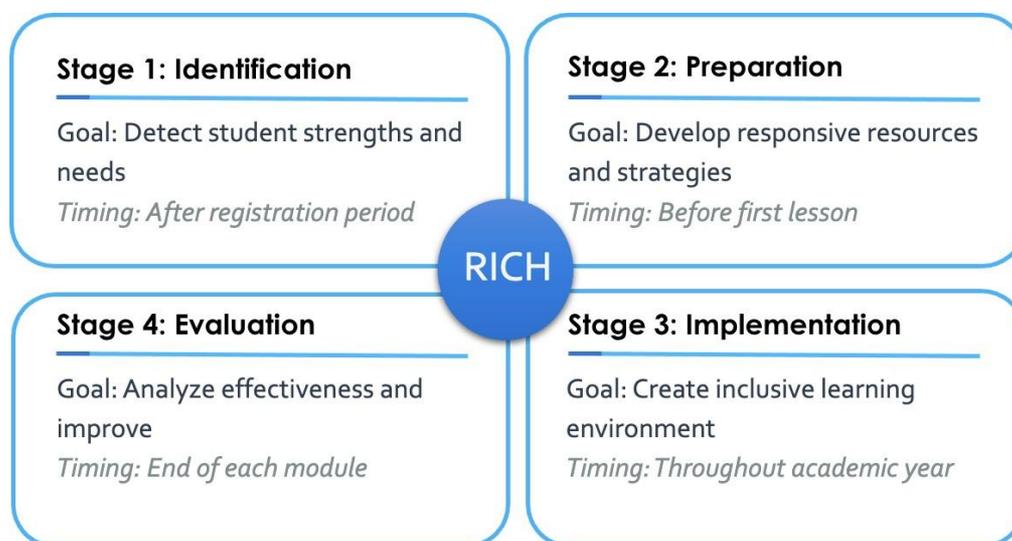
4.1. The RICH Model

With the aim of creating a culturally and linguistically responsive atmosphere in the classroom in light of the identified key challenges, the researcher designed an educational model named RICH (see Figure I). This acronym stands for:

- **Respectful classroom environments:** Fostering an environment that celebrates diversity and promotes mutual respect.
- **Inclusive materials and activities:** Utilizing resources and activities that embrace a wide variety of learning styles and cultural elements.
- **Culturally responsive teaching practices:** Adopting pedagogical approaches that broaden instructors' cultural knowledge to enhance learning.
- **Holistic support for all learners:** Providing comprehensive assistance to ensure all students thrive in the classroom.

The model consists of four stages that are presented below in detail:

Figure I. The RICH Model



The goal in the identification stage is to detect the strengths and needs of incoming students through questionnaires and interviews. It takes place after the registration period ends at the beginning of the academic year. Demographic and personal information such as learners' first language, socio-economic background, personality traits, the number of years spent in Türkiye, and learning styles is collected by the school administration. A comprehensive placement test is conducted to determine the proficiency levels. An analysis of diverse cultural backgrounds and their influence on learning habits is investigated in order to become familiar with the students' study preferences and expectations for teacher roles as well as popular traditions in their home countries. An individual profile is created for each student to be taken into consideration in the next stage.

The goal in the preparation stage is to develop culturally and linguistically responsive resources, instructional strategies based on the profiles and increase the instructors' awareness about incoming students with a training session. It must take place before the first lesson starts. A 'guidebook' is designed for instructors which consists of basic expressions in students' first languages for good rapport, classroom rules that also cover expected manners to be announced in the first lesson. The unit in charge of managing this process must check if the existing materials are appropriate to the needs of the students and adapt culturally relevant and engaging materials such as multimedia materials. Instructors attend a training session on appropriate teaching strategies and intercultural competence for this context. Necessary resources are prepared for the students in need, and the school library is enriched accordingly (e.g., bilingual dictionaries for the international learners). Classes are organized to promote inclusive groupings and prevent cultural segregation.

The goal in the implementation stage is to create a respectful, inclusive and engaging learning environment, and teach in a way that can meet the needs of CaLD students. Differentiated instruction plays a key role in integrating varied activities and assessments into the teaching period. Culturally relevant materials stand out in this stage to make learning more relatable to the student population. Group work is highly recommended for students to learn from one another's experiences. Instructors should consistently incorporate the principles of scaffolded instruction, maintaining an awareness of the need to break down intricate tasks into smaller, manageable steps. Getting anonymous feedback from learners regularly is very likely to increase the effectiveness of this model. Collaboration among instructors must be promoted through weekly meetings. Lastly, ongoing teacher training can be taken into consideration if deemed necessary.

The goal in the evaluation stage is to analyze the effectiveness of the model, identify the areas for improvement, and assess the learning outcomes. It takes place at the end of each module, allowing the responsible unit to make necessary modifications to the implementation of the model. The unit collects data through various types of assessments, student feedback, and teacher reflection. Open communication about the model is highly recommended among all the participants. This stage also allows the school administration to assess the intercultural competence development of both instructors and students. Last but not least, the knowledge and experience accumulated during the implementation period must be analyzed carefully to improve the quality of the model for the next academic year.

5. Conclusion

English preparatory schools in Türkiye serve growing populations of culturally and linguistically diverse students, necessitating enhanced instructor competencies in multicultural pedagogy. This design research study systematically examined the challenges language instructors encounter when teaching English to CaLD students at university level through triangulated data collection involving interviews, literature analysis, and researcher reflection.

The thematic analysis revealed twelve specific challenges categorized into communication, cultural, pedagogical, and resource-related domains. In response to these findings, the RICH model was developed as a four-stage framework that provides systematic procedures for creating culturally responsive learning environments. The model's stages—identification, preparation, implementation, and evaluation—offer structured approaches to addressing each identified challenge while ensuring continuous improvement.

Educational institutions should consider implementing the RICH model's identification procedures to better understand their diverse student populations, while the preparation stage provides concrete steps for instructor training and resource development. The implementation and evaluation stages ensure that culturally responsive practices become sustainable and continuously improved.

While this study provides valuable insights into CaLD instruction challenges and solutions, the relatively small sample size and focus on one institutional context limit generalizability. Future research should examine the RICH model's effectiveness through longitudinal implementation studies and investigate student perspectives on their learning experiences in CaLD classrooms.

Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural contexts would enhance understanding of multicultural pedagogy, while research on technology integration within the RICH framework could address evolving educational needs in increasingly digital learning environments.

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