RAISING AWARENESS OF DIVERSITY IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

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Rezumat: Într-o lume din ce în ce mai interconectată, supusă schimbărilor continui, noțiunile de diversitate, egalitate, echitate, incluziune și toleranță au câștigat recunoaștere și importanță considerabilă, în special, în domeniul educației. Prezentul articol abordează principalele beneficii, asociate cu integrarea diversității la orele de limba engleză, și susține ideea că sporirea conștientizării pluralității lumii în care trăim se datorează includerii și abordării active a diversității culturale, lingvistice și sociale în procesul de predare-învățare a limbii engleze. Acestea, prin promovarea unui limbaj inclusiv și evitarea stereotipurilor și discriminării, precum și prin crearea diverselor activități, încurajează colaborarea și interacțiunea între elevi cu experiențe și medii culturale diferite.
Cuvinte-cheie: conștientizare, diversitate, egalitate, echitate, incluziune, toleranță.

In the last fifteen years, the educational system in the Republic of Moldova has undergone several reorganisations, which aimed at modernizing and democratizing education, at creating optimal conditions for taking advantage of each child's potential, regardless of the family's status and background. In order to ensure every child's right to have access to a quality education several reforms have been implemented, for instance the concept of child-friendly schools has been introduced. Being promoted internationally, it focuses on five clear-cut dimensions: inclusion and equity; learning effectiveness; students' safety, protection and health; gender equality; the involvement of students, families and communities into the school life [1, p. 10].

The official documents that regulate the educational system issues in Moldova are in full accordance with the recognised international documents (e.g. *The Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*). For instance, Article 35 from *The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova*, guarantees the right to education and establishes the means of ensuring this right. The *Law of Education* regulates the educational policy of the state, the organization and operation of the education system. In Article 6 it guarantees the right to education for any person, regardless of nationality, sex, age, origin and social status, political or religious affiliation, or criminal record [11]. In other words, the analysis of the legislative framework and the structure of the Moldovan educational system has proved that there are political, legal and structural premises for quality education and access of every child to first-class education.

Undoubtedly, encouraging diversity, equal opportunity, and inclusion in education must be the basis of efficacious teaching practices in the 21st century. High-quality schooling that assures learners' advancement and satisfies their potential should be guaranteed to all students, regardless of their age, gender identity, personality, appearance, ability / disability, learning style, ethnicity, political views, religious beliefs / creed, socio-economic background / status, education level, native language, etc.

It is fundamental to consider the above-mentioned attributes for the reason that, in modern society, we can witness an ongoing history of unfairness and / or harassment, discrimination and continued prejudice in the educational environment, against those who turn to be different and vulnerable. Moreover, it should be mentioned „that individuals who are members of non-dominant groups often face significant disadvantages throughout their lives inclusive of educational opportunities" [14, p. 1709].

In the past few years the Republic of Moldova has become a rather wide-ranging country in terms of people's background, race, religion, etc., due to globalization, migration, and military conflicts which resulted in the arrival of numerous refugees, thousands of which are of school age. Having crossed the borders, they have to integrate into the realia of the modern Moldovan society, with its both positive and negative sides. That is why raising Moldovan learners' awareness of diversity, equality, equity, inclusion and tolerance is of paramount importance nowadays, and must be encouraged in any class on a regular basis. Thus, to avoid some of the prejudices and inequalities disfavoured students might come across, many educational institutions in Moldova have started to introduce official diversity training into their curricula.

In the meantime, we would like to clarify the terminological apparatus used in the present paper, i.e. the terms *diversity, equality, equity, inclusion*, and *tolerance* because despite the fact that they are closely related, and often discussed as a single concept, it is worthy considering them separately, analyse and compare their meanings.

Diversity „is a reality created by individuals and groups from a broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences. It is extremely important to support and protect diversity, to value individuals and groups without prejudice, and foster a climate where equity and mutual respect are intrinsic" [7]. Oxford English Dictionary defines diversity as "the quality, condition, or fact of being diverse or different; difference, dissimilarity; divergence" [13], i.e. „a range of many people or things that are very different from each other" [9, p. 367]. To put it otherwise, diversity can be regarded as the practice or feature of considering people of different genders, sexual orientations, or from a series of unlike social and ethnic origins. It is essential to highlight the idea that diversity infers accepting that each person is unique, and being aware of certain specific differences.

From a different perspective, the term under consideration should be regarded as the presence of differences within an educational setting. It is equally important to understand that diversity in schools leads to considerable intellectual ingenuity, innovation, raise of leadership prospects, as well as to the boost of opportunities for development. It has been proved that groups consisting of different individuals turn to be more efficient at problem solving than homogeneous groups, „and policies that promote diversity and inclusion will enhance" people's „ability to draw from the broadest possible pool of talent, solve [the] tough(est) challenges, maximize employee engagement and innovation, and lead by example by setting a high standard for providing access to opportunity to all segments of our society" [12].

It is known that „in recent years, diversity has been embraced as a core value and fundamental priority across the different fields of medicine, science, and technology" [15, p. 30], that is why the administration of the educational establishments should not underestimate its role, instead they must promote the idea of equality and diversity as

central doctrines for schools, colleges, universities to consider in their pursuit of accepting diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom. Additionally, diversity develops critical-thinking skills, shapes empathy and inspires students to think differently.

Equality is another essential term that is defined as „the fact of being equal in rights, status, advantages, etc." [9, p. 422], which means that each person should be treated alike and fairly being given the same opportunities, regardless of their circumstances. Furthermore, it is regarded as "the right of different groups of people to have a similar social position and receive the same treatment" [2].

The term *equity* is explained in Hornby's Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as „a situation in which everyone is treated equally (syn. *fairness*)" [9, p. 423], however, it, to some extent, differs from *equality*, i.e. it accepts the idea that every individual in certain situations might have diverse circumstances, and correspondingly, in an educational establishment different kinds of assistance would be necessary, granted that various people need varied support, but each must be offered the same conditions to take full advantage of equal opportunities. Indeed, „The route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone justly according to their circumstances" [6].

According to Cambridge Dictionary, the word *inclusion* means „the idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage" [3]. Collins Dictionary Online describes inclusion as "the act of making a person or thing part of a group or collection; […] it is the policy or practice of making sure that everyone in society has access to resources and opportunities" [5]. In other words, inclusion is an approach of guaranteeing the same prospects and means to all who may possibly be excluded or disregarded, e.g. persons with disabilities, representatives of different minority groups, immigrants, refugees, etc.

Tolerance is understood as the „willingness to accept behaviour and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them" [4]. The students should be taught to realize that they must behave towards their classmates the way they want to be treated by others. Only then will they behave properly in schools, without offending those who are different.

Indisputably, all the people are encouraged to preserve their uniqueness, they should not feel embarrassed for being different, and they must be proud of who and what they are. We stand on the opinion that teachers must ensure that the educational settings meet all the criteria for guaranteeing everyone's diversity, equality, inclusion and tolerance, so that all the students feel confident and safe.

Teachers of English have a great opportunity to explain all above-mentioned notions within their classes and be involved in the process of raising awareness of diversity on the daily basis as the interdisciplinary nature of language, literature, and cultural studies within the realm of English education provides an ideal foundation for exploring and embracing diversity, facilitating conversations that nurture understanding, empathy, and appreciation for different perspectives.

Besides, it is of fundamental importance to introduce inclusive language and discuss the importance of using respectful and inclusive terminology in the English class. This helps to create a more welcoming environment for everyone. Besides, we should

encourage collaborative activities, because working together on tasks that require understanding different viewpoints can foster appreciation for diversity.

One of the ways used by teachers in their strive to make the pupils conscious of the diversity they live in is the reading resources they use during their classes. Bringing carefully selected stories from the English literature or even written in English to their classes the teachers make the pupils delve into the multifaceted English literature, which spans across various cultures, eras, and regions. Due to the fact that the English literature includes works by authors from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and social experiences, analysing and discussing these works, either in original or adapted and abridged, allows students to explore different perspectives and realities, understanding a large range of diversity aspects.

A valuable selection of stories is recommended by Gail Ellis in her material *Promoting Diversity Through Children's Literature* which contains suggestions about types of diversity that could be taught using these stories. Thus, simply reading and discussing the stories with pupils / students we could promote, in terms of diversity, the awareness of:

- differences in culinary traditions around the world;
- visual impairment;
- racism and prejudice;
- other cultures;
- national identities;
- equal gender opportunities, etc. [8].

Being teachers of English, one of our main aims is to encourage the students to use the studied language as much as possible. Consequently, we can design very specific activities, with genuine communicative purpose, and make them very personal. Students could be given the task to create topical surveys to identify how diverse they are. The results of the surveys should be presented to the whole class in a creative way. The subsequent discussions will surely expose diversity in the class.

A very powerful way of making the students not only understand, but also feel how difficult it is to be in minority or different, is to role-play some activities in which the participants would perform usual tasks being somehow restricted, making their usual way of working impossible. These activities usually have a very memorable impact on students who become aware that, in the majority of cases, success is due to great effort, and lack of success is not always because of laziness or stupidity.

Inviting speakers from various backgrounds to bring students closer to diversity is also a very good idea. The range of the guests could be very large: from authors and activists to simple individuals who have unique stories to tell and experiences or perspectives to share. Learning directly from real people, having the possibility to ask questions will be very valuable and impactful.

In the era of the Internet and wide access to multimedia resources, it is very helpful to use videos and documentaries based on the idea of diversity, offering the students a large variety of perspectives on the world we live in. After such video sessions teachers have / organise discussions, creating a safe and respectful environment for open debates

about diversity. Students should feel safe to share their thoughts and experiences and everyone's voice should be heard and respected.

Writing assignments are effective tasks used in encouraging students to explore and reflect on diversity-related topics. They could be asked to write *a personal reflection essay* in which they would reflect on the way their personal culture, background shape their way of perceiving the world they live in. This type of essays will definitely show and shape personal understanding of the diversity.

Another written assignment is *a narrative on empathy*. The teacher could ask the students to write narratives from the perspective of someone from a different cultural background, gender, or race, placed in a difficult situation. We consider the following topics quite relevant:

- Tell a story from the viewpoint of a child facing diversity for the first time. Highlight his innocence, curiosity, and openness to differences.
- Create a narrative about someone who moves to a new country or culture and must adapt to new customs, traditions, and societal norms. Explore the challenges and moments of evolution in this journey.
- Tell a story about the unexpected friendship between two individuals who initially seem very different. Highlight the bond that forms despite their diverse backgrounds.

This type of activity will help the students not only to empathize with diverse experiences but also to understand different viewpoints.

Research papers on specific aspects of diversity are also very useful. Students might explore the importance and challenges of cultural diversity in workplaces, the effects of diversity in education, or media portray the diversity. Though difficult, this type of written assignments is meant to promote in-depth exploration and critical thinking.

Interviewing someone from a different cultural or ethnic background and *writing a report* or article based on that interview could be another writing assignment used by the teacher in making the student understand and appreciate the diversity. Through interviews, students gain exposure to diverse worldviews, values, and practices. This practice challenges their preconceptions and broadens their understanding of the multifaceted nature of culture. Consequently, actively involving students in interviewing individuals from diverse backgrounds and encouraging them to write reports, educators create a dynamic learning experience that goes beyond textbooks. It fosters empathy, critical thinking, and a genuine appreciation for the richness of diverse cultures, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic society.

The experience has proved that *celebrating cultural events* or *heritage months* is a very powerful strategy to raise the awareness of diversity in the English class. This could involve learning about different traditions, histories, and contributions of various cultures. Exposure to diverse cultural events helps the students break stereotypes and misconceptions about certain nations, or ethnic groups. Moreover, such activities are meant to show the richness and depth of cultures beyond superficial generalizations. Hence, celebrating cultural events is like shining a spotlight on the beautiful mosaic of human experiences and traditions, and it fosters an environment of inclusivity and understanding.

Among the wide number of creative activities suggested by scholars and educators to promote and raise the awareness of diversity, we have selected some from Erica Jabali's list of *25 Activities to Teach and Promote Diversity in the Classroom*, which can be adapted and used in the English class as well:

The *Rotate Music* activity, meant to showcase music from all over the world, can be used in the English class selecting a list of songs in English from different English-speaking countries. It would be a great idea to perceive the diversity of these countries or regions trying to identify differences of accents.

The *Create a Collage* activity could be used to help the students express their identity using pictures and symbols. This speaking activity will encourage the students to present how they see themselves, explaining why they have chosen the displayed elements and how they represent their individuality.

The *Virtual Field Trips* activity is based on the possibilities offered by such tools as Google Earth[1], Google's Art & Culture Program[2] and many others that offer virtual tours as Buckingham Palace, UK[3] or Houses of Parliament, UK[4]. It is amazing to give the students the opportunity to make a virtual tour sitting in the classroom and have the possibility to verbalise the emotions and describe what they see.

The *Get Cooking* activity can be adapted to English class while speaking about food from different cultures. Discussing on this topic students will not only learn the topical vocabulary but also will find out about the different spices, ingredients and cooking methods used around the world.

The activity *Research Money* can be transformed into a research project. Students will be enthusiastic to find information about the history of the money used in different English-speaking countries, how it contributes to shaping the identity of that state [10].

Indubitably, by integrating above described activities, teachers of English can create an inclusive and diverse learning environment that not only raises awareness but also fosters understanding and appreciation among students.

On the whole, raising learners' awareness concerning the role and impact of diversity, equality, equity and tolerance in schools necessitates a well-thought strategy with a clearly designed curriculum, sufficient time and patience. Besides, it is mandatory to create a safe comfortable environment where the students can study without being bullied, harmed, intimidated or offended only because they are different.

Teachers should realise that any classroom is the right place to advocate for diversity, equality, equity and tolerance, thus raising a school community conscious of their importance, outcome, and the role they play in society. Language teachers should adjust their teaching strategies, approaches, methods and techniques to fit all types of learners in their class, so that they become more proficient and effective students. In addition, we strongly believe that awareness-raising actions will definitely enable all the learners to appreciate and accept the idea that people, though different, are nevertheless alike, having similar aspirations and goals. English, as a global language, connects people worldwide. Exploring literature and communication in English allows for exposure

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[1] https://earth.google.com/web/
[2] https://artsandculture.google.com/category/place
[3] https://www.royal.uk/virtual-tours-buckingham-palace
[4] https://www.parliament.uk/visiting/virtualtour/

to global perspectives and diverse voices beyond one's immediate surroundings. By integrating diversity into English lessons, educators can contribute significantly to fostering empathy, understanding, and appreciation for different cultures, perspectives, and identities among students.

All things considered, we would like to highlight the idea that all the learners, regardless of their origin, cultural, economic and social background, etc. are eligible to get access to guaranteed modern education, achieve academic growth, be encouraged to learn, get emotional support, feel safe so that they eventually manage to finish successfully the schools they attend.

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