

Challenges of teaching english in a multilingual classroom

Aileen A. Barrios

Universidad de Panamá
Centro Regional Universitario de Panamá Oeste
Panamá

aileen0330@hotmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7196-2774>

Aleojin Ríos

Universidad de Panamá
Centro Regional Universitario de Panamá Oeste
Panamá

aleojin.rios@up.ac.pa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2247-0313>

Recibido 4/12/24 – Aprobado 15/4/25

Abstract

The exposure of English in education has led to many countries becoming bilingual or even multilingual rather monolingual. So, teaching English to MLs has turned into a demanding challenge for teachers due to the linguistic background in the classrooms. However, challenges are neither perturbing nor overwhelming. Thus, teaching without challenges is featureless and ineffective. This systematic review aimed to explore the challenges English teachers face when teaching English in multilingual classrooms. Some of the challenges faced were lack of teacher training, appropriate use of methods and strategies by the teachers, lack of English proficiency among learners due to their linguistic backgrounds, and lack of resources. For this study, 20 articles published between 2010 and 2023 were collected to analyze their data and main findings about teaching English to MLs. Major findings showed methods that can be applied in multilingualism as well as strategies to promote teachers and students' interaction in the classroom. Finally, in this systematic review, consistent teacher training programmes are required. It is imperative to have committed, innovative, dynamic, empathetic, and organized teachers to promote quality multilingual education, teachers should be expertise in the discipline.

Keywords: English, Spanish, teacher, classroom, multilingualism

RETOS DE LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS EN UN AULA MULTILINGÜE

Resumen

La exposición al inglés en la educación ha llevado a muchos países a convertirse en bilingües o incluso multilingües en lugar de monolingües. Por lo tanto, enseñar inglés a estudiantes multilingües se ha convertido en un reto exigente para el profesorado debido al contexto lingüístico de las aulas. Sin embargo, estos desafíos no son ni perturbadores ni abrumadores. Por lo tanto, la enseñanza sin desafíos resulta monótona e ineficaz. Esta revisión sistemática tuvo como objetivo explorar los desafíos que enfrentan los profesores de inglés al enseñar inglés en aulas multilingües. Algunos de los desafíos encontrados fueron la falta de formación docente, el uso adecuado de métodos y estrategias por parte del profesorado, la falta de dominio del inglés entre los estudiantes debido a sus antecedentes lingüísticos y la falta de recursos. Para este estudio, se recopilaron 20 artículos publicados entre 2010 y 2023 para analizar sus datos y los principales hallazgos sobre la enseñanza del inglés a estudiantes multilingües. Los principales hallazgos mostraron métodos aplicables al multilingüismo, así como estrategias para promover la interacción entre profesores y estudiantes en el aula. Finalmente, en esta revisión sistemática, se requieren programadores de formación docente consistentes. Es imperativo contar con docentes comprometidos, innovadores, dinámicos, empáticos y organizados para promover una educación multilingüe de calidad. Los docentes deben ser expertos en la disciplina.

Palabras clave: Inglés, español, docente, aula, multilingüismo.

Introduction

Many countries are currently facing challenges in teaching English in a multilingual classroom. One of the main problems is multilingualism in the classroom, a factor that has taken off a lot in recent years, due to the cultural migration that exists all around the world. Haukås (2016) figured out that multilingual classrooms are always challenging and teaching

a third language is entirely different from teaching a second language. To be able to delve deeper into these challenges faced by English teachers, it must be explained what multilingualism is, which is only the linguistic condition by which a person or community speakers can express themselves in several languages. European Commission (2015) writes multilingualism as the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives.

The most common cases are societies or people who handle more than two languages. Certainly, English teachers working in multilingual classrooms have been able to meet with more than one obstacle when teaching MLs. The lack of understanding the basis of English properly as basic grammar and vocabulary it is really a challenging job for English language teachers. Most of the time, teachers need to apply code-switching into their mother tongues or use translation to explain and clarify a difficult language pattern. The world is a storehouse of languages. There is linguistic diversity. Linguistic diversity reflects the existence of the multitude of languages spoken in the world which is variously estimated. Crystal (2009) Another of the most frequent problems we encounter in a multilingual setting is the difficulty of being able to carry out collaborative work, since it becomes impossible to unite students of different languages and make an assignment together.

Another of the most frequent problems we encounter in a multilingual setting is the great difficulties of being able to carry out collaborative work since it is a challenge to unite learners from different linguistic and cultural background (a single class would have more than 30 languages) to work an assignment together. Some students feel shy and hesitant when are struggling in English activities.

This study emphasizes in the need of applying successful methods and strategies to increase students' knowledge and keep motivated in the learning process despite the lack of didactic materials, equipped labs, useful text according to their level of English.

synthesize data on the challenges of teaching English to MLs. Inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- Articles that discussed multilingualism in a policy approach were not included.
- Articles that considered multilingualism as a demographic and migration factor rather than a school factor were not included.
- Articles from different multilingual countries were considered. There was no restriction to a specific region. Only English articles were included.
- Articles focusing on English language teaching for MLs were included.
- Articles using different methods (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed) were included.
- Articles without full text available were not included. All information that was not an article (chapter, book, conference paper) was excluded.
- After an exhaustive review for inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 articles were used for the systematic review.

Results

Multilingual methods and strategies

In relation to the present study, it can be noted that many authors have highlighted the methods and strategies used by teachers in multilingual classrooms. According to Chamot (1987) they are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information. Sometime later, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) on their part defined learning strategies as the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information.

Some teachers claim that one of the most highlighted weaknesses of teachers is teaching with appropriate methods and applying successful strategies that work for every individual learner. Although it is true that students have their own way of learning, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide students with outstanding methods and strategies to develop linguistic skills. However, it cannot be ignored that since a single training method could not possibly fit the needs of all learners' concerning their

language learning strategies and skills development, a multimodal and multicognitive approach corresponding to all the students' needs should be employed (Chostelidou et al, 2012). Multilingual pedagogies are assemblages of several strategies that build on the ideas of actively involving students' languages in the teaching-learning process as beneficial for students' social, language, and academic development (Cummins, 2005).

One of the most effective ways to teach English in a multilingual setting is to use proven strategies. Oxford remarks that classification of learning strategies, which draws upon previous models, strategies are classified into cognitive, memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social, and are grouped into two major broad types, direct and indirect ones, which are all interrelated and interact with one another (1990).

Many teachers have incorporated their own learning experiences into the classroom, which has led to the acceptance of MLs. Similarly, MLs show more interest in learning with multilingual teachers than with bilingual teachers. In other words, teachers who teach multilingual classes should speak at least three languages or have the native language of the sector they teach in their curriculum, which makes it easier to explain tasks and even organize teamwork with students from different language and cultural background abilities.

Opportunities should be provided for English teachers to reflect on their own language learning experiences as they implement the same strategies with their learners in their classes (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Smith, Harris, & Reder, 2005). Studies already conducted on the challenges English language teachers face in multilingual classrooms show that most teachers choose to use more than one method or strategy at a time because they know from their own experience that combining strategies leads to the expected result.

Among the various methods and strategies used, the reading method, the eclectic method, the discussion method, and the communicative method stand out. Also, Code-switching is called a strategy that can be employed in teaching and learning foreign languages at a certain level of education. In this term, code-switching is a shifting of language from one to another by the speaker within the same meaning and substance (Myers-Scotton 1993, 2006). Following within English classroom activity, the teacher integrated the two languages in a powerful communication, which is called translanguaging as echoed by (García & Wei, 2014; Margana & Rasman, 2021). Although many teachers claim that the mixture of two methods is more effective, others have used and suggested some strategies such as:

- Promoting language learning
- Using a common language as a lingua franca
- Using the language of the students.

From the results of the current study, it can be deduced that although there are several methods, they all have in common the active promotion, formation, and construction of the different linguistic repertoires and identities that exist in a multilingual classroom.

It is worth noting that although all the strategies used can lead to positive results, it is up to the teacher to develop them effectively. The lack of technology, economic resources and didactic materials in the students' native language hinders the learning process. If we add to these challenges the lack of multilingual teacher training, the challenges can lead not only to a pedagogical problem, but also to a problem of social adaptation on the part of MLs.

Articles included the audio lingual, the audiovisual method, the cognitive code, the situational approach, the reading method, the discussion method, and the communicative method; teachers confirm that their use promotes interaction with students.

Out of 229 teachers, 82.53% claimed that they used repetition and rewards with students; they felt motivated to interact in English in the classroom. 81.13% of teachers had to resort to translation and code-switching into native language for better understanding of tasks by students. 13.97% of teachers only used English in the classroom.

Lack of teachers' training

Teaching English to MLs is a rewarding challenge for any teacher who loves his vocation. However, multilingual countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, India, Zambia, and others do not have an effective education system that meets the needs of English teachers nowadays. There should be trainings, workshops and refresher courses specially designed for the English language teachers. (Noom-Ura, 2013). According to Cummins (2008), a trained teacher would recognize that students are not ready to utilize a language other than their own in a classroom setting.

The teaching goal is to make students work efficiently and it can be achieved with appropriate teaching training. Lucas & Villegas (2013) emphasize the need for current and future teachers to acquire practical strategies to support MLs such as through translanguaging and other

culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. According to Khan and Khan (2016), untrained teachers, education policy, assessment system, and a lengthy syllabus make it difficult for college students to learn English.

The government, schools and teacher training universities must work hand in hand and recognize the challenges teachers face every day in a multilingual classroom, as well as expand their training beyond strengthening language skills for teachers. Teacher training and professional development are seen as central mechanisms for the improvement of teachers' content knowledge and their teaching skills and practices to meet high educational standards (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). In addition, they often feel insecure about how to teach English in a linguistically inclusive and effective way (cf. Busse et al. 2020).

Among the common challenges of teaching English in multilingual classrooms is the lack of qualified teachers in discerning which are the functional methods and strategies to integrate an effective methodology in a multilingual classroom. These challenges are due to the linguistic diversity in class. Christison et al. (2021) argue that long-term in-service teacher training programmes will be fundamental in supporting such an aspiration for further professional development of foreign language teachers.

Despite the great importance and need for teacher training and professional development programs to boost quality teaching and learning, it is usually claimed that the available programs, which is not the case of Algeria, seem to be fragmented, poorly aligned with curriculum and inadequate to meet the needs of teachers (Cohen & Hill, 2001). In the lack of constant training by educational entities, some teachers have had to invest in learning pedagogical skills and mother tongues, enabling them to gain greater communicative competence to make the teaching/ learning process much more effective.

According to Fareed et al., (2016) have demonstrated that the first language is able to be a facilitator used to explain the material and convey the English vocabulary, phrase, and sentence. They switch the language from the English into other languages, including Arabic and Indonesia regarding their familiarity and regulation in that school, to help those students, understand the explanation much easier as demonstrated by (Hakim et al., 2019).

In 14 articles, there was a forum of 21 institutions between elementary schools, secondary schools, and universities; 261 teachers participated in the studies. Following, 76.18% of teachers stated that they do not have

adequate training for teaching English. Therefore, only 18% of teachers are trained in methodology of teaching English. In other studies, 86.97% of teachers stated that there were no workshops, seminars, or refresher courses frequently. In addition, 93.01% of English teachers believed that they should be involved in the curriculum design and teacher training courses since they were the ones who teach MLs.

Teaching MLs

Ayeni (2011) observes that teaching is a process that involves discovering desirable changes in the learner to achieve specific outcomes. The process of teaching English is not only linked to the teacher, MLs also play an active role in learning it. However, according to Douglas & Lee (2015), classroom management is the teachers' action and direction used to generate a supporting environment of learning with a fascinating learning activity.

Students' behavior should be focused on making the teacher be conscious when a task is not understood. However, part of this role is linked to the interest that the teacher instills in the student. If, despite this encouragement, the student does not show interest in learning, they will feel that the classes are monotonous and boring; creating a moment of anxiety which would hinder the appropriate development in learning English. MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) describe language anxiety as, the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated.

With second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning English which made some to participate while others did not. Certainly, if students perceive that teaching strategies are not interesting combined with the lack of teaching materials in their native language, it creates demotivation and little understanding on the part of students. Fareed et al., (2016) have claimed that code-switching could be utilized to facilitate classroom interaction activity specially to create comprehensible input into the students with low level of English proficiency. Besides, they switch the language from the English into other languages, including Arabic and Indonesia regarding their familiarity and regulation in that school, in order to help those students, understand the explanation much easier as demonstrated by (Hakim et al., 2019).

Similarly, MLs with anxiety problems reflect a lack of interest in focusing on the topics provided by the teacher. Horwitz et al. (1986) mentions language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Although each multilingual environment is unique, students must have proactive

behavior in classes. Feeling personalized support from the teacher is an important step to break communication barriers, and to be able to carry out teamwork that promotes English interaction. The teacher hoped the students would have better comprehension (Pramesvaran et al. 2018).

Articles were used, the data of 187 teachers and 415 students were used for this study, English was taught as a fundamental subject. 64.17% of teachers showed difficulties in teaching when students did not try to produce knowledge in English. It creates that 76.07% of students were shy when using English in the classroom for fear of being wrong, while 14.97% of prepared and confident students hardly suffer from anxiety, which increases participation in class. Finally, 85.03% of teachers considered that anxiety is a factor present in learning MLs.

2. Discussion

In this systematic review, a study was conducted on the challenges faced by both teachers and students in multilingual classrooms. The results of this systematic review showed that one of the most important factors in learning English is the teachers and students linguistic background in a classroom.

Through various research methods, questionnaires, surveys, observation and monitoring for both teachers and students, presented those methods and strategies used in multilingual classrooms, lack of teacher's training, and teaching MLs are the main factors that hinder the process of teaching-learning in multilingual classrooms. A high percentage of teachers showed an inclination in the use of repetition and rewards to students; strategies that promoted MLs interaction. Similarly, it was determined that a minimum of teachers only used English in the classroom while the rest of teachers used the methods of translanguaging and code-switching to the MLs mother tongues to ensure a better understanding of the activities.

On the other hand, it was shown that a considerable number of teachers did not have adequate English training, they did not receive seminars, workshops or training. And even when teachers presented appropriated training, they did not receive refresher courses either from the government or from the school where they worked. Additionally, the results of the survey showed that the teachers in charge of teaching in multilingual classrooms demanded participation in the curricular design for greater control of the material to be taught which should be based on the real needs of the students.

Teachers with quality training manage multilingual classes better; so, they would be able to discern the students' strengths and weaknesses possess. In this framework, the teachers surveyed confirmed that students with difficulties in learning English reflected anxiety for fear of being wrong and being mocked. That is, anxiety limits the capacity of student's communication which makes the teaching-learning process a bit complicated.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

This systematic review intended to figure the challenges faced by teachers when teaching English in multilingual classrooms. According to the British Council, in world-wide, there are 1.5 billion English learners (Bently, 2022). In multilingual classrooms, teachers must put in extra effort due to the diversity of languages. Haugen (2009) believes that the background of every learner is very important to every teaching and learning situation in school.

Opportunities should be provided for English teachers to reflect on their own language learning experiences as they implement the same strategies with their learners in their classes (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Smith, Harris, & Reder, 2005). Additionally, there are no constant professional development opportunities for English teachers to acquire new teaching techniques and methodologies to improve the efficiency and interest of English instruction for students. Noom-Ura (2013) found out that there should be trainings, workshops and refresher courses specially designed for the English language teachers.

This in-depth study addresses the challenges faced by both teachers and students in the teaching-learning process in multilingual classrooms. Future researchers are advised to focus on the role teachers should claim in designing special curricula for MLs and the duration of class, as 30 minutes is insufficient to teach English. Similarly, in-service trainings and workshops for English teaching should be requested based on the actual needs of every teacher. The study of student behavior should be deepened, as well as the appropriate methods and strategies to promote students' interest in learning L3.

Focusing research on the socioeconomic factor and students' exposure to English can provide important results that minimize teachers' difficulties in teaching English in multilingual classrooms. For future researchers, teacher education and training for working with MLs is an overarching research topic.

Disclosure Statement

There was no conflict of interest reported during research.

References

- Abikar, S. (2022). *Exploring Challenges Faced by a Teacher Teaching English in a Primary School in England | Eurasian Journal of Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*. <https://ejlts.com/index.php/home/article/view/37>
- Chostelidou, D., Griva, E., & Tsakiridou, E. (2015). Language Learners' Skills and Strategies: Assessing Academic Needs in a Multilingual Context. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 1472-1478. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.442>
- Christison, M. (2023). Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs, Practices, Emerging Ideologies about Multilingualism and Self-Efficacy Relative to Teaching Multilingual Learners. *Languages*, 8(1), 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8010041>
- Cummins, J. (2007). *Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms | Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/CJAL/article/view/19743>
- Escamilla, K., Hopewell, S., & Slavick, J. (2021). Teaching (Bi)Multilingual Learners: Connecting Languages. *The Reading Teacher*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2044>
- Jeyaraj, J. S. (s. f.). *Challenges of Teaching English in India*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3486395
- Kerekes, J. (2021). *Teachers' Takes on Supporting Multilingual Learners in K-12 Classrooms in Ontario | TESL Canada Journal*. <https://teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl/article/view/1525>
- Khare, A. (2011). *Teaching English Language Skills for School Teachers: CTE Programme of IGNOU | Khare | Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. <http://www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/all/article/view/4/2>
- Kirsch, C. J. D. (2020). *Multilingual Approaches for Teaching and Learning | From Acknowledging*. Taylor & Francis. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780429059674/multilingual-approaches-teaching-learning-claudine-kirsch-joana-duarte>
- Kopečková, R. (s. f.). *Learning to Teach English in the Multilingual Classroom*

Utilizing the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures. MDPI. <https://www.mdpi.com/2226-471X/7/3/168>

- Mariam, A. (2022). *CHALLENGES OF TEACHING PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY IN A MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM*. Zenodo. <https://zenodo.org/record/7188979>
- Murzina, E. (2022). *DIFFICULTIES FACED BY EFL TEACHERS IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO THE STUDENTS IN RURAL SCHOOLS | Учёный XXI века*. <https://scipubplatform.online/index.php/uch21vek/article/view/117>
- Mwanza, D. S. (2021). *An analysis of teachers' classroom application of the eclectic method to English language teaching in multilingual Zambia*. <http://dspace.unza.zm/handle/123456789/7145>
- Parveen, A., Dar, M. A., Rasool, I., & Jan, S. (2022). Challenges in the Multilingual Classroom Across the Curriculum. *Handbook of Research on Teaching in Multicultural and Multilingual Contexts*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-5034-5.ch001>
- Paudel, P. (2020). *Teaching English in Multilingual Contexts: Teachers' Perspectives | Prithvi Academic Journal*. <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/paj/article/view/29557>
- Poudel, P. P. (1970). Teaching English in Multilingual Classrooms of Higher Education: The Present Scenario. *Journal of NELTA*, 15(1-2), 121-133. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v15i1-2.4618>
- Prianty, T., Ngadiso, N., & Wijayanto, A. (2022). Task-Based Language Teaching: Perceptions and Implementation in Teaching Speaking. *AL-ISHLAH: Journal Pendidikan*, 14(1), 99-108. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v14i1.1203>
- Rasheed, S. (2017). *Challenges of Teaching English Language in a Multilingual Setting: An Investigation at Government Girls Secondary Schools of Quetta, Baluchistan, Pakistan | Rasheed | International Journal of English Linguistics | CCSE*. <https://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ijel/article/view/69430>
- Song, J. (s. f.). *Translanguaging as a Strategy for Supporting Multilingual Learners' Social Emotional Learning*. MDPI. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/12/7/475>
- Szelei, N. (2021). *Teaching in multilingual classrooms: strategies from a case study in Portugal*. <https://www.scielo.br/j/rbedu/a/GZc6kJd7jwgnPTMcbzNB4kF/?lang=en>