

CREATING AN ENCOURAGING LEARNING  
ENVIRONMENT FOR MULTICULTURAL GROUPS  
IN LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION COURSES

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# CREATING AN ENCOURAGING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR MULTICULTURAL GROUPS IN LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION COURSES

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## Abstract

*Teaching multicultural groups of adult learners has become a widespread practice in immigrant-receiving countries. However, not enough has been said about the practical strategies for managing these groups, where all the participants may have different cultural values and, consequently, very different ideas about the educational process and the roles of students and instructors in that process. This article presents an effective strategy for creating a supportive learning environment while working with adult immigrant learners from different countries. This approach was developed and tested in practice over years of working with such groups of students in linguistic integration courses in Quebec and can be summarized as follows: treat students on a human level and avoid emphasizing their cultural identity in the educational process.*

## Résumé

*L'enseignement de groupes multiculturels d'adultes est une pratique répandue dans les pays accueillant des immigrants. Cependant, on ne parle pas souvent des stratégies pratiques permettant de gérer ces divers groupes au sein desquels les participants ont sans doute différentes valeurs culturelles et donc des idées très différentes sur le processus éducatif et le rôle des étudiants et des instructeurs dans ce processus. Cet article présente une stratégie efficace pour créer un milieu d'apprentissage axé sur le soutien pour ceux qui travaillent avec des apprenants adultes immigrants de divers pays. Cette approche fut conçue et mise à l'essai au cours d'années de travail auprès de tels groupes d'étudiants dans des cours d'intégration linguistique au Québec. Elle se résume par les principes suivants : traitez les étudiants comme êtres humains et évitez de mettre l'accent sur leur identité culturelle dans le cadre du processus éducatif.*

## Keywords

*adult learning, learning environment, inclusive education, educational technology, culture*

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**Mots clés**

*éducation des adultes, milieu d'apprentissage, éducation inclusive, technologie de l'éducation, culture*

Civic and linguistic integration courses have become a specific type of mass adult education in the contemporary world. Indeed, many immigrants and refugees have arrived in North American and European countries to live and work there. Consequently, many modern societies are becoming increasingly multicultural as immigrants may arrive from all over the world. The paradigm of multiculturalism as a model for managing diversity was developed in response to the multiple challenges of the peaceful cohabitation of different cultures in the same political and social community. Multiculturalism seeks to recognize ethnocultural diversity within the political community and places greater emphasis on recognizing specific groups and their rights to self-determination within that community (Roult et al., 2019). It has become a dominant model in Canada, often cited as a source of pride and a symbol of national identity, and is now recognized worldwide (Roult et al., 2019). This is why multicultural societies that welcome immigrants are obviously very interested in encouraging them to participate actively in the social and economic life of their host society. To thrive in their host societies, however, immigrants need language skills and at least a basic understanding of various aspects of life in those societies. To facilitate the acquisition of linguistic and practical knowledge of a host society, many European and North American countries offer civic and linguistic integration courses to adult immigrants (Boyd & Cao, 2009; Gebhardt, 2016; Guo, 2013; Joppke, 2007; Zagrebina, 2022).

In such courses in Quebec, up to eight different cultures can be represented in a group of 18 to 20 students. Consequently, instructors of such courses routinely deal with groups of students in which almost all the participants come from different cultures, not counting educational and sociodemographic differences. The biggest challenge for an instructor in such a situation is to create an encouraging learning environment where everyone's culture and identity is respected. Generally, when working in a culturally different environment, it is accepted that great importance should be placed on attributes such as tolerance, open-mindedness, and respect (Walkington, 2015), and it is crucial to create a more inclusive environment for lifelong learning without opposing cultural, national, and ethnic binaries (Jurkova & Guo, 2021). In the educational and research literature, however, not enough attention is paid to practical strategies for managing multicultural and highly heterogeneous groups of adult learners in linguistic integration courses. There are discussions about multicultural classes in schools (Van Tartwijk et al., 2009; Vidwans & Faez, 2019; Gay, 2002; Siwatu, 2011; Weinstein et al., 2004), but not in integration classes for immigrant adults. However, in Quebec alone, language integration courses, which always involve multicultural groups, teach thousands of adult immigrants each year. Therefore, practical strategies for managing multicultural groups of immigrant adult learners could be of great interest to many instructors.

Previous research has also not definitively suggested whether the teacher should consider the ethnicity of students in multicultural groups (Van Tartwijk et al., 2009). Other researchers propose a culturally responsive pedagogy, implying that the teacher should consider the culture of the students (Vidwans & Faez, 2019) or students' cultural background (Weinstein et al., 2004) and should be aware of broader social, economic, and

political context (Weinstein et al., 2004), without, however, explaining how such a pedagogy can be put into concrete practice to teach students. Unlike previous research, this article not only proposes a strategy based on considering adult students as unique persons and not as representatives of ethnic groups or cultures, but also presents practice-based arguments to defend such a strategy, as well as practical advice on how to implement it in the classroom. The practical strategy presented aims to contribute to an encouraging and stimulating learning environment for each student in a multicultural classroom. This strategy was developed and tested over years of working with such groups of students in Montreal, the multicultural epicentre of Quebec.

### **Culture and Norms of Behaviour**

Culture in its broad sense (which is discussed below) can shape student behaviour and attitudes toward the educational process, which creates specific challenges for managing multicultural groups. Social psychologists distinguish between collectivist and individualist cultures (Triandis et al., 1988). These two types of cultures have developed very different views of the individual's life purposes, appropriate behaviour, and relationships with others, based on ideas of how relationships between the individual and the group should be organized: priority of individual goals over group goals (in more individualist cultures) and priority of group goals over individual goals (in more collectivist cultures) (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Triandis, 2001). Members of collectivist cultures are more concerned with the welfare of members of their own group than that of outsiders, whereas members of individualist cultures distinguish less sharply between the needs of members of their own group and those of outsiders (Schwartz, 1992). Empirical studies have shown that the discrepancy or even the contradiction between the collectivist values of immigrants' countries of origin (such as collective responsibility) and the more individualistic values of their host society (individual autonomy) can create a real challenge for immigrants (Zoppi, 2019).

These distinctions between collectivist and individualist cultures are, however, very general, and in real life are complemented by many other aspects of culture such as ethnic history and traditions, and religion. Norms of behaviour vary according to culture—that is, according to the level of individualism or collectivism, and ethnic and religious specificities. Cultural groups are not monolithic, and there is often wide variability in the motivational beliefs, values, and responses to environmental cues within a cultural group (Urdan & Bruchmann, 2018). Therefore, even within the same culture, students' motivational orientations can vary significantly (Urdan & Bruchmann, 2018). Furthermore, behavioural norms are affected by many other factors, such as education, professional activities, and primary socialization environment (e.g., family, large cities versus small towns or villages, even climate and geographic region).

This article considers the fact that culture in a broad sense (including ethnic and religious specificities, and other factors like educational and professional experiences) influences the behaviour of students in the classroom, their dealings with classmates and the instructor, as well as their attitude toward the whole educational process. In fact, the individual's role expectations, ways of learning, and styles of verbal and non-verbal interaction are unconsciously acquired simply by growing up in a particular culture (Weaver, 1995), and students' ethnicity can affect their perception of teacher interpersonal behaviour (den Brok & Levy, 2005). In multicultural groups, a mismatch between the instructor's

teaching style and the students' learning styles can cause even well-prepared workshops to fail (Vita, 2001). Students' motivation in education is affected not only by their beliefs and values or factors related to culture and ethnic identity, but also by many other factors, including the actual social environment and individual factors (Isik et al., 2018). Now imagine a group of 18 adult students, arriving from different countries, in which only small groups of two to four students share the same ethnic culture and/or religion. In addition, they have different educational and professional backgrounds and consequently often very different ideas about the educational process and the roles of a student and an instructor in it. This is the typical situation in civic and linguistic integration courses in Quebec. An instructor who works with these types of groups always faces the same challenging task: to ensure each participant feels important and respected and, at the same time, that no one feels offended by actions that violate their values. The mission seems impossible. However, over years of working with such groups, the most practical and effective solution was worked out.

### **Context of the Experience**

I developed the practical strategy for creating an encouraging learning environment in multicultural groups of adult learners during the teaching activities I carried out over about five years of working on language integration courses for adult immigrants in Montreal. The methods I used to obtain information for the conclusions and recommendations in this article are therefore directly related to my teaching activities: regular communications with students (including asking and answering questions, engaging students in discussions, chatting with them, and responding to student feedback) and observations (I had the opportunity to observe different groups for periods from 11 weeks [one regular language course session] up to 33 weeks [three sessions] for two to five two-hour lessons per week). The groups were always multicultural and very heterogeneous (according to students' ethnicity and education), composed of men and women generally aged between 25 and 45, with rare exceptions of younger and older students. I observed the learning environment in the groups (including group interpersonal communications, student reactions in the form of smiles and laughter during the lesson, their friendly comments to each other, their willingness to participate in different tasks, and their willingness to respond with more than one word to questions from instructors) at the beginning of the session, then during the session when applying the strategy presented, at the end of the session, and, if possible, for two or three subsequent sessions. The strategy presented below has therefore been developed on the basis of all these experiences.

### **Considering Specific Cultural Values versus Personal Dignity on a Human Level When Teaching Multicultural Groups**

How should instructors approach multicultural groups of adult immigrant students while respecting the identity and culture of each student and thus creating a learning environment that is encouraging and stimulating for everyone? Must they respect each culture (i.e., the set of behavioural norms based on ethnic traditions and/or religion) represented in the classroom? Or should they rather treat students on a human level, emphasizing the only value—personal dignity—that is the same for everyone and that is not difficult to memorize?

Here are three arguments why an instructor in a civic and linguistic integration

program should not focus on the specific cultural values of the participants. (1) Any instructors, even the most educated, with extensive teaching experience, have limited knowledge, if they have any knowledge at all, of the cultural specifics of each country of origin of the participants in a group. Therefore, even if they sincerely try, they can hardly adhere to all these specific values appropriately. (2) There can be considerable contradictions between some values, and if instructors respect one side, they inevitably offend the other. These conflicting values may relate to, for example, gender roles and behaviours, racial attitudes, and religious prejudices, and if instructors try to discuss them directly, the result can be great tensions between the participants, which are detrimental to the learning environment and can interfere with the whole learning process. In fact, educators in multicultural groups often find that exploration of multicultural issues in the classroom may lead to emotionally charged dialogues (Reynolds, 2011). And in the multicultural classroom, small disagreements often escalate into genuine conflict (Weaver, 1995). (3) Considering specific cultural values or norms may lead to the marginalization of some participants. For example, in some cultures, women are not expected to express their personal opinions in front of others. Consequently, in the second-language migrant classrooms, women often take the role of passive recipients of education (Ennser-Kananen & Pettitt, 2017). If instructors respect this value, they create a marginalized person who will not progress in her group.

There are also three strong arguments for treating students on a human level in civic and linguistic integration classes. (1) Treatment on a human level—that is, emphasizing the dignity and uniqueness of each person—is quite understandable and acceptable because everyone is pleased when treated with respect and attention, even if they come from a collectivist culture requiring the sacrifice of personal interests to the objectives of groups. After all, everyone has some kind of self-esteem. Even in traditionally collectivist cultures, where people evaluate themselves less positively than Westerners (i.e., people from individualist cultures) (Brown & Cai, 2010), self-esteem exists at some level. And even if students are not accustomed to regular encouragement and approval from teachers in their culture (this is quite common in groups taking civic and linguistic integration courses, according to the testimony of participants, which we received while working with such students), they quickly get used to personalized respect. Our experience with adult immigrant students shows that such personal respect contributes to participants' positive perception not only of themselves, but also of other participants, as well as of the entire learning process. (2) By treating students on a human level—that is, focusing on their personal uniqueness and never on their group or demographic affiliation—the instructor can apply the same approach to all participants, without the need to diversify or categorize participants based on characteristics (such as culture, gender, or age) that are unrelated to their learning efforts. Thus, addressing students on a human level allows the instructor to treat participants as equals, which they appreciate very much. (3) Recognizing the equal dignity of all humans coincides with one of the fundamental values of democratic societies, which are the majority (if not all) of the societies that offer integration courses for immigrants. Thus, by insisting on the principle of equal human dignity of all students, the instructor familiarizes the participants with an essential value of their host society.

This approach does not eliminate discussions about the cultures from which the participants have come. However, there is a difference between talking about cultural elements, particularly elements as visible and fairly neutral as cuisine or artistic expressions,

and talking about cultural identity or behavioural norms based on ethnic or religious traditions. Discussions about cultures are inevitably present in multicultural classrooms, but the instructor should always ensure that only neutral, non-emotional topics related to culture are discussed. In all cases, participants should take pride in elements of their culture that are of interest to others, rather than feeling stigmatized because of their cultural identity. The instructor can make sure that any discussion of culture in the classroom brings participants together, and does not destabilize the group and learning environment, by providing topics for meaningful discussions in the second language. The instructor should always keep in mind that in civic and linguistic integration classes for immigrant students, integration is a keyword—and, first and foremost, it means creating positive relationships and fostering positive communicative experiences. Empirical studies have shown that, according to the students themselves, they appreciate making friends and getting involved in supportive communication during linguistic integration courses as much as they appreciate acquiring language skills (Zagrebina, 2022). Research shows that a feeling of relatedness, or a warm, caring, reciprocal relationship, is one of learners' basic psychological needs (Shelton-Strong, 2020). Therefore, the notion of culture as a topic of discussion in the multicultural classrooms of adult immigrant students has a very specific content, not necessarily coinciding with the definitions of culture found in the scientific literature.

### **Sharing Teaching Experiences**

In my teaching practice, I have ignored the ethnicity or gender or any other specificities (such as education or age) of adult immigrant students by treating them as if they were just individuals with valuable life experiences and opinions, and nothing else. I emphasize this treatment of students by, for example, asking them pop-up questions related to the topics or situations being discussed—"Do you like it when it rains like today? No? Why? Do you prefer winter or summer? Why?" or "What do you think about it [an experience, an animal, a movie]? Do you like it? Why?" or "What do you like most about your host society?"—with the questions addressed to each student in turn (Zagrebina, 2023). Such examples are endless. Asking students such questions makes them feel more relaxed and connected on a human level, regardless of their ethnicity, because these questions relate to everyday experiences that are understandable and available to everyone. This technique seems primitive and too simple, but it works with immediately visible and surprisingly powerful results. In addition to demonstrating a personal interest in a student's opinion or experiences, the questions raise the general mood in the group, engaging passive students, grabbing students' attention early in the lesson, or allowing them to relax after strenuous exercises. This is about the instructor-student communication.

To avoid disagreements or emotionally charged dialogues between students from different cultures, I intentionally guide their communication in appropriate directions. Discussion topics given to pairs or groups of three to four students always allow them to discuss experiences that are understandable and interesting for all, regardless of their ethnicity—for example, weekends, hobbies, career plans, public institutions in their home country and the host society. The list of topics is long. Such topics connect students on a human level rather than making them feel like representatives of specific cultures or ethnic groups. Participating in discussions on topics related to daily challenges and

experiences lets students feel included and connected to similar others and makes them feel more interested in their personality than their ethnicity. This is beneficial for creating an environment that is supportive of everyone.

### Recommendations

The key recommendation for instructors working with multicultural groups of adult students, particularly in civic and linguistic integration courses, but also in any educational context, can therefore be formulated as follows: Always personalize each student on a human level so they do not feel viewed as a member of an ethnic group or an immigrant, but as a person with unique features like anyone else in the group, regardless of ethnicity. To ensure this, regularly ask students questions about their personal ideas and opinions on subjects that are neutral and understandable to all other students (such as weather, shopping, hobbies, professional career), and about their experiences, especially in the host society. Avoid emphasizing the “cultural specificities” or “cultural identity” of students. There are two good reasons to take this path. First, you can never really be sure if a student’s behaviour and attitudes are a result of the student’s culture (or any element of it), or a result of the student’s personality or other factors affecting socialization, like family or professional experiences. For example, some studies found that categories such as race, ethnicity, and gender explained less than 3% of the variance on most factors related to college performance (Sheckley & Keeton, 1995). Second, any categorization, even with the best of intentions, is the shortest path to prejudice and discrimination (Plous, 2003). Thus, the principle that students are first individuals, not members of a group (Sheckley & Keeton, 1995), should form the basis of pedagogical technology when working with adult immigrant learners as well as in any other multicultural educational environment.

Given the limited sample to support the strategy presented (about three dozen groups of 14 to 20 students over a period of about five years), these recommendations could be seen more as hypotheses. I invite instructors working with multicultural groups of adult learners to test the strategy in practice to see if it produces the desired positive outcomes. For me, there are two most essential criteria for the success of the strategy:

- Students’ positive reactions when approached on an individual level, such as smiles, willingness to respond, and laughter
- The further formation of an increasingly positive educational environment in the group, the visible signs of which are more frequent smiles and laughter during the lesson; a greater willingness to communicate with classmates and the instructor; positive feedback from students, such as thanks for the lesson; as well as a more relaxed general mood, even when performing complex tasks

I see the development of a more encouraging learning environment as a highly desirable positive outcome, as it makes the whole educational process more efficient and greatly facilitates the job of the instructor. Although it may be difficult to identify the pure effect of this strategy, as various factors may contribute to the learning environment (such as the personal attributes and educational level of the students and the heterogeneity of the group), the positive reactions of the students as a direct response to the personalized approach could make it possible to conclude it is efficient.

### Conclusion

This article describes an effective practical strategy, developed over years of working with multicultural groups of adult immigrant students in linguistic integration courses, to create an encouraging learning environment. It presents the arguments for treating students on a human level, rather than focusing on the cultural values and cultural specificities of the students. The key argument is that the personalized approach on a human level increases the self-esteem of adult students and thus contributes to their positive attitudes toward themselves, other students in the class, and the whole learning process. This then allows the instructor to create a learning environment that is encouraging and stimulating for everyone, including the instructor. On the other hand, focusing on the cultural characteristics of students can cause tension and might even marginalize some of them. Moreover, any instructor of civic and linguistic integration courses must familiarize students with the fundamental values of the host society. The principle of the equal dignity of all humans, emphasizing personal uniqueness and tolerance, coincides with the democratic values adopted in most societies that offer such courses to adult immigrants.

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