

Fostering Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity in the Language Classroom through Choice, Mastery, and Community: A Motivational Approach

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Abstract:

This paper explores how DEI initiatives and a motivational approach to teaching offer a superb synergy that will assist educators in supporting students' language learning fairly, regardless of available resources, as long as there are students and an eager educator ready to break barriers. In this paper, we discuss how DEI initiatives not only help us create fair, empowering, and adaptable language learning environments but also how they can support the three most critical motivational needs of our students—autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which, according to the self-determination theory, are strong indicators of behavior initiation and continued engagement in language learning beyond our classrooms.

Keywords: *Diversity, equity, inclusion, self-determination theory*

Introduction

“You must submit the assignment by Monday,” says a teacher to a student who needs more time to finish it, having spent the week caring for their siblings while one parent was hospitalized. Another teacher says, “Everybody must submit this assignment using Google Docs” to a student without Wi-Fi access who has to travel long distances to find a spot nearby. “This student is a B+ student” is said during a lunch conversation between two teachers, and “Excellence means no mistakes!” was told to a student at a novice or A2 level who was being asked to perform at

C2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Once we look at the context of these statements, we can agree that they are alienating, disempowering, and excluding—ultimately detrimental to the student's learning experience. These statements are why discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are indispensable to a teacher's philosophy since they help educators see the unseen and attempt to understand that equality does not fit the unbalanced realities of students' learning experiences.

As AI technology advances, focusing on

the human element in language classrooms is imperative. A crucial aspect of student-focused pedagogy is implementing practices that prioritize students and support their motivational needs, helping them connect with their English language journey both inside and outside the classroom. Questions such as Who are our students? What is in their minds? What are their interests? What do they know? What don't they know? How are they experiencing our classrooms? How is their world? will help us create organic environments for learning where students feel seen, heard, empowered, and part of a community.

DEI initiatives offer the opportunity to rethink the old roles of teachers as the “knower, in control” and students as the “naive, the follower.” A Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paul Freire, said, “Education must begin with the solution of the student-teacher contradiction by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 1970, p. 53). And I would add, “... while engaging in dialogical and transformative exchanges that allow those roles to be called partners in each other's education journey.” Discussing DEI allows us to see what is unseen and listen to what is not being said when teachers, students, parents, and the whole community connect with each other with humanity.

This paper explores how DEI initiatives and a motivational approach to teaching offer a superb synergy that will assist educators in supporting students' language learning fairly, regardless of available resources, as long as there are students and an eager educator ready to break barriers. In this paper, we discuss how DEI initiatives not only help us create fair, empowering, and adaptable language learning environments but also how they can support

the three most critical motivational needs of our students—autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which, according to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), are strong indicators of behavior initiation and continued engagement in language learning beyond our classrooms.

Theoretical Context

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

DEI principles require us to focus on our students, their world, identities, interests, and realities. Centering on these principles ensures that students have a learning experience in harmony with who they are and who they aspire to be rather than conforming to a conventional idea of who they should be. With so many students in our classrooms and so little time, achieving this goal may seem challenging and unsurmountable. Where can an educator start? With our mindset. We can start by acknowledging that a single, one-size-fits-all approach, focus, or way of doing things hinders learning and deters students from engaging with their language learning process. Howard Gardner, an American developmental psychologist, Harvard professor, and author of the multiple intelligences theory, said, “No one set of teaching strategies will work best for all students at all times. I believe that we should take seriously what individuals have to say about their own learning and respect their statements about the conditions under which they believe they can learn” (Gardner, 2006). Furthermore, neuroscientific studies “show that patterns of brain activation and structure vary in systematic ways between individuals differing in working memory and other higher cognitive abilities. Both experience and genetic

factors may contribute to such individual differences ... [which] has implications for human performance” (Parasuraman & Jiang, 2012). Therefore, we need to focus on designing inclusive experiences that speak to diverse students, one change at a time, and understand that the key is to be mindful and purposive and that we might not reach everyone, but at least we should keep trying. Remember, a simple hello in the morning can have a long-lasting impact, even if that impact reaches one student. Tomorrow, there will be three more.

What is Diversity? Diversity relates to practices that reflect different voices from different socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, religions, and learning disabilities, to mention just a few. Diversity means purposely designing practices that reflect diverse backgrounds while supporting learning that invites those different perspectives to have a visible place in classroom conversations. Bringing a diversity of voices to the table, according to Dr. Robert Sellers, is “key to the growth of our ability to actually solve big and important problems” (Mills, 2024, 4:37). For instance, being mindful of who is speaking in our classes and who is not speaking and making pedagogical decisions to include those silent voices is one way to support diversity. Another step that we can take to diversify our practices is to examine our textbooks and observe who is represented in them. Consider the types of English that are included or omitted, and make a conscious effort to incorporate people’s experiences and cultures from diverse English-speaking backgrounds.

What is Equity? Unlike equality, which means treating everyone the same, equity refers to practices that address imbalances and systemic inequalities to allow everyone the

opportunity to learn (Walster & Walster, 1975). Fairness is central to pedagogical decisions and access to opportunities inside and outside the classroom. It is essential to take some time to reflect on our own implicit biases. We may not know them, but we all have them; even the most well-trained individuals in bias-free environments have them. In a TED talk, Verna Myers (2014) noted, “Biases are the stories we make up about people before we know who they actually are” (11:05). Teachers are also humans, and we make assumptions about our students. Let us do this exercise:

A father and son were in a car accident in which the father was killed. The ambulance brought the son to the hospital. He needed immediate surgery. In the operating room, a doctor came in, looked at the little boy, and said, “I can’t operate on him. He’s my son.” (Barlow, 2014, para. 1)

How do you explain this? It is simple: the doctor is the boy’s mother. If you did not arrive at this answer, do not worry; you are not alone. Actually, you are part of the majority. According to Barlow (2014), in a study by two psychology professors, Mikaela Wapman and Deborah Belle, only 22% came up with the answer of the mother as the doctor due to our preconceived notions or gender schemas. What is crucial is to acknowledge and be aware that we have biases; this is a significant step in teaching with equity. Many people may think that lowering the standards of an assessment is a fair approach. However, in reality, it only worsens the achievement gap. Setting high expectations while providing significant and impactful support for every student and avoiding assumptions about their capabilities based on subjective ideas is a fairer approach. When grading, we should

blind grade our students' work and not look at who answered each question or who wrote the essays. This approach helps eliminate possible preconceived notions we might have about students.

What is Inclusion? Inclusion pertains to implementing practices that enable students to feel heard, supported, and valued, making them an integral part of the classroom community. According to Cohen and García (2008), students thrive and are more likely to engage in learning activities in a classroom where their sense of belonging is promoted. As Mills (2022) observed, “When people feel out of place when their sense of belonging is threatened, then that discomfort and self-doubt can have far-reaching effects...according to some psychologists, threats to belonging help drive problems as varied as racial and gender achievement gaps, political polarization, and even physical health problems” (0:35). Telling a student, “Could you tell me more about your experience?” followed by “Your point of view is interesting! I did not see it that way” and “Could you tell me more?” can make a great difference in how the student connects with the class, other students, and the educational content. Tell students that what they say is important to us and that they matter. Simple actions or words used in an interaction with a student could support their sense of belonging.

DEI is a comprehensive conceptual framework that plays a pivotal role in creating and supporting classroom environments that are vibrant, engaging, welcoming, and highly flexible, thus fostering effective learning and engagement. This framework is particularly instrumental in addressing students' motivational needs in language learning. Rooted in the self-determination theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000),

meeting these motivational needs is crucial in the process of learning a language, since it is an activity that requires time, effort, and dedication. Motivation is a key factor influencing student engagement both within and outside the classroom, making it a critical variable in language learning. DEI and the self-determination framework help us focus on the students and what moves them, enhancing the student experience in our classrooms.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a framework that identifies intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation and how these sources affect engagement, well-being, and performance. This framework was created by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (n.d.), two motivational psychologists who focused “on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance” (par. 2). This theory states that if, using our case as an example, language educators create conditions that support our students' three basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, we will foster high degrees of engagement, persistence, and creativity, which can result in linguistic gains.

Deci and Ryan (1985) categorized motivation into three types: amotivation, external motivation, and internal motivation. Amotivation is a situation in which an individual lacks motivation and feels miserable and disconnected from everything around them. For instance, a student who shows no interest in their studies can be considered amotivated. External motivation comes from external sources, and it refers to the efforts made by others to make someone do things

they want them to do. For example, teachers in the United States often use the “extra points” system to motivate students. Under this system, if a student completes a task assigned by the teacher, they receive extra points that count toward their grade. An emphasis on grades falls into this category. Finally, intrinsic motivation is the golden type of motivation—one that an individual engages in because they find pleasure and fulfillment in the activity. In summary, intrinsic motivation is when we do something because we find it exciting and enjoyable, while extrinsic motivation is when we do something because we feel we have to. Many of our students feel that way about our classes. They are taking a language class because they have to. They are told that it is necessary. Once students understand the value of learning English and integrate it as part of themselves, they will be motivated to learn the English language. So, the question remains: How can I motivate my students in such a way that they feel intrinsically motivated? By facilitating classroom spaces where the three primary motivational needs are fulfilled. By fulfilling these needs, you are also supporting DEI principles.

The Need for Competence (Mastery). When individuals feel competent, they are more likely to participate in activities in which they excel (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is not uncommon to hear students say, “I am not good at English” or “English is not for me.” This lack of confidence in their abilities to perform well in English could have a myriad of sources, but one prevalent in the literature in this area of motivational research is the demotivating effect of classrooms that focus on perfect language outcomes without allowing students to make mistakes. Classrooms that overcorrect and penalize mistakes leave students defeated. Krashen (1982) talks about the affective filter

in language learning. His hypothesis addresses this need by emphasizing the importance of designing pedagogical experiences that keep that affective filter down. When the affective filter is up, students cannot hear; therefore, their brains cannot process the language. They are experiencing too much anxiety and stress, which does not allow them to engage or be willing to communicate. The need for competence aligns with DEI efforts, in that people need to feel effective and capable in their interactions with the environment. In DEI, this ensures that everyone has equal access to opportunities for development and success, regardless of their background.

What can language educators do to satisfy this need for competence and, in turn, increase the possibility of higher engagement with the target language? First, by focusing on the students’ outcomes as a process and understanding that mistakes are part of it. If students are not penalized at the early stages of learning, this can significantly improve their experiences while respecting their individual learning journeys. Educators could give students an activity they feel successful at and then progressively elevate the challenge by providing scaffolding activities and meaningful feedback that helps them understand how to grow. This helps students move from simple to more challenging activities, and they will feel supported.

Second, giving meaningful feedback is also part of supporting the need for competence. Providing feedback that is coercive (e.g., telling the student to “study more” or writing on the margins of an essay, “I don’t understand”) does nothing but undermine the student’s sense of competence and leaves them feeling defeated and lost. Feedback is one of the areas of great importance in

everybody's learning process (Carrol 2014) since it will help facilitate learning if done right. Using rubrics or change-oriented feedback, such as the context, observation, impact, and next step (COINS) approach, makes students feel that a better outcome is possible. In COINS, context refers to the reason for the feedback (i.e., a mistake, time, or situation). Observation alludes to what the person did or said specifically that prompted the feedback. Impact relates to how that action impacted the meaning, the situation, or someone else involved. Finally, the next step provides guidance on future behaviors that can contribute to improving the original outcome.

This is what COINS would look like in a language class. The students are asked to submit a story about their weekend. Using COINS, teachers would write on a student essay something like this: In this line (context), you used the present rather than the past (behavior). Using the present here makes your narrative less relevant (impact). By using the past here, you would provide the reader with a memory and a time reference (next step). This approach provides students with specific areas for improvement and actionable strategies for addressing them. They would be left with a sense of control and possibilities for what they needed to do next. They would feel empowered and heard.

Third, give authentic compliments and not empty praise. Empty praise makes students feel manipulated. This praise must be authentic and not compared with other students. It is important to acknowledge and appreciate our students' growth, from where they started to where they are now. Using language that tells students how much they have learned increases the possibility of their further engagement with the language while lifting learning barriers.

Finally, providing opportunities for resubmissions and corrections after the student receives feedback allows students to feel less threatened and more relaxed. I have also noticed better engagement with the language and a surge of interest in communicating in the target language.

The need for competence invites educators to examine their teaching and ensure that we are more adaptive and responsive to our students' language learning needs and processes. In DEI, this ensures that everyone, regardless of their background, has equal access to opportunities for development and success.

The Need for Autonomy (Choice). Deci and Ryan (1985) state that once people feel they have control over their destiny and decisions, they are more likely to engage in self-initiation behaviors. What does that mean for language teachers? We must provide students with choices and the opportunity to be part of decision-making (equity and inclusion). How?

- By understanding our students' points of view, showing them respect, and trying to understand their internal frame of reference: How are they viewing this concept? What are their obstacles as they perceive them? What are the things that are in their way? What are the things they do not understand?
- By empathizing with their struggles
- By designing assessments that present students with choices of how to demonstrate knowledge. For instance, could they present a PowerPoint or write a summary?

- By inviting our students to be part of the planning and assessment
- By using inviting language and moving away from using phrases like “you must,” “should,” and “have to.” Instead, use phrases such as “Let’s look at it,” “What is your reaction,” and “What do you think about it?” Inviting language can help explain why something needs to be done and how it can be done autonomously. When students ask why they have to do something, responding with “It will be on the test” can undermine autonomy and be controlling. Instead, consider asking students what they want to achieve and how they can do it effectively. Simply referring to the test is not always the best indicator.
- By giving autonomy to our students and inviting them to be part of the decision-making process, we also provide opportunities for equity since we allow students to make decisions according to their different possibilities.

The Need for Relatedness (Community). As mentioned, being part of a community, feeling included, and being heard are powerful motivators of behavior. Remember when you felt excluded from a group, meeting, or family gathering? How did it make you feel? On the other hand, recall when you felt part of a group and how empowered you felt. Feeling part of something is one of the most sustainable motivators of behavior. Simple activities like think-pair-share can effectively include everyone and encourage participation and engagement in the classroom of voices absent in everyday teacher–classroom conversations.

This activity involves the teacher asking a question, giving the students a few minutes to think about their answers, and then pairing them up to discuss and share their thoughts. This approach gives students time to reflect on and organize their ideas while providing a less intimidating space to share their insights. It also allows students to say something, express their misunderstandings, or say nothing. Saying nothing does not mean reluctance to engage with the class. It could also mean that the students are going through a natural stage of acquisition, language processing, or what Krashen (1982) calls the silent period.

Another activity is to use a set of questions at the beginning of the academic year to help you know who is in your classroom. This will also help you design experiences that will reach a wider audience and help students become motivated to participate. For instance, one of my favorite questions is: What is your most frequently used or favorite emoji? The responses to this particular question provided me with valuable insights about the group of students I was teaching that semester. It helped me overcome some of the assumptions I had made about them, such as thinking that all of them enjoyed texting or that, being young, they were tech-savvy. After reading their responses, I realized that not everyone uses emojis or understands what an emoji is, and that students of the same age have different meanings for the same emoji. I also used this question as a discussion-based activity and an introduction to a reading activity about what emojis say about us.

Relatedness in the DEI context means creating an environment in which individuals feel that they belong and are accepted, irrespective of their differences. Fostering a sense of community and connection among diverse

groups promotes inclusivity and helps build a culture of respect and mutual understanding.

Conclusion

By creating classrooms that focus on respecting differences, breaking down barriers, building communities, and encouraging choice while supporting mastery of a language, we can help design and support welcoming and empowering classroom environments. Focusing on DEI efforts not only helps us create environments that are academically rich and student-centered, but also helps us satisfy our students' three basic motivational needs for further engagement with their language learning process.

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