III. LINGUISTIC CONFLUENCES

A STUDY ON MULTICULTURALISM IN ELT CLASSES

Lavinia NĂDRAG
"Ovidius" University of Constanta
lnadrag28@yahoo.com

Abstract

Starting from recent theoretical perspectives of multiculturalism and the importance of the intercultural communicative competence in English language education, this study explores students' awareness of multiculturalism and their attitudes toward diversity, stereotypes, and inclusion. The research is based on a questionnaire applied to students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters of a public Romanian university, with the aim of identifying how multiculturalism is perceived in the philological academic environment and whether students consider it necessary in the curriculum. The findings are intended to support recommendations that could contribute to improving multicultural education practices at faculty level.

Keywords:

Multiculturalism, intercultural competence, English language teaching (ELT), philological students.

Introduction

Globalization and technological developments have increased the frequency of intercultural contact, especially among young people. Factors such as social media, international entertainment and daily interactions in intercultural educational or professional settings have exposed students to a wide array of cultures and ways of thinkings. In this context, researchers in foreign language education argue that successful learning should stretch beyond grammar and vocabulary, since communication also requires the comprehension of cultural norms and social meanings.

Therefore, the concept of intercultural communicative competence has become an intensively debated topic in English language teaching and learning processes. Scholars such as Agudelo (2007), Griffith and Lim

(2024), and Khoiriya et al. (2025) stress the importance of cultural awareness, empathy and the ability to reflect critically on stereotypes, and highlight their impact on language education efficiency. In her turn, Buzarna-Tihenea (2024, p. 156) states that intercultural education "*promotes diversity, critical thinking, inclusion and open-mindedness; develops intercultural skills; boosts international communication; prepares students for the global labor market; develops learning experiences*". However, the integration of intercultural perspectives into the English classroom can also be hindered by obstacles such as institutional constraints, teachers' limited training or teaching materials focused on narrow cultural representations. It was thus felt necessary to conduct a study on students' awareness of multiculturalism and their attitudes toward diversity, stereotypes, and inclusion in order to formulate recommendations that could contribute to improving multicultural education practices.

Theoretical Background

In her 2018 article, Ana Leao points out that globalization and rapid advances in technology have brought people from different cultures closer together, especially young people, who are constantly exposed to international media, social networks, and interactions with classmates from other countries. In her perspective, this increased intercultural contact could be a real opportunity for learning and growth, yet many societies still struggle to deal with diversity in a thoughtful way. Leao (2018) emphasizes that learning a language is not just about grammar; it is also about being able to communicate appropriately in different cultural and social contexts, a point supported by other researchers, such as Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002).

Agudelo (2007) also argues that foreign language teaching, especially English, goes far beyond the simple teaching of linguistic structures. In his view, language education influences the way learners understand and relate to the world around them. Since certain cultural perspectives are often prioritized in the classroom, language teaching can unintentionally promote ethnocentric attitudes and offer cultural capital that enables some learners to better position themselves within social and economic hierarchies. Agudelo (2007) further points out that language teaching is strongly shaped by wider socio-cultural and political realities. For example, English is not only taught

as a means of communication, but also as a tool that supports internationalization and economic expansion, revealing the close relationship between language learning and global power structures.

Similarly, Khoiriya et al. (2025) explain that English language teaching in the contemporary world cannot be limited to grammar and vocabulary. Since English increasingly functions as a global lingua franca, it is often used in interactions between speakers who are not native users of the language. As a result, learners must be able to handle different cultural expectations, communication styles, and perspectives. According to these scholars, successful communication today depends not only on linguistic competence, but also on intercultural skills. This suggests that English classes should move beyond the traditional emphasis on the four language skills and actively encourage the development of cultural awareness, empathy, and critical reflection, helping students communicate effectively in an increasingly diverse and interconnected society (Khoiriya et al., 2025).

In the same vein, Griffith and Lim (2024) stress the idea that learning a foreign language cannot be separated from learning about the culture in which that language is rooted. Simply knowing vocabulary and grammar is not enough to reach true proficiency, particularly when using the language spontaneously in real-life situations. These two researchers assert that cultural knowledge—such as values, norms, beliefs, rituals, and traditions—is essential for understanding meaning and communicating effectively. They explain that research over decades has shown that learners are unlikely to achieve advanced communicative competence unless culture is integrated into the classroom in explicit and meaningful ways, making cultural understanding a central component of language education.

In their turn, Buzarna-Tihenea (2020) and Khoiriya et al. (2025) also argue that teaching English today goes far beyond grammar and vocabulary; it requires developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Therefore, it is essential to understand what intercultural education entails. The Council of Europe (2009) emphasizes that it is not a radical innovation, but rather an approach that builds on existing sociolinguistic and cultural realities while recognizing social attitudes that can sometimes resist change. Its aim is not only to enhance functional language learning and future professional skills, but also to foster personal development in an inclusive

way, accessible to all learners, not just an elite. Methodologically, it is less about introducing a new teaching technique and more about adopting a broader perspective: integrating learners' languages, languages used in school, and all subjects across the curriculum. At its core, intercultural education seeks to develop competence that goes beyond language, promoting social cohesion, mutual understanding, participatory democracy, and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. It encourages the expansion of learners' linguistic and discursive repertoires and supports lifelong learning, shaping both individual growth and the evolution of educational systems.

Drawing on Byram's (1997) framework, Khoiriya et al. (2025) suggest that learners should become "*intercultural speakers*," able to navigate different cultural norms, mediate meaning, and prevent misunderstandings. Ponce de Leão (2017) emphasizes that intercultural competence has been the focus of much research and theorization across different fields, building on foundational work such as Gudykunst's studies on intercultural communication in the United States.

Agudelo (2007) highlights that in European EFL contexts, intercultural competence has become as central to language teaching as communicative competence was in the late 1980s. It refers to the ability to act appropriately in intercultural settings, build relationships on emotional and cognitive levels, and maintain one's own identity while mediating between cultures. Scholars such as Kramsch (1993), Pennycook (2017), and Baker (2011) also support the idea that language is always culturally embedded, shaped by identity, ideology, and context. Thus, in culturally homogeneous classrooms, introducing students to diverse global perspectives can increase engagement, intercultural sensitivity, and flexibility in communication.

Byram and Guilherme (2010) explain intercultural competence as a concept that can be approached from two closely related angles. On the one hand, it refers to a person's ability to communicate effectively with individuals who come from cultural backgrounds different from their own. On the other hand, it also involves the skill of handling intercultural encounters in an appropriate and successful way, especially when people bring different emotions, ways of thinking, and behavioral patterns into the interaction. In a similar line of thought, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) describe intercultural competence as a complex construct made up of five

main components: intercultural attitudes such as openness and curiosity, knowledge about one's own and other cultures, the ability to interpret and relate cultural meanings, skills for discovering new cultural information and interacting with others, and finally, critical cultural awareness. Together, these perspectives underline the multifaceted nature of intercultural competence and its growing importance in English language teaching.

Leao (2018) also insists that intercultural competence requires learners to engage in meaningful interaction with people from other cultures, moving beyond the traditional focus on grammar and vocabulary. In her view, English language teaching should encourage mediation and the joint construction of meaning, since communication breakdowns often result not simply from linguistic limitations, but from differences in personal experiences and cultural viewpoints. She argues that learners should be guided towards becoming "intercultural speakers," capable of balancing their own cultural identity with an understanding of others. Leao (2018) suggests that this can be achieved through task-based and experiential learning activities developed progressively within a spiral curriculum.

Khoiriya et al. (2025) further argue that developing intercultural competence involves much more than simply identifying cultural differences. Instead, it requires students to reflect critically on issues such as social norms, identity, inequality, and power relations. Learners should be encouraged to challenge stereotypes and to view English not only as a means of communication, but also as a tool that can support ethical and globally responsible interaction. Similarly, Buzarna-Tihenea (2020, p. 312) highlights the urgent need to promote interculturality in the English classroom, stressing that it can shift learners from being mere "language users" to becoming "intercultural speakers," capable of expressing personal perspectives while demonstrating acceptance and tolerance toward diverse attitudes, ideas, and values. Both Khoiriya et al. (2025) and Buzarna-Tihenea (2020) point out that activities such as role-plays, cultural autobiographies, and critical incident journals can strengthen empathy, adaptability, and intercultural awareness, while reflective tasks help students examine their own assumptions. When integrated effectively, intercultural competence can make language learning more meaningful and prepare students to communicate responsibly in multicultural contexts.

From Leao's (2018) perspective, teachers must address culture in a critical and thoughtful way, avoiding stereotypical and superficial representations that are often present in textbooks. Culture should be treated as dynamic and constantly negotiated, rather than fixed or static. Leao (2018) also stresses the importance of incorporating learners' personal and social identities, acknowledging that identity is complex and continuously shaped by experience. This approach allows students to better understand themselves, relate more effectively to others, and avoid simplistic generalizations. For this reason, the selection of teaching materials and the promotion of critical reflection become essential. In the same direction, the Council of Europe has repeatedly emphasized the importance of preparing teachers through training in intercultural awareness, communication skills, and cultural sensitivity, so that intercultural competence can be properly developed in educational settings.

Agudelo (2007) also considers critical cultural awareness to be one of the most important dimensions of intercultural competence, describing it as a transversal element that should guide language teaching. By questioning their own cultural assumptions as well as the frameworks they use to interpret others, learners can develop a deeper awareness of both self and other, which reflects Freire's idea of critical consciousness. According to Agudelo (2007), this type of awareness supports genuine intercultural dialogue, while also strengthening linguistic development and mutual understanding between individuals with different identities and backgrounds.

Griffith and Lim (2024) stress the idea that knowing vocabulary and grammar alone is not enough for effective communication. Words carry meanings shaped by culture, and without cultural understanding, learners risk misinterpretation and misunderstandings. Effective communication requires awareness of both the target culture and one's own, as well as the ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal cues like tone, gestures, and context. Griffith and Lim (2024) further explain that teachers do not need to be cultural experts; their role is to facilitate meaningful learning experiences and implement activities that promote intercultural competence, help students reflect on their own culture, understand others, and develop critical thinking. In their opinion, by fostering the ability to "*stand in the other's shoes*," intercultural communicative competence enables learners to convey and

interpret messages accurately, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps and enhancing both proficiency and understanding of self and others.

Khoiriya et al. (2025) highlight that one of the main obstacles to developing intercultural competence in English teaching is the lack of systematic teacher training. Many educators are trained in grammar-translation or communicative approaches but rarely in intercultural theory, critical discourse, or global citizenship education, leaving them hesitant to address sensitive topics like race, gender, or ideology. According to the aforementioned scholars, other factors hindering the development of the intercultural competence are the institutional priorities that often focus on exams and linguistic accuracy, discouraging innovation and risk-taking in intercultural teaching. Moreover, textbooks tend to be Anglo-centric, emphasizing British or American scenarios while ignoring the global diversity of English, which can reinforce stereotypes and a narrow view of "*standard*" English (Khoiriya et al., 2025). To avoid cultural essentialism, the literature encourages teachers to present culture as fluid and context-dependent, exploring intra-cultural differences and hybrid identities. Critical pedagogy encourages the move beyond surface-level content toward deeper engagement with inequality, power, and postcolonial perspectives, requiring both curricular flexibility and pedagogical courage (Khoiriya et al., 2025).

Case study

Research methodology

The study presented in this article is part of a wider research performed in the academic year 2024-2025 with another colleague, i.e. Alina Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza), from the Faculty of Letters, who teachers ESP at Ovidius University of Constanta.

The main research method that we implemented is the questionnaire. It consisted of both multiple-choice questions and open questions focused on delineating the multicultural profile of students, identifying their direct experiences with, and attitudes towards diversity and stereotypes, and exploring the role of the university/curriculum in promoting multiculturalism. The questionnaire was filled in by students anonymously, as no personal data were required. The anonymity was intended to increase the students' level of sincerity as regards their answers.

I applied this questionnaire to the students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters, while my colleague applied it to non-philological faculties. The findings of this research will be published in three separate studies, i.e. one study authored by me and focused on the students from the Faculty of Letters, one study authored by my colleague and focused on the students from non-philological faculties, and a third study co-authored by both of us and focused on a comparative approach between philological and non-philological students' experience and attitudes towards multiculturalism.

The objectives of my study are the following: identifying the level of awareness of multiculturalism among the students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters; exploring students' perceptions of and opinions on social difference, stereotypes, prejudices and the integration of people with exceptional abilities; evaluating the extent to which multiculturalism is perceived as present in the academic environment of the Faculty of Letters; investigating students' perception of the need to explicitly include multiculturalism in the curriculum. All these objectives will underlie the formulation of recommendations for improving multicultural education policies at the Faculty of Letters.

Findings and discussions

This study analyses the answers to the questionnaire provided by 24 students from the Faculty of Letters (English-French, English-Turkish, English-German BA programs and the "Modern Languages in Plurilingual Dynamics" MA program). 20 of them were between 18 and 25 years old, one between 26 and 35 years old and three above 36 of age. All the subjects own the Romanian citizenship. 22 of them declared themselves as White or Caucasian i.e., 91.7%, while 2 belong to an unspecified race.

As far as the ethnic group is concerned, 19 are Romanian, 1 Turkish, 1 Tartar, 3 of other ethnic origin (Aromanian, Romanian Jew, Tartar). By gender, 18 are female, 5 male and 1 transgender.

One question asked the subjects to think of and specify **the age** when they became aware of the existence of different races, ethnic groups, social classes, religions, disabled people, LGBT+ communities, etc.

The inclusion of various cultural groups made the task difficult for the students, as they became aware of such differences at a different age. For instance, one student confesses the following:

> "*I suppose that I started becoming aware when I was about 7 years old. I had a lot of questions as to why certain people were treated differently or why they behaved differently. About LGBT+ communities I became more aware when I was about 13-14".*

All the students' answers are systematized in the table below. Since some students provided approximate ages, the answers were grouped in terms of age intervals associated with Romanian education levels: primary school (6-10 years old), secondary school (11-15 years old), high school (15-18 years old). Surprisingly, one student declared that they became aware of the aforementioned diversity at 35 years old.

Table 1. Ages when students became aware of the existence of multiple races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ disabled people/ LGBT+ communities, etc.

Age	**Number of answers**
6-10	12
11-14	8
15-18	3
35	1

Source: table processed by the author of this article

The various **circumstances** of their awareness are presented in the table below:

Table 2. Respondents' awareness of multiple races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ persons with disabilities/ LGBT+ communities, etc.

Circumstance	**Answers**
Family/ Community	"*I have been aware of them ever since my sister showed me what it was about*" "*they were brought up in a negative light, in adults' conversations around me, in books i'd read*" "*Being myself a minority it raised a larger awareness*"
School	"*from classmates*" "*I had a classmate*" "*in primary school during English lessons*" "*in kindergarten*" "*In high-school, through discussions with other colleagues*"

Internet/ Mass-media	"*I saw a lot of people on the Internet talking about this topic*" "*Online-YouTube,Music etc. and social media platforms such as Instagram and others*" "*on TV"*
Multiple sources	"*I educated myself about those on the internet, but I also live in a diverse community*" "*School, online media, history*"
Unspecified circumstances	"*Heard about it*"

Source: table processed by the author of this article

Some students wanted to share with us some of their personal experiences which had an impact on them, and raised their consciousness. Such answers are included in the table below:

Table 3. Two answers regarding the awareness of multiple races/ ethnicities/ social classes/ religions/ persons with disabilities/ LGBT+ communities, etc.

Student	**Answers**
Answer 1	"*I noticed poor people's eyes, some of them begging on the street or not dressed as well as I was. I often interacted with them since my mother used to give me money or food for them. When I was 12 she took her class for them to see how people lived in the slums and made documentaries about how the holocaust and slavery left an impact on the newer generations. […] I met people who survived hardships because of their faith and I could feel the strength of their soul. […] in one Romanian school I was called a nazi for being born in Germany, whereas in Germany I was called a jew rat. […] My teacher in second grade used to smash the head of a romale child against the blackboard and then proceed to make him walk by every student's desk. Every student had to tell him how abominable, disgusting and useless he was. I refused and made her thus my enemy […] This extreme kind of behavior doesn't happen as often nowadays in schools, but I know that many teachers look away when children bully others. Bullying someone for being smarter and more successful was also considered normal behavior in most schools I attended, regardless of their prestige or what country they were in. Some schools were wonderful though*".
Answer 2	"*I actually became aware of all those aspects at different ages in my life, but most of the aspects about those minorities became clear to me at around age of 13. To give out some examples, I got acquainted with ethnicities much earlier in my life, at around 7, cause in my near community there were a lot of Romani people who were so many that*

	it was impossible to not see the difference. Disabled people is also worth mentioning. My best friend from my childhood had a little brother who was disabled and had to use a wheelchair. This again exposed me to the harsh reality that those people have to experience, at the fragile age of 9. About Others I learned in school at the age of 13, except LGBT+ about whom I learned myself, through Internet or books, because no one wanted to talk about it at that age, 12 I think".

Source: table processed by the author of this article

17 students (i.e., 70.8%) have colleagues of different races/ ethnicities/ religions, etc. than them: Muslim, Aromanian (Macedonian), Turkish, Tartar, Ukrainian, Catholics, Penticostal. Some students also said: "*I have colleagues that are muslim and jewish, and that are part of the LGBTQ+ community*"; "*I am Muslim and Tatar, so I was different from the beginning*"; "*Italian friends, who have another religion than I have*".

They met them at the University, in school, through friends, while travelling, at workplace, in friend groups, online. For instance, one student confessed:

> "*I met them walking down the street […] attending different schools, going to church, moving around and having thus different kinds of neighbors." […] "none of my neighbors would greet us or at least hold the door open when they saw us approaching. They're usually very distant to one another. Except in the countryside. […] Only once did we have nice neighbors, one from Bulgaria and a Turkish family who welcomed us with food the day we moved in. Because they were so nice, I got to know more about their cultures, their religions, their countries, languages, etc.*"

The **types of relationship** with these people differ widely, but they are described in a positive or neutral manner. Some respondents labelled these relationships as follows: "*friends*", "*acquaintances*", "*classmates*", "*school mates*", "*good*", "*very good*", "*neutral*", "*pretty nice*"; "*a normal friendly relationship*". Others provided more detailed information: it "*depends on their personality and how much time I spend with them*"; "*I have nothing against people of Other ethnicities, races or Religions*"; "*I don't really know how to approach them and make them my Friends. I Hope that I can make that Change in the Future*"; "*Some of them are close friends to me*".

20 students (i.e., 87%) admit that their relationship with another group does not affect them in any way. Some respondents furnished further details in this regard: "*It does not because I mind my own business*."; "*i face backlash from my family for being trans, i am also treated as a woman everywhere i*

go that doesn't involve my friends… it's annoying at least and heartbreaking at most"; "*I've learned from a young age to be able to blend in*.". However, 3 students say that "*the way they think, behave or who they are and how they live has" an impact on them. One of them exemplified this type of influence as follows: "We can share our perspectives related to traditions, religions, food*".

All the subjects consider the other groups **equal** to theirs (neither superior, nor inferior).

About half of the subjects (i.e., 54.2%) have **very rich colleagues**. Some students described their relationships with them:

Table 4. Responders' relationships with their rich colleagues

Type of relationship	**Answers**
Positive	"*I have a very good relationship with them*." "*Thankfully I have a very good relationship with them, because even if they come from a more stable background, they have been raised well and to also treat everyone equally no matter what*." "*It is surprisingly good, the money doesn't define the person and I'm happy to see this around my colleagues*."
Neutral	"*We are only colleagues*"
Negative	"*They like to think they are superior*.";

Source: table processed by the author of this article

According to 12 students (i.e., 50%), they have **poor colleagues**. They label the relationship with them as "*good*", "*decent*". Some students also provided further details: *"Even if they're not very poor, they still struggle at times, but I try to help them when they let me do so and we always have a good relationship*."; "*Not very poor, but definitely struggling and working hard to make a living. My relationship with them isn't dictated by their financial troubles*."; "*get along very well*".

16 students have thought about ways of helping them. Some of their ideas are included in the table below:

Table 5. Responders' ideas for supporting their poor colleagues

Type of support	**Answers**
Material/ financial support	"*I could help them with a lot of support and everything they need (money, food, shelter, etc.).*" "*financial help by offering them money*"

	"*Even if it's just borrowing them money or other things, I don't expect anything back but they give me something in return out of their own kindness, which I will always appreciate.*" "Small things like: lunch on me or hey I got you something."
Spiritual support	"*By being a kind person*"; "*With a piece of advice or helping them find work.*" "*to include them more in my group, to spend free time with them so they don't feel inferior*" "*Just spend time with or talk to make it easier for them.*" "*Give advice and help with whatever thing I am able to.*"
Mixed support	"*Donating clothes and helping them out in class*" "*At least by providing emotional support, and, if possible, by helping financially.*" "*Giving them notes when they miss classes, sharing sandwiches, finding nice things to talk about.*" "*I can support them emotionally and financially, by organising donations*"
Unspecified	"*It depends on their needs. But i'm there to help anyone.*"

Source: table processed by the author of this article

The answers to the next question, i.e., "*Who else could help them?*", refer to diverse categories: classmates, teachers and educational institutions ("*the class*"; "*the university could help them by cancelling the tuition fee or by giving them a social aid scholarship*"), the state, friends ("*their other friends*", "*our teachers*"), rich people ("*maybe those who have too much money for their own good and decide to spend it all on extravagant useless things.*"), everyone ("*Everyone could help them.*"; "*Just being there for them.*").

The students were also asked about "*genius*" colleagues. About 60% said that they have genius classmates. About one third of the subjects (33.3%) consider that such prodigies should learn in separate classes for gifted students.

The next questions were focused on prejudices/ stereotypes related to a certain race/ ethnicity/ religion/ culture, etc. More than half of the students (i.e., 58.3%) said that they are familiar with certain prejudices/ stereotypes related to a certain race/ ethnicity/ religion/ culture. Some of the answers are systematized in the table below. Strikingly, only two stereotypes mentioned by the students are positive.

Table 6. Prejudices/ stereotypes mentioned by the respondents

Type of prejudice/ stereotype	**Answers**
Positive	"*Germans are always on time and they're very correct."*
Negative	"*Blacks are considered inferior.*" "*I've learned that hate is taught, not something that you are born with. And usually here if you're not the stereotypical Romanian (white, straight, Christian Orthodox) not everyone is as open to accept you.*" "*that muslims or arabs love religious terrorism, that roma people only steal, that jews are greedy, that being lgbt+ is just a trend*"; "*Romani people are usually considered thieves, unclean, loud, uneducated.*" "*LGBTQ people are automatically considered to be sick with AIDS.*" "*Muslims are fanatics and terrorists. No, that's what islamists do.*"
Mixed	"*Asians are often stereotyped as being good at math and science, Latinos are often stereotyped as being hot-tempered, Muslims are often stereotyped as terrorists or religious extremists.*"

Source: table processed by the author of this article

Another question referred to multicultural issues in lectures and coursebooks. Only 29.2% of the students said that issues concerning multiculturalism are tackled in lectures and coursebooks. 6 students mentioned some issues discussed at university level: cultural clashes, language barriers, discrimination, integration challenges, usually tackled in literature courses. According to one student, "*literature based on other cultures will lead to multiculturalism discussions. There are also feminist issues brought up*". Two other respondents said: "*In my master program there are several courses referring to multiculturalism directly or indirectly through literature, films and studies.*"; "*The topic of multiculturalism is usually dealt with in the literature that we study. Some courses discuss novels that have black or gay people as protagonists, for example, and these novels try to indicate that all are equal.*" Another student appreciated the openness of the educational institution and the teaching staff towards multiculturalism: "*I haven't noticed any professor being against multiculturalism, nor do the course books contain any offensive content. On the contrary. I believe the University is open minded.*".

19 students think that there should be explicit references to multiculturalism in coursebooks, syllabi, curricular and extracurricular activities, while13 students state that explicit references to multiculturalism would not affect their attitudes, values, behavior, character, personality, and culture:

> "*explicit references to multiculturalism in books contribute to a more inclusive and equitable landscape, enriching readers' lives and fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the world's diverse cultures and perspectives*"; "*I actually think there should be examples if it calls for it, mostly*"; "*Personally, I like learning about new cultures, religions, languages etc. I think it's good to be exposed to multiculturalism, especially at a young age to learn that even if someone doesn't look like you or has the same beliefs or orientation, you should learn to treat them equally*"; "*i already think of myself as an accepting person and i am always willing to learn and respect*"; "*Education is important, especially the social and historical kind. I think lack of education is not necessarily the cause of wrongness, but definitely a symptom. There are plenty of educated and intellectual people who do horrible things*"; "*I would understand better these concepts*"; "*I don't think there should be any difference*".

54.% of the students said that they have teachers of a different race/ ethnicity/ religion/ sexual orientation, etc. than themselves. However, almost all students (i.e., 95.8%) rate their teachers based on their competence/ professionalism, not based on their race/ ethnicity. When asked about the criteria that they use in order to rate their teachers, students mentioned elements such as behavior, teaching style, teaching skills, involvement, professionalism, competence, knowledge, intellect, way of thinking and being, innovation, creativity, communication skills, feedback, course materials, empathy, attitude towards students, respect, openness to different perspectives, punctuality. One student said that they rate their teachers based on "*Whether they can or cannot teach me Something, preferably in a way that me and Others like me can understand*", while another confessed that they appreciate those who teach "*In a funny or interesting way if possible*".

22 students (i.e., 91.7%) think that female students in their class are not favored over male students by the teachers/ teaching staff and nor are the male students. One student provided a detailed comment in this regard:

> "*I think both situations happen, depending on the teacher. Some are very easily impressed by the boys who put in the slightest*

bit of effort and consequently praise them, while girls who are truly very hard working aren't anything special to them. Others do the contrary, where they believe that girls are inherently smarter than boys and are thus more lenient with them. But, from personal experience, the former is the more common situation (boys being favored)".

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings presented in the section above. However, it should be mentioned that the sample is small and therefore it is not statistically representative.

First, students became aware of diversity at an early age, mainly in primary (6-10 years old) and secondary school (11-14 years old) suggesting that multicultural awareness began – in their case – at a young age and has been shaped long before university. The respondents' multicultural awareness has been shaped by real-life contact (family/ community, school classmates) and media exposure, which indicates that their multicultural perceptions bear the imprint of informal education and social environment.

Second, students have frequent contact with people of diverse ethnicities, religions, etc. It should be noted that most of them describe their relationships in a positive or neutral manner, which highlights a tolerant atmosphere in the academic environment. This attitude is reinforced by their egalitarian values, as all respondents stated that they see other groups as equal. However, the answers might have been influenced by social desirability. As far as their teachers are concerned, most students assess them based on their professionalism and competence, not on identity. In this regard, the students' responses illustrate their mature attitudes and their merit-based perceptions.

Third, although socioeconomic inequality is evident, respondents manifest empathy toward poorer classmates, suggesting various ways to assist them in terms of emotional support, inclusion and financial help. Thus, students are able to recognize class differences and show empathy instead of judgement towards their less fortunate colleagues.

Fourth, students are familiar with stereotypes and prejudices. Despite their aforementioned rejection of prejudice (as all of them consider the other groups equal), the students' social environment is still marked by harmful stereotypes.

Fifth, according to the answers provided by the subjects, multiculturalism is not strongly present in the curriculum, as only about a

third said that such topics are approached in the lectures or courses they attend. Therefore, based on the students' answers, multicultural education is incidental and not systematic. They feel the need to engage with multicultural topics in their courses and activities, which would engender a more inclusive academic environment.

Sixth, although gender discrimination is not strongly perceived among the respondents, some subtle bias is still acknowledged by some of them. For instance, one of the respondents said that sometimes male students may be praised more for minimal effort.

This study evidences that the students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters display multicultural awareness, tolerance and empathy, despite the widespread negative stereotypes that flood their environment and the perceived lack of consistent multicultural education in the formal curriculum.

These findings support the recommendation that teachers should integrate multicultural education more explicitly in their courses and seminars, not only in those dedicated to literature. Moreover, the development of elective courses, seminars or modules focused on multicultural education is also recommended. Having in view the widespread negative stereotypes and prejudices, teachers should be trained more in diversity-sensitive pedagogy; this would enable them to tackle and manage sensitive diversity, inclusion and social justice issues, to respond to discriminatory attitudes, language and behavior patterns and to successfully foster inclusive classroom interactions. In addition, anti-stereotype and anti-prejudice activities (e.g., workshops, debates, critical thinking tasks, etc.), encouraging intercultural interactions, as well as multicultural extracurricular events should be organized.

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