



## Investigating the Challenges and Strategies of Teaching English in Afghan EFL Multicultural Classrooms

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- Teaching EFL classrooms

**Abstract:** This study investigates the challenges and strategies of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in multicultural classrooms in Afghanistan. The classrooms in this country are mostly characterized by significant ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. To collect data from participants, researchers employed a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research combines quantitative surveys from EFL university instructors across 15 Afghan universities. Moreover, qualitative interviews were conducted with EFL educators at Ghor University who were nearby and available to the researchers. Findings of this study indicate that, although most Afghan EFL instructors feel relaxed and enthusiastic in teaching multicultural classrooms, they also encounter challenges such as language diversity, cultural misunderstandings, differences in students' backgrounds, and a lack of qualified and experienced teachers. Thus, participants and respondents in this study emphasized strategies for use in such settings, such as cultural diversity, collaborative learning, and integrating culturally relevant materials to enhance classroom engagement and inclusivity in multicultural settings. The study provides the crucial need for culturally responsive education and professional development to enhance EFL instruction. The findings of this study are significant for policymakers, educators, instructors, and curriculum developers seeking to improve the quality of language teaching and learning in Afghanistan's diverse educational perspective.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to explore the challenges Afghan EFL teachers face in multicultural classrooms and to identify strategies to address them. English has become a universal language in recent decades, and it is crucial for academic and professional success as well as for worldwide communication (Crystal, 2003; Hollie, 2017). According to Khan and Iqbal (2019), since 2001, Afghanistan has recognized the value of English in its educational system, as educational

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reforms have emphasized English language teaching (ELT) at different levels. Meanwhile, particular difficulties arise in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Afghan classrooms, many of which stem from the nation's sociolinguistic differences, limited educational backgrounds, teacher-training limitations, and multicultural composition.

Several ethnic groups, such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others, call Afghanistan their home and live in this country; each has its own language, culture, customs, and educational values. Many courses, especially those at the university level, bring students together in one class after they have succeeded in a national exam, despite their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and locations across Afghanistan. Bank (2010) and Gay (2001) noted that, although this multicultural setting might enhance the educational process, it can also pose serious difficulties and challenges for both instructors and learners.

One noted challenge in such settings is the range of English language proficiency. Diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence students' familiarity with the second language. For example, Snow (2010) pointed out that students who have participated in one classroom to learn the target language with different proficiencies and may differ in the amount of vocabulary, idiomatic phrases, and grammatical structures can hinder learning and effective communication. Moreover, August and Shanahan (2006) emphasize that prior knowledge significantly impacts reading comprehension and overall academic performance among English Language Learners (ELLs). Additionally, Cummins (2000) argues that in group work, the lack of shared background knowledge can create barriers to meaningful interactions and isolate students who are not proficient in the target language.

Research shows that misinterpretation due to linguistic diversity is another challenge. Instructors may encounter learners who speak entirely different first languages. Also, they have different abilities in the target language. It can be difficult to communicate clearly and ensure that every student has access to the curriculum in these situations (Pandey, 2024). Moreover, Kang and Han (2019) found that linguistic diversity can affect peer interactions within the classroom.

Additionally, Cenoz and Gorter (2015) argue that linguistic diversity should be viewed as an asset rather than a barrier. They suggest that cognitive development and a deeper understanding of linguistic structures can be promoted by leveraging students' home languages. Furthermore, variation in learning styles can also create challenges. It definitely impacts the effectiveness of the teaching process and student learning outcomes. Coffey (2020) stated that students from various cultural backgrounds often present different learning styles, which can affect their engagement and performance in language acquisition. For example, some learners may prefer more structured, teacher-centered approaches, whereas others may thrive in collaborative environments that promote interactive learning (Chen Tzeng, 2019).

Furthermore, variations in classroom interaction, such as participation levels and communication styles, differ across cultures. For instance, in some cultures, students may be more reserved and less eager to participate actively in class discussions and group work,

which can be misunderstood by educators as a lack of interest or understanding (Hernandez, 2021). Moreover, the interaction between various learning styles and classroom behavior can lead to varying levels of motivation and achievement among students. For instance, as Zhang et al. (2023) noted, disengagement and lower academic performance can result from a mismatch between a student's preferred learning style and the instructional methods employed.

Moreover, limited resources and support systems in Afghan EFL multicultural classrooms can definitely make learning challenging. According to Khan and Iqbal (2019), several EFL classrooms are faced with a shortage of appropriate and effective language-learning materials, technology, and culturally relevant content, which can worsen language barriers and limit students' engagement. In addition, a lack of structured support systems can leave students feeling isolated and overwhelmed, particularly those who may already struggle to adapt to a new educational environment (Baker, 2018). Research also indicates that educators may be ill-equipped to implement effective differentiated instruction in multicultural education (Holliday, 2016). This gap in resources and support systems affects academic outcomes (Zhang & Hiver, 2021). Therefore, addressing resource and support system deficiencies is essential to developing an inclusive and equitable learning environment in multicultural EFL classrooms.

Another primary issue is insufficient training for educators in multicultural pedagogy. Several EFL teachers are not adequately prepared and trained to address the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students. This lack of training often leads to a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction where educators apply one approach to all classes and students, and they think that it would be enough, which can alienate and isolate students from different cultural contexts and reduce their engagement and motivation in the teaching and learning process (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Furthermore, according to Gay (2010), insufficient training can leave educators unprepared to manage classroom dynamics effectively. Multicultural classrooms often include a wide range of language proficiencies, various learning styles, and cultural norms. Teachers who lack adequate training in culturally responsive instruction may struggle to implement inclusive practices that recognize and celebrate this diversity (Villegas Lucas, 2002).

Despite the mentioned challenges, research suggests some effective strategies. One essential strategy for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment is adopting diverse teaching styles. Teachers must be adaptable in their instructional approaches and respect the varied cultural backgrounds, learning preferences, and language proficiencies of their students. Tomlinson, (2001) and Ladson-Billings (2022) emphasizes that students' cultural contexts should be reflected in teaching practices, which can help bridge the gap between students' home experiences and the academic environment. Fostering a collaborative learning environment is crucial in multicultural EFL classrooms. Cooperative learning strategies encourage peer interaction and support, allowing students to learn from one another's perspectives and experiences (Johnson, 2009). Moreover, ongoing assessment

and feedback are vital components of adapting teaching styles to meet diverse needs. Formative assessments can provide insights into students' progress and areas where they may require additional support (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Furthermore, differentiated instruction for diverse learners is another effective strategy. Tomlinson (2001) stated that differentiated instruction, which involves adapting content, process, and product based on students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, has been shown to enhance engagement and achievement in EFL settings. According to Dornyei and Csizer (2002), flexible grouping is one of the effective approaches to accommodating different learning paces. This approach is particularly beneficial in multicultural classrooms where students may have varying degrees of familiarity with English. Research presents that effective scaffolding not only assists in language acquisition but also promotes a deeper understanding of content (Wood et al., 1976). Additionally, Dweck (2006) stated that one of the most essential issues within the classroom for motivating learners to embrace their learning process is fostering a growth mindset.

Felder and Silverman (1998) noted that using different teaching methods is one of the best strategies for reaching every student in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) multicultural classroom. A teacher who uses various modes increases the chance that every learner connects with the lesson in a meaningful way (Gardner, 1983). It also helps when students are asked to use more than one mode simultaneously. This kind of task doesn't just teach content; it also builds teamwork and critical thinking (Thomas, 2000). Storytelling is another tool that reaches across learning styles. As Kirkland and Sutherland (2003) explained, a story can combine pictures or videos, narration, and music, and even role-playing. This makes lessons lively while also supporting vocabulary growth and comprehension.

Selecting texts and materials that reflect diverse perspectives is crucial. Ladson-Billing (2022) claimed that one of the best advantages of using texts that represent various perspectives is that they validate the identities and experiences of all students. This is mostly important in EFL contexts, where language learners should consider both linguistic differences and cultural nuances. Duncan-Andrade (2002) supports the idea that discussing diverse texts can enhance students' critical literacy, enabling them to question assumptions and challenge. According to Pennycook (2010), another effective and significant strategy is to incorporate texts or materials that address contemporary social issues and global challenges, which encourage and engage learners.

Moreover, research shows that integrating technology into language instruction can enhance motivation, increase accessibility, and foster collaboration among students (Hockly, 2015). One of the most significant advantages of incorporating technology in EFL settings is that it enables learners to provide personalized learning experiences. For instance, Godwin-Jones (2018) stated that programs like Duolingo and Rosetta Stone adjust the difficulty level based on learners' performance, ensuring that students are neither overwhelmed nor bored. Research also suggests that exposure to authentic materials can enhance language acquisition by providing learners with relatable, relevant content (Thorne & Black, 2007).

Dooly (2008) mentioned that this collaborative approach not only fosters peer learning but also encourages students to share their unique perspectives and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, one of the most essential terms for fostering effective teaching practices for educators is ongoing professional development, particularly in diverse and multicultural classrooms. Darling-Hammond (2017) claimed that this commitment to professional growth enhances educators' skills and knowledge, and also positively impacts student outcomes and engagement. Additionally, it equips instructors with the tools and strategies to address their students' diverse learning needs. Furthermore, ongoing professional development supports teachers in reflecting on their practices and making data-informed decisions. Educators who engage in continuous learning are more likely to assess their teaching effectiveness and seek feedback from peers and students. This reflective practice allows teachers to identify areas for improvement and implement evidence-based strategies that enhance student learning outcomes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). By fostering a culture of reflection and inquiry, professional development empowers educators to take ownership of their professional growth and adapt their teaching methods to meet their students' evolving needs.

Furthermore, this study aims to achieve several purposes. First, to explore the perceptions of Afghan EFL educators regarding teaching English in multicultural classrooms. Second, to examine how cultural and linguistic diversities among students influence English language teaching and learning, and raise some challenges. Finally, to explore and introduce some effective strategies to address the challenges of multicultural classrooms.

This research addresses the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of Afghan EFL teachers regarding teaching multicultural classrooms?
2. What are the main challenges that EFL teachers encounter in multicultural classrooms in Afghanistan?
3. What strategies do Afghan EFL teachers employ to manage diversity and enhance learning outcomes in EFL multicultural classrooms?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this study, a mixed-methods approach is used to gather data from participants and respondents. According to Bryman (2016), both research designs are significant; qualitative research adds depth and context to the findings, while the quantitative research design offers a framework for statistical inference and generalization. When combined, they improve the validity and reliability of the conclusions and advance a thorough understanding of the study topics.

### ***Participants and Sampling***

The population for this study consisted of all EFL instructors across Afghan universities, including lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors. To select participants and respondents, a purposive sampling method was employed. Quantitative data

were collected from EFL instructors at several universities as targeted samples, including Ghazni, Kabul, Herat, Parwan, Helmand, Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani (Kunar), Kandahar, Jalalabad, Panjshir, Takhar, Faryab, Shaikh Zayed (Khost), Sar-e Pul, Ghor, and Balkh. Additionally, in the qualitative approach, resampling was conducted among the targeted samples. The EFL instructors at Ghor University were interviewed to gain a deep understanding of their ideas related to the topic.

### ***Instruments***

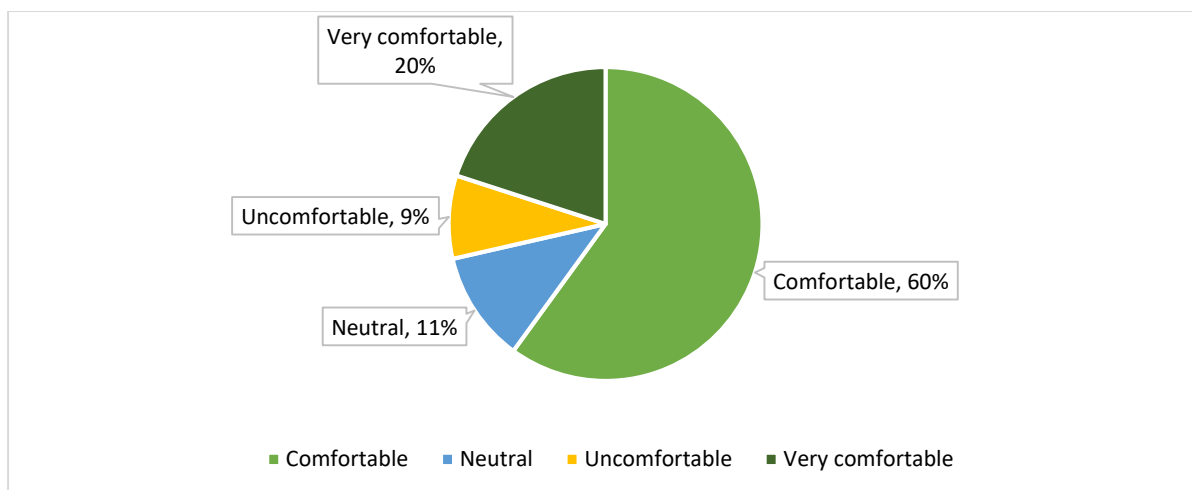
The research design used in this study is mixed-method. In the quantitative approach, the researchers used a questionnaire, which was distributed to participants via online tools. The questionnaire contained closed-ended and open-ended questions. In the closed-ended part, respondents were supposed to choose the option that best fit their experience. Moreover, in the open-ended section, the respondents were supposed to type or write their ideas with details for a particular suggested question. In addition, in this study, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to generate a deep understanding of the interviewees' perspectives on teaching an Afghan EFL multicultural classroom, as suggested by Nunan and Bailey (2009).

### ***Data analysis***

In analyzing the data, statistical and thematic systems were used. To analyze quantitative data, manual and statistical methods were used. To analyze the closed-ended questions in the questionnaire, graphs and figures were used after analyzing the collected data. Furthermore, to analyze open-ended questions, the researchers critically reviewed the ideas of all participants, then wrote the report based on common ideas regarding one particular question, and, from all responses, one common idea was taken about the same issue. Additionally, in terms of analyzing qualitative data collected through face-to-face interviews, the researchers first transcribed all recorded data into written form after collecting data from interviewees. After transcribing the recorded data, the 'card sort' technique suggested by Nunan and Bailey (2009) was used.

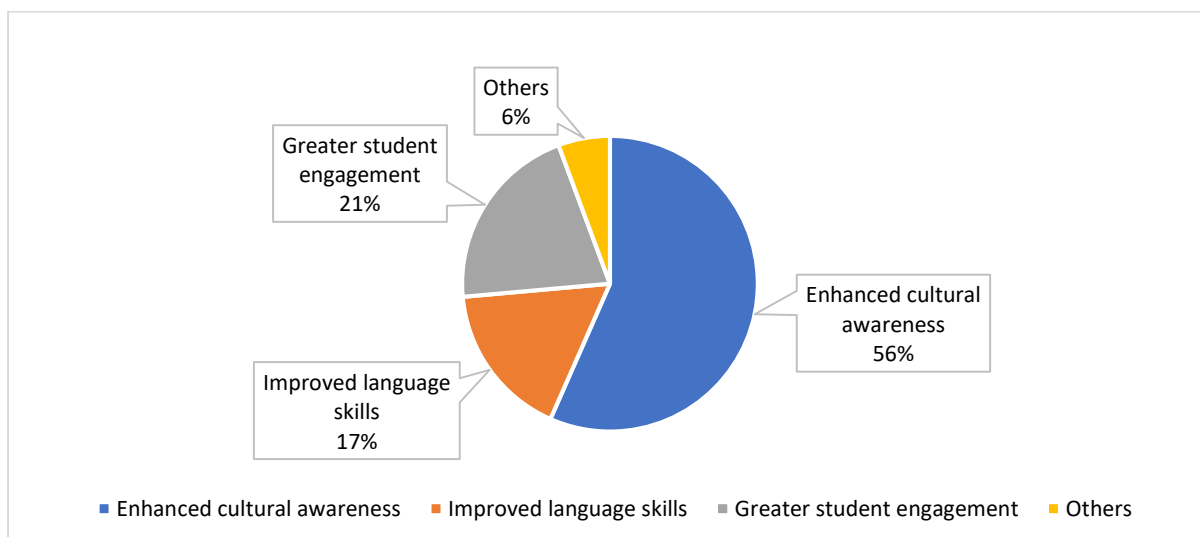
## **FINDINGS**

According to the findings, a multicultural classroom is a place where students from different cultural backgrounds come together to learn English, or a class that contains a group of students with different races, religions, and countries. In such a setting, learners bring different perspectives, traditions, and learning styles influenced by their native languages and cultural experiences.



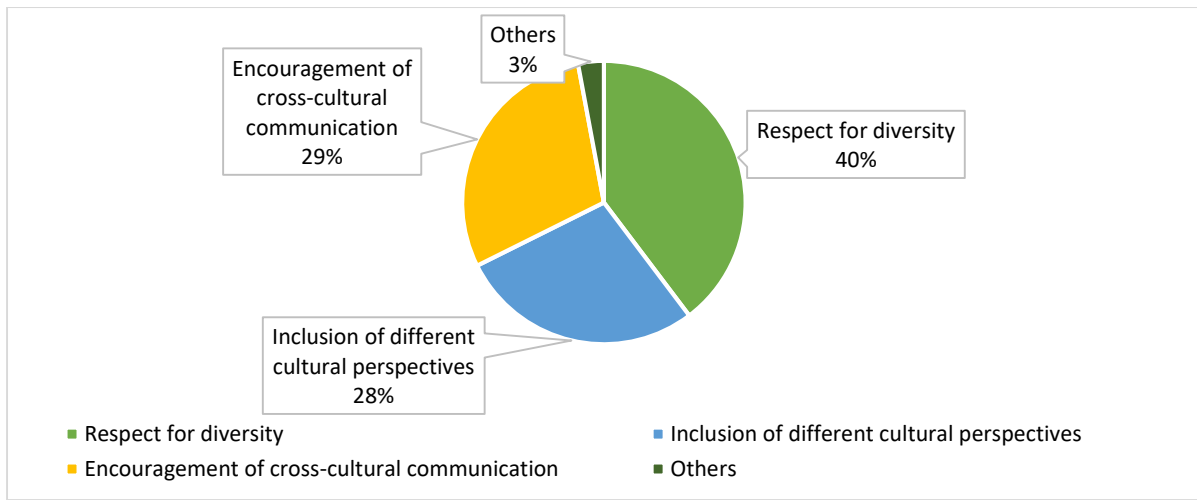
**Figure 1.** How Comfortable Do Teachers Feel Teaching Multicultural EFL Classes?

Among the participants in this study, 60 percent feel comfortable teaching multicultural EFL classrooms, indicating they enjoy doing so. 20 percent of them claimed that they feel very comfortable teaching such classes and really enjoy teaching multicultural classes. Conversely, 9 percent of participants feel uncomfortable teaching multicultural classrooms; they may feel themselves in a difficult situation and find it very hard to teach and control such classes. In addition, 11 percent of participants have no idea or feel neutral. Ultimately, most Afghan EFL teachers feel comfortable teaching in multicultural classrooms where students with diverse cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and customs come together in one setting to learn from each other’s experiences alongside their target language.



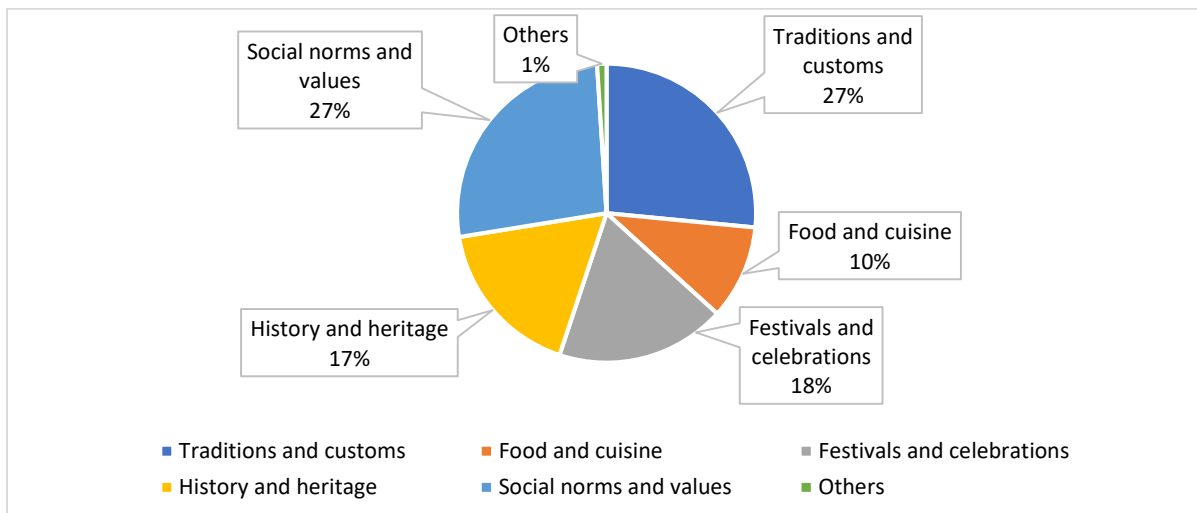
**Figure 2.** Benefits of Teaching in A Multicultural EFL Environment

According to this study, teaching in a multicultural environment has many benefits for both students and teachers. The benefits include enhancing cultural awareness, improving language skills, improving student engagement, and more. The participants in this study mostly emphasized enhancing cultural awareness, which accounted for 57 percent of the whole population.



**Figure 3.** Most Important Aspects of Multicultural Education

The figure above indicates that respect for diversity is the most important aspect of multicultural education that should be considered by all involved. Respecting diversity in multicultural classrooms is essential for fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment. When educators acknowledge and celebrate the varied cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of their students, they create a space where all learners feel valued and empowered.



**Figure 4.** Essential Topics to be Included in Educators' Curriculum

In terms of essential topics for teaching multicultural classrooms, this study shows that several topics are important and helpful to include in such classrooms' curricula. According to this study, traditions, customs, and social norms and values are very important to include among the topics in order to teach such classes.

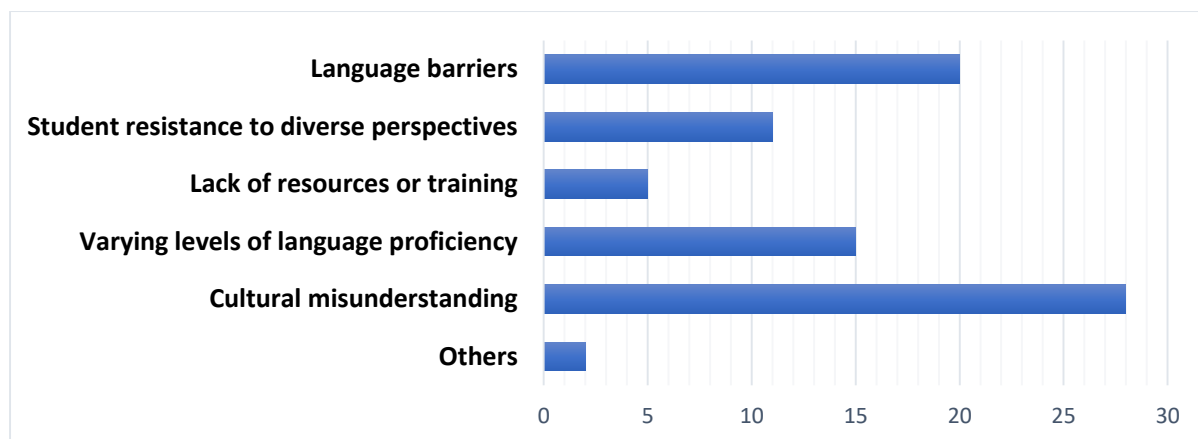


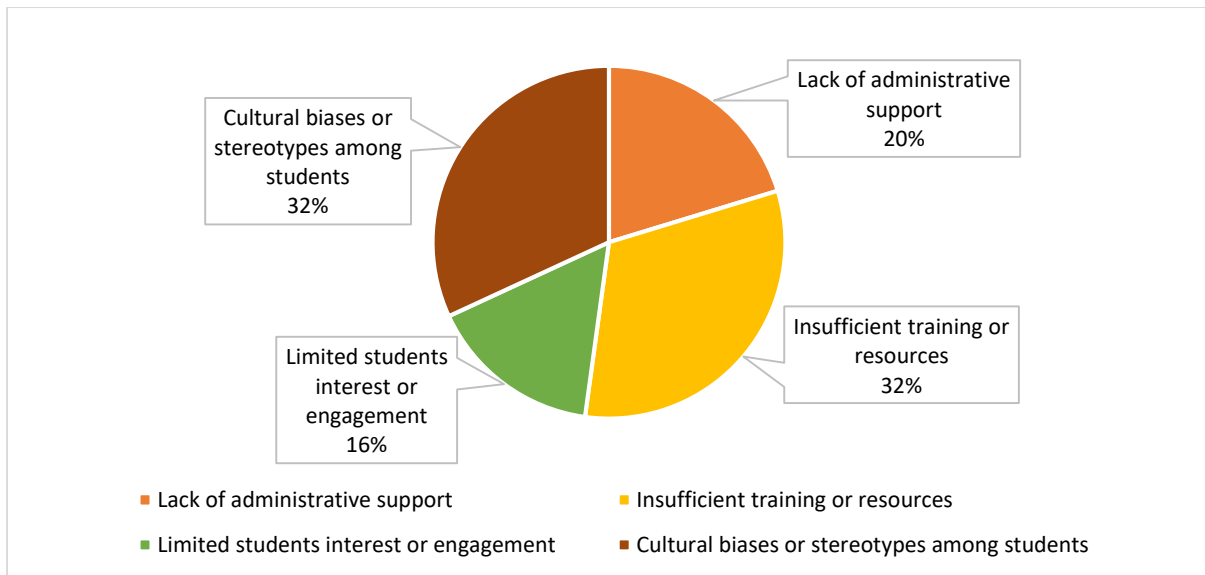
Figure 5. Challenges that Afghan EFL Teachers Face in Teaching Multicultural EFL Classrooms

There are several challenges that educators face in teaching Afghan EFL multicultural classrooms. Based on this study, common challenges teachers encounter include language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, varying levels of language proficiency, a lack of resources or training, and students’ resistance to diverse perspectives.

Among the mentioned challenges, the participants mostly emphasized the cultural misunderstandings they face in their classrooms. This phenomenon often arises from language diversity, social norms, values, and nonverbal cues, which can lead to confusion or offense. For example, gestures that are considered polite in one culture may be disrespectful in another, and depending on the cultural context, certain phrases may carry different connotations. Moreover, university instructors mostly encounter these challenges weekly, as they have class once a week in a particular classroom, and some even face this kind of challenge every day with their students in EFL classes.

Furthermore, this study identified examples of a specific challenge educators face in Afghan EFL multicultural classes. For example, one of the respondents said:

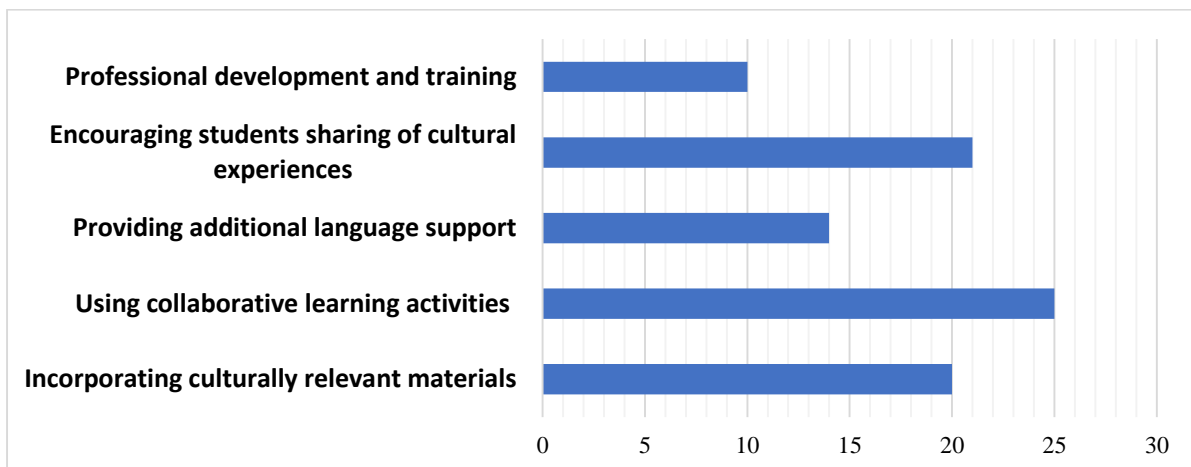
*“One specific challenge I faced in a multicultural EFL class was managing varying levels of English proficiency and different cultural approaches to communication. For example, students from more reserved cultures may hesitate to speak in front of the class, while students from more vocal cultures may dominate discussions. This disparity can create an imbalance, with some students not fully engaging, leading to uneven participation. To address this, I implemented small-group discussions and pair activities, allowing students to communicate in a less intimidating setting and encouraging more balanced participation across cultural groups. It also helped build trust, as students were able to feel more comfortable sharing their ideas”.*



**Figure 6.** Most Significant Barriers in Teaching Practice of Multicultural Education

Some significant barriers educators encounter in implementing multicultural education in their teaching practice include: lack of administrative support, insufficient training or resources, limited student interest or engagement, and cultural biases or stereotypes among students.

Based on the survey, the most significant barriers that Afghan EFL instructors face are insufficient training or resources and cultural biases and stereotypes among students, which lead to misunderstandings among students.



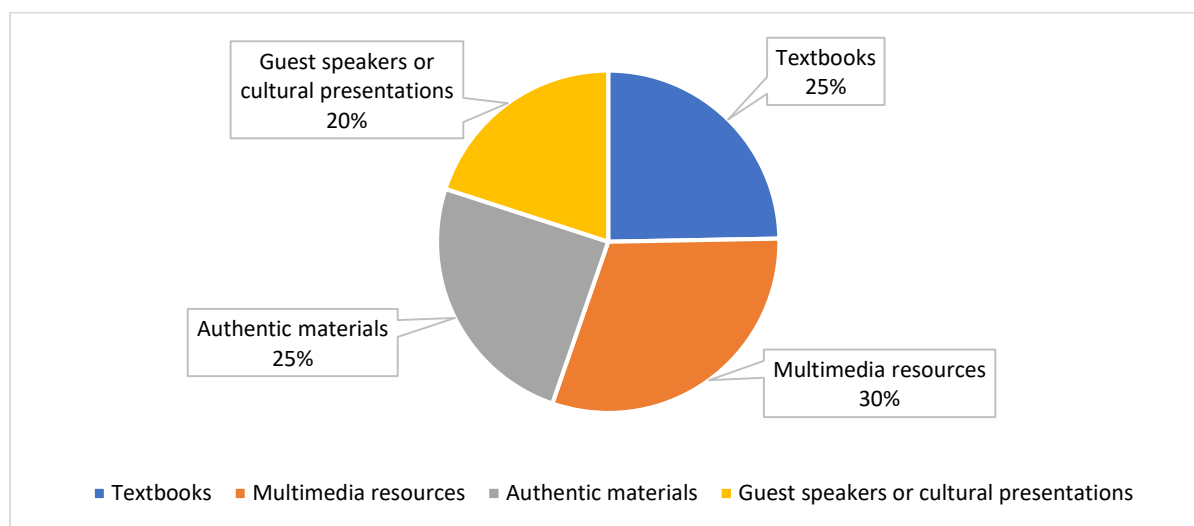
**Figure 7.** Strategies That Afghan EFL Teachers Use In Multicultural Classrooms

This study identified challenges educators face when teaching in multicultural EFL classrooms in Afghanistan. In addition, participants and interviewees suggested strategies they found very effective for teaching in Afghan EFL multicultural classrooms. Commonly suggested strategies include incorporating culturally relevant materials, using collaborative learning activities, providing language support, encouraging students to share their cultural experiences, and offering professional development and training. Among all these strategies, the respondents mostly emphasized using collaborative learning activities that encourage

students to share their cultural experiences, so that all students can learn from each other’s perspectives and experiences, which creates a friendly and cheerful atmosphere in such classes. Additionally, they claimed that incorporating culturally relevant materials is an essential strategy for multicultural classrooms.

Moreover, the study found that incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into teachers’ lesson plans is essential. For example, one of the interviewees said,

*“I incorporate students’ cultural backgrounds into my lesson plans by first getting to know their unique experiences and interests through informal discussions or surveys. Then, I will provide activities and materials to help them reflect on and honor their backgrounds. For example, I may use readings, videos, or examples from different cultures that align with the lesson’s theme, ensuring both global and local perspectives are included. This approach not only makes learning more relevant and engaging but also creates an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel valued and seen”.*



**Figure 8.** Utilizing Effective and Relevant Materials

In teaching Afghan EFL multicultural classrooms, educators can use several types of materials. This study indicates that effective teaching materials for this kind of class include textbooks, multimedia resources (videos and podcasts), authentic materials (newspapers and literature), guest speakers or cultural presentations, and more.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute meaningfully in three phases: the perceptions of Afghan EFL teachers in multicultural settings, the challenges they face, and strategies to be used in such settings. The responses from instructors across Afghanistan universities provide a comprehensive insight into the pedagogical complexities of teaching diverse student populations. Based on this study, teachers reported feeling comfortable and even enthusiastic about teaching in multicultural classrooms, suggesting openness to diversity and recognition of the cultural richness these environments offer.

The primary institutional barriers are various proficiency levels in L2, different linguistic backgrounds, insufficient training, and a lack of resources. Teachers acknowledged a lack of preparedness in addressing cultural diversity, highlighting the need for structured professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy. This aligns with broader literature (e.g., Gay, 2010; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Misinterpretation due to linguistic diversity was also reported as a barrier in such settings. Instructors have different learners in one classroom who speak different first languages. Also, they have different abilities in the target language. It can be difficult to communicate clearly and ensure that every student has access to the curriculum in these situations (Pandey, 2024). Limited resources in Afghan EFL multicultural classrooms can definitely make learning challenging. According to Khan and Iqbal (2019), several EFL classrooms are faced with a shortage of appropriate and effective language-learning materials, technology, and culturally relevant content, which can worsen language barriers and limit students' engagement.

Insufficient training for educators in such settings is also a challenge. Several EFL teachers are not adequately prepared and trained to address the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students. This lack of training often leads to a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction where educators apply one approach to all classes and students, and they think that it would be enough, which can alienate and isolate students from different cultural contexts and reduce their engagement and motivation in the teaching and learning process (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

On the positive side, the study identifies several practical strategies that teachers currently use or recommend. Collaborative learning, in this approach learners should work together and share their ideas, understandings and experiences regarding the issue; incorporation of students' cultural backgrounds into lessons, in this strategy as suggested by literature and findings, learners are going to express their own experiences based on the lesson before starting, and being aware of several perspectives will help them to increase their knowledge. Additionally, the use of authentic and multimedia materials was also emphasized as effective; in this approach, the teacher can use authentic materials based on learners' cultures and contexts and use diverse materials. These strategies align with current TESOL pedagogical theories that promote learner-centered, inclusive teaching (Tomlinson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2022).

Moreover, the integration of technology was also highlighted as a facilitator of multicultural teaching. Teachers who employed digital tools reported increased student engagement and improved communication across cultural lines. However, the efficacy of such tools depends on access and digital literacy, both of which remain uneven in Afghan higher education institutions. Another critical theme from interviews was the role of assessment. Teachers discussed culturally fair assessment as essential for accurately evaluating student performance. Traditional methods were often seen as biased toward dominant cultural norms, further disadvantaging minority students. This reflects a growing consensus in

language assessment research advocating for formative, culturally responsive evaluation methods (Gottlieb, 2016).

Taken together, to teach multicultural classrooms using various strategies and materials, some effective teaching methods need to be applied. A combination of collaborative, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching methods is most effective for promoting multicultural understanding. Group projects and discussions encourage students to share their perspectives and learn from each other's experiences. Using real-world scenarios and case studies allows students to engage with global issues and understand different cultural viewpoints in a practical context. Additionally, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method promotes multicultural understanding by encouraging students to engage in real-life communication with peers from diverse backgrounds.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals the difficulties and strategies of teaching in diverse environments, offering a nuanced understanding of Afghan EFL instructors' experiences in multicultural classrooms. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and a lack of professional preparation are among the major obstacles teachers face, even though most appreciate the diversity of cultures students bring to the classroom. The results demonstrate the urgent need for teacher preparation programs and culturally sensitive teaching methods. Fostering equitable learning environments also requires institutional support, including resources, inclusive curricula, and assessment instruments.

Multimodal instruction, integration of cultural backgrounds, and collaborative learning have all shown promise in addressing diversity-related issues. These techniques foster intercultural understanding and empathy, which are critical for language acquisition and civic development. To foster inclusive, successful, and culturally affirming EFL instruction nationwide, the study's findings can be incorporated into professional development frameworks, national education strategies, and classroom practices.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

Despite the valuable insights this study provides, several limitations should be acknowledged. First of all, limited geographical representation in the qualitative data: although the quantitative data included instructors from 15 universities across Afghanistan, the qualitative portion (interviews) was limited to Ghor University instructors. Second, the study lacks longitudinal analysis: it captures a snapshot of teachers' perceptions and strategies at a particular time but does not examine changes over time. Another limitation of this study is its limited focus on students' perspectives; it emphasizes teachers' perspectives but does not include students' viewpoints from multicultural classrooms. Furthermore, the gender homogeneity of participants is another notable limitation of this study, as all participants were male teachers.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

To build on the findings of this study and address its limitations, future research should consider several important issues. First, expand the qualitative; future studies should interview instructors at a wider range of universities. This would offer a more nuanced understanding of regional variations in challenges and strategies. Second, include student perspectives; incorporating the voices of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds would enrich the findings. Additionally, conduct gender-sensitive research; future studies should also explore how gender influences classroom participation, learning experiences, and teacher-student interactions in such settings.

### **AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION**

All of the authors work collaboratively on the manuscript.

- Asadullah Faizy conceptualized and supervised the study, and collected and analyzed the data.
- Nesar Ahmad Wahedi wrote and organized the manuscript.
- Sakhi Murad Ghorianfar revised the reviewers' comments.

All the authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

### **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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