

MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS IN MALAYSIA: A PILOT STUDY**Noor Fazzriene Bt JZ Nun Ramlan***Universiti Teknologi MARA
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Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia***Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the multicultural awareness among English teachers in Malaysia. The need for teachers and students to adjust to their environment is an important consideration as we attempt to understand the multicultural education's relationship to teachers' awareness. The underlying rationale of this study is multilingual and multicultural communication competencies are vital for living, studying, and working in an internationalised knowledge-based society. It is hoped that the findings will provide imperative information for future studies in measuring multicultural awareness level and to yield insight how important is multicultural awareness among teachers. At present, research on multicultural education includes four elements in multicultural competencies: teachers' awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and skills. It is therefore necessary to investigate if such findings reveal truth for the Malaysian context. The findings of this study will therefore have implications for understanding the importance of multicultural awareness in teaching and learning. Hence, this paper will reveal the insights of multicultural awareness level among English teachers as a part of multicultural competence.

Keywords: Multicultural awareness, Multicultural education, Cultural difference

1.0 Introduction

Multicultural awareness (MCA) is about how an individual forms a greater understanding and sensitivity to the values, lifestyles, and other rudiments that are not only restricted to their races, gender and ethnicities. Multicultural awareness is an act of a person, an occurrence or an object that incorporates many cultures. As stated by Mikolič (2010), multicultural awareness refers to the “values the diversity in cultural beliefs within a society and is always a unifying factor. Multicultural awareness is against mainstream culture practices”.

A teacher’s level of multicultural awareness may differ depending on their ethnicity, age and gender. According to Nadelson et al. (2012), the study found teachers of colours are more open to multicultural education while Sleeter (2005) found that teachers of colours were more culturally aware and committed to multicultural education. These findings have important implications for teaching and supports that teachers’ ethnicity influences their multicultural efficacy.

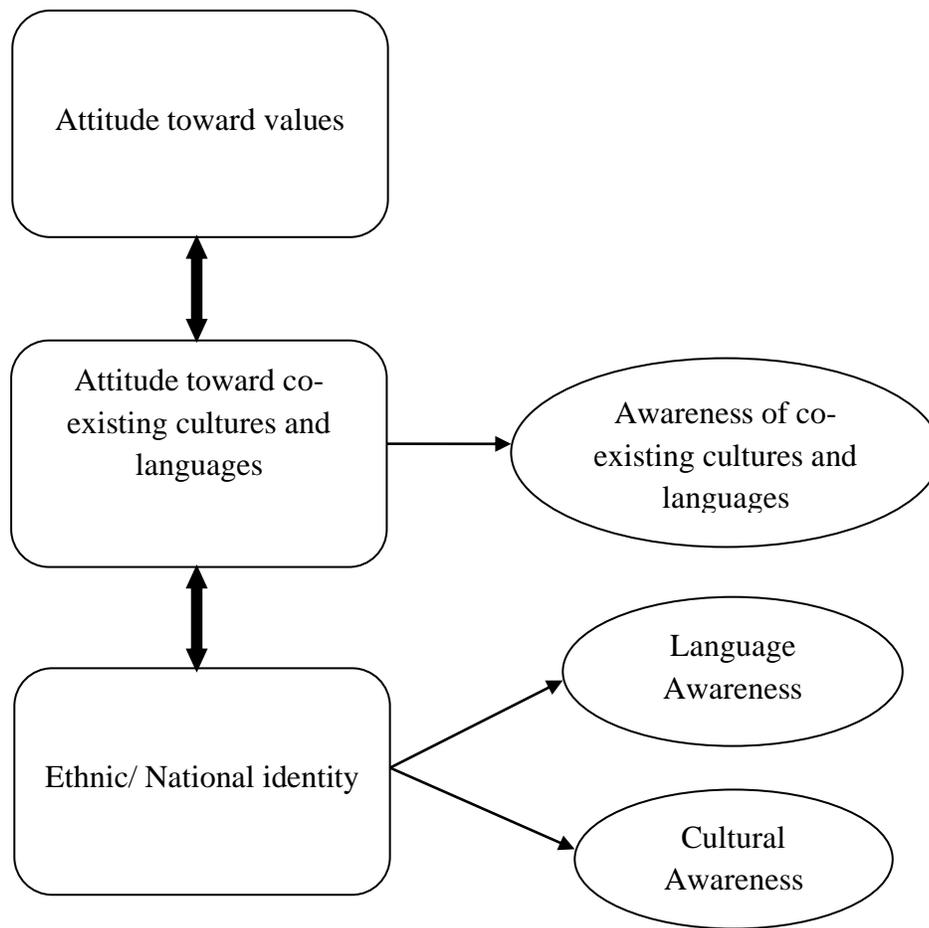


Diagram 1.1 Model of multicultural awareness

This conceptual framework is adapted from a model of intercultural awareness by Mikolič (2010). The model consists of ethnic/national identity as the attitude toward the primary culture and first language, attitude to the second/third/other culture and language, and attitude to intercultural or trans-national values. Ethnic/national identity consists of two levels: i) ethnic affiliation as a sense of belonging to an ethnic or particular group and ii) national awareness which consists of two components: culture and language. It is said that an individual's awareness or attitude toward others' ethnic affiliation including language(s) depends on his social environment. Mikolič (2010) highlights that *“at the level of ethnic affiliation, the individual identifies with the mother tongue and language awareness develops as a significant element of national*

2.0 Previous studies

Raising Multicultural Awareness of Fifth Grade Students through Multicultural

Education: Action Research

Sarraj (2011) in a study stated that a change to the current curriculum is needed to help students developing the necessary global awareness. This study developed a program for multicultural education using comparative analysis and findings revealed that there four themes that need to be given attention: first, students enjoy learning about different cultures and secondly, students are sympathetic to the main characters in the stories as they tried to place themselves in their unique situations. Third, students believe making judgments about others based on personal pre-conceptions is wrong and finally, students believe bullying is wrong. Therefore, students became aware of the importance of multicultural awareness when dealing with countries whose beliefs and cultural norms are different from ours.

The Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes of Prospective Teachers: A Quantitative and Heuristic Phenomenological Study

This study was conducted by Perkins (2012) using mixed-methods to explore the multicultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and attitudes of prospective teachers. The study intended to investigate the multicultural awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes of prospective teachers during their final year of course work in a teacher education program, and their attitudes and beliefs of them about their readiness to teach diverse student populations. Results from the survey indicated that prospective teachers feel they are well-prepared to teach

diverse student populations; however in other ways during the interview sessions, the researcher found that they did not feel as confident as they mentioned in the survey. Thus, this study shows that more opportunities are needed for prospective teachers to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in Multicultural Education in a practical sense.

Culture and Language Awareness in the Multicultural Environment of Slovene Istria

Mikolič (2010) in a study confirmed that a positive attitude toward the second language and culture, and bilingualism or interculturalism in general do not compete with positive attitudes toward the mother tongue and culture. Since this paper concentrates on the interethnic/intercultural attitudes, the outcome can be reconciled with a view of culture and language awareness within a view of interethnic/intercultural awareness.

Preservice Teachers' Attitudes About Awareness of Multicultural Teaching and Learning.

Barry & Lechner (1995) examined preservice teachers' attitudes and awareness of aspects of multicultural teaching and learning. The results indicate that these teachers are aware of many issues related to multicultural education. While aware of the need to be able to work with students from diverse cultures, they are aware of their abilities to teach children from different cultural and religious backgrounds. They also know how to communicate with children and families from diverse backgrounds.

The Relationship between Teachers' Attitudes towards Multiculturalism and Assigned Grade Level

This study was conducted by Elfe, Brown, Morote and Tatum (2011) to investigate the differences between different grade level teachers' attitudes towards multicultural awareness. The samples were ninety-three teachers from one Long Island school district who needed to respond to the Multicultural Awareness to School Environment (MASE) survey. The responses were compared using an analysis of variance (ANOVA). The study proved that no significant differences were found between middle school and teachers of other grade levels; however, there were differences between elementary and high school teachers. The results of this study were consistent with the findings of Avery and Walker (1993) in which they suggested that multicultural training should be differentiated for elementary school and high school teachers to match their curriculum and instruction needs as well as their differences in multicultural awareness.

A Reliable Survey to Measure Teachers Multicultural Awareness to Their School Environment

Tatum and Morote (2011) had developed the *Multicultural Awareness to School Environment* (MASE) survey in order to measure teacher's multicultural awareness in K-12 schools and was field tested with 136 teachers in one school district. Factor analysis on MASE items defined 3 subscales: curriculum and instruction, professional development, and school climate. They proved that with continuing research to document reliability (approximately 87%), the MASE survey appears to have potential in facilitating research to better understand teachers' attitudes towards multicultural awareness to their school environment.

Do Teachers' Certification Influence Their Level of Multicultural Awareness and Knowledge in Multicultural Education?

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between teachers' years of experience, level of education (degree earned), certification, and level of knowledge in multicultural education and their multicultural awareness to their school environment. It was conducted by Green, Hunter, Steele, Morote and Tatum (2010). Multicultural awareness was measured on three subscales: curriculum and instruction, professional development and school climate. The survey was administered to 136 teachers in New York school district. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the relationship between the independent variables: years of experience, certification, level of education and level of knowledge in multicultural education and multicultural awareness to school environment. However, the results showed that only certification has a relationship with teacher level of knowledge in multicultural education and multicultural awareness.

3.0 Research Method

3.1 Participants

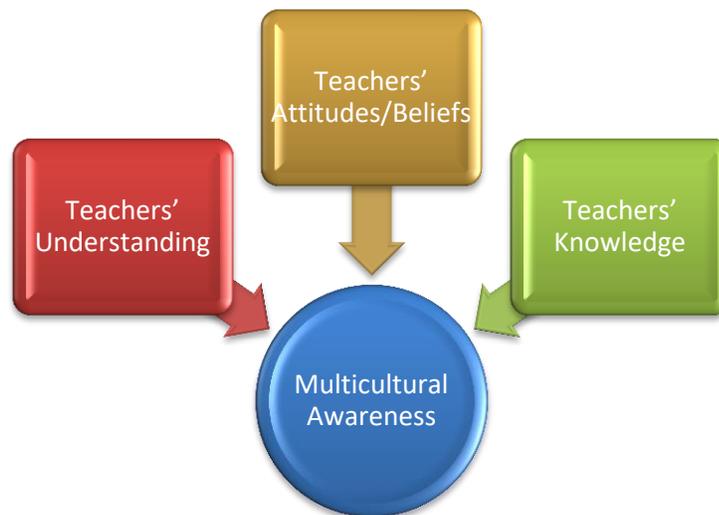
The sample of this study was a convenience sample of three English teachers from two primary schools in Malaysia and 117 participants who responded to an open-ended question. The participants were between the ages of 25 and 55 years. All of them have at least five to more than 20 years of experience in teaching English.

3.2 Data collection and Analysis

Three English teachers were interviewed based on a semi-structured interview to investigate their level of multicultural. The purpose of the semi-structured interview in this study is to elicit the information from the teachers about their multicultural awareness in the classroom. The interview questions were adopted from Perkins (2012) and items were modified and selected according to the appropriate of this study. In this study, the respondents were interviewed to explore teachers' perception and understanding of multicultural awareness in classroom. In addition, researcher also tried to discover aspects of the teachers' multicultural competencies which include attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills in teaching and learning session. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. In order to ensure reliability and validity, transcribed interviews were cross-checked by the participants and codes under each theme were presented in the reporting of the findings.

4.0 Findings

Findings show there are three themes found in this study. The themes are teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes and beliefs as well as teachers' knowledge.



4.1 Teachers' understanding of multicultural awareness

Three sub-themes were found under the heading of teachers' understanding of multicultural awareness. They are diversity of cultural identity, respect, having sensitivity and acceptance. For example, the participants reported that: *"To me, multicultural awareness is a greater understanding and sensitivity of the history, values, experiences and lifestyles of people. We must be open to accept and respect other cultures."* Meanwhile, another respondents said *"I think it is more to respect and acceptance. It is important and everyone should understand the culture of each race so we can respect and help each other among cultures..."*. It is also found that a participant posited multicultural awareness as interaction to the cultural differences: *"Multicultural awareness is our ability to interact and understand the cultural differences around us. We must be sensitive and respect people from other cultures..."*

4.2 Teachers' attitudes and beliefs

Another four sub-themes found for teachers' attitudes and beliefs are i) aware to own heritage, ii) comfortable with cultural differences, iii) respect religious and spiritual beliefs of others and iv) openness. A participant reported *"Well, I did some researches in getting to know my students' heritage especially those who came from Sabah and Sarawak. I tried to get more information so that I am able to help them in class..."* It shows that the participant is willing to research about his students' uniqueness as an effort to know them better. Another participantsaid *"We have to accept the students as they are, they came from different backgrounds and it is important to understand that they may not be the same as us although they might have the same ethnicity."* She accepted her students' differences though both parties have the same

ethnicity. The participants also gave some responses on religious and spiritual beliefs and being openness.

- *“I am comfortable in dealing with students of diverse cultures...”*
- *“I am interested to learn other cultures as I am open to this matter...”*
- *“I’m not so confident when dealing with students of different religions from me. You know it is a sensitive issue when it comes to religions. Sometimes I say ‘In sha Allah’ to my non-muslim students. It could be biased. I’m so worried you know...”*
- *“Teachers? Yes. They should be more open to understand and accept the students’ differences.”*
- *“I have one Indian student. Every morning she comes to school, she has forehead marking. Of course I wondered about this so I googled. I found two types of forehead markings. Hindus wear Tilak and Bindi to indicate which branch of Hinduism they belong to. Their third eye maybe...”*

4.3 Teachers’ knowledge of multicultural awareness

Sub-themes found under this heading are knowledgeable about linguistic features, diversity between cultures and diversity within cultures. For knowledge of linguistic features, one participant reported that *“When I teach Malay students from different states, they do speak different languages. Sometimes, I don’t understand. Though we are both Malays, I found their dialects are different”* while another participant responded *“Yes. I have problems to understand their language. I used to teach in Terengganu before....”* Meanwhile, diversity between cultures and diversity within cultures were also found in the interview session; however, only one participant gave the response *“I believe bridging the gap between cultures*

is important and necessary for peace and development. I am aware of my cultural diversity and that it is important as diversity between cultures.”

4.4 Teacher's own understanding of MCA

4.4.1 What is your own understanding of multicultural awareness?

Based on an open-ended question in the survey questionnaire (what is your own understanding of multicultural awareness), teachers had revealed their understanding on the multicultural awareness (MCA) as respect, sensitivity, tolerance, acceptance, unity, as well as understand and learn other cultures; but most of them tend to choose respect and ability to understand and learn other cultures. However, there is a minority group who did not reflect to the questions correctly; rather than give the definition based on their understanding; they provided the answer on how important it is to our community.

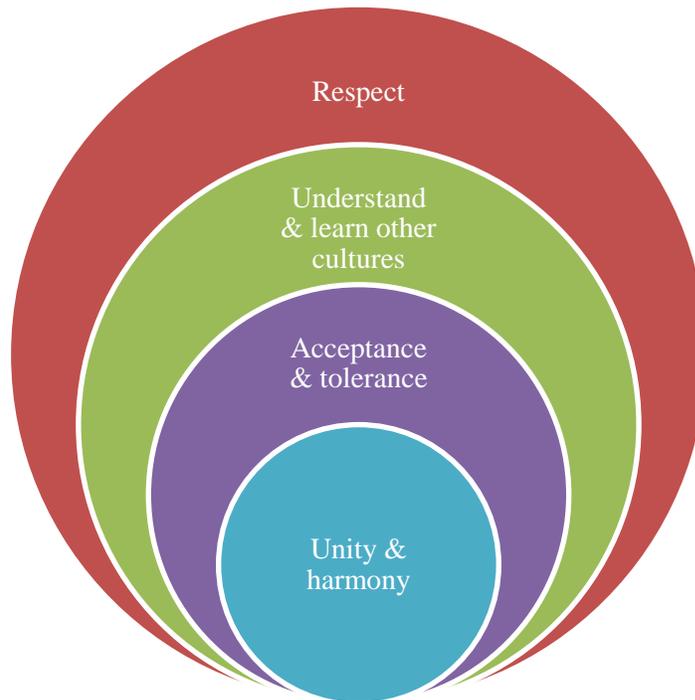
Four main themes were found to be the most frequently responses among all respondents. They are values, direct definition, nation building and teaching & learning. Values refer to the important and lasting beliefs shared by the members of a culture about what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable while direct definition means a straight forward meaning of particular words, phrases or sentences. Meanwhile, nation building is defined as normative concept that means different things to different people in order to embrace unity (Idrus, 2007). The final theme which is teaching and learning shows how the respondents incorporate, implement and inculcate those elements in multicultural awareness in their

classroom especially during teaching and learning process. Below are some of the responses reflected by these teachers.

Table 4.6 Themes found in open-ended questions

THEMES	EXAMPLE OF RESPONSES
1) Values	a) Sensitivity and respect each other in community and society b) Must have understanding, respect and knowledge of multicultural in our country
2) Direct Definition	a) sensitive to other culture's values, experiences and lifestyles for peace and harmony b) Our abilities to interact and understand different cultures around us
3) Nation Building	a) Developing a sense of unity and tolerance in plural society b) Important values for Malaysia and to preserve our unity
4) Teaching & Learning	a) Must be applied during P&P process b) Different cultures need different

approaches of teaching and
learning materials



4.4.2 Respect

Among 126 respondents who answered the questionnaires, only 117 of them reflected to an open-ended question and it is found that most of them defined multicultural awareness as a stage to respect others. This is in line with the definition given by Mikolič (2010). Some of the responses are “*Respect others before you expect others to respect you*”, “*Respecting other cultural practices*”, “*Respect other races and cultures*”, “*Respect each other in community and society*“, “*Respect and appreciate different culture existing in our country*“ and “*All races/ethnics must be responsible and respect each other*. This shows that they have high level of understanding about multicultural awareness. They also show their opinions that respect each other can help us to preserve our peace and harmony. Their responses include “*Respecting others*

in order to preserve our national identity”, “Respecting others for national sovereignty” and “Respect other cultures for a better unity”.

There are also some responses on sensitivity such as *“Sensitivity and respect each culture”, “Sensitive to other cultures’ values, experiences and lifestyles for peace and unity, “Aware of cultural differences and sensitivity” and “Being alert and sensitive to the surroundings”.* Being sensitive to other cultures and their feelings means accepting what they like/dislike and who/what they believe in. It is how they feel for a reason and thus, we should respect that.

There are also some responses on tolerance and acceptance such as *“Respect and acceptance to other cultures”, “Be optimistic to accept and respect other cultures”, “Accept, understand, and respect other cultures”, “Acceptance to other cultures”, “Accepting different cultural views”, “Respect and tolerance“ and “Respect, open-minded and tolerance”.* This shows that how important it is to respect, be sensitive and accept other different cultures to ensure our peace and harmony. This also may enhance the teaching and learning process in multicultural classroom as teachers know how to approach each different student. As stated by one of the respondents, *“Different cultures need different approaches of teaching and learning materials”* and this is also supported by the findings of interview.

4.4.3 Understanding and learning other cultures

Whilst teachers defined MCA as respect, some of them also described MCA as understanding and learning other different cultures. Their responses include *“Must have*

understanding, respect and knowledge of multicultural in our country, “Multicultural awareness is understanding and accepting different cultural views while at the same time not being ethnocentric, “We must understand all different cultures in our country so that we learn the sensitivity and optimism towards others”, “It is important among us to understand and learn other cultures” and “Understanding cultural background and learning the values of each culture”.

These findings indicate that everybody should understand and learn other cultures so that we become acquainted about cultural differences. They responded that it is *“Our responsibilities to learn and respect other cultures”*. Responses also show that we need to avoid prejudice and stereotype *“Everyone should have the understanding of multicultural awareness in order to live in harmony and unity especially in a multicultural/multiracial environment. It helps to eliminate any prejudices, stereotyping if we understand each other better”, “As a Malaysian, we should learn, understand and tolerate each others from different culture” and “The ability to understand that human should not be stereotyped according to cultural backgrounds because everyone is unique.”* Another respondent reflected that multicultural is *“The state of understanding that people can be different from us and those things that we find acceptable can be unacceptable to others.”* The respondents provided positive answers to this question and they even believe that understand and learn other cultures can avoid miscommunication as refer to *““Must understand other cultures to avoid communication breakdown”*.

Overall, most respondents have better understanding about multicultural awareness as their responses are in line with the definition given. There is also a response that nearly to what

has been recorded in an interview session “*Multicultural awareness is a greater understanding, sensitivity and appreciation of the history, values, experiences and lifestyles of people*”. The respondents also signify how important it is to understand and learn other cultures for the peace and harmony of a country. The examples of the responses are “*It is important to understand the similarities and differences in multiculturalism in order to enhance unity among all races in Malaysia*”, “*Understand and aware of the differences to promote a sense of belongings and solidarity*” and “*Learn different cultures for unity*”. Thus, this section of questionnaire has shown that the respondents have high level of understanding about the definition of MCA to them.

5.0 Conclusion

Based on this study, it is found that all participants prefer to work with students whose cultures are different to them. Findings show that it is important for teachers to become more aware to students from different cultures to make the classroom environment more conducive for teaching and learning. Apart from that, all participants agreed that they do apply culture awareness in their teaching and rated themselves as “Very Aware” in terms of understanding how their cultural backgrounds have influenced the way they think and act. Two participants rated themselves as “Very Good” in terms of being able to accurately compare their own cultural perspective with that of students from other cultures while one of them rated as “Good”. This study also supports previous studies on multicultural awareness of teachers (Sarraj, 2011; Perkins, 2012; Mikolič, 2010, Barry & Lechner, 1995). The results suggest that in general, the three English teachers have good understanding, attitudes and knowledge of multicultural awareness. Thus, this study has important implications to English teachers in understanding the

issues of multicultural education that are faced by them. Future research using quantitative methods would be useful in providing more information regarding the teachers' level of multicultural awareness and competencies.

6.0 Recommendations

There are few recommendations for future researches related to this study. Firstly, future researchers can conduct a more thorough and bigger scope of studies related to teachers' multicultural awareness. Since this study focuses on teachers in selected areas, future research can incorporate other districts/states to gather their opinions regarding this issue. When a bigger scale study is conducted, the findings can be generalised to the population of English teachers in Malaysia.

Secondly, a comparative study can also be conducted in examining the teachers' level of multicultural awareness towards this issue. The comparative study can evolve between gender, teachers servicing in the national schools and private schools or even teachers graduated from local universities and foreign universities. These are some of the directions in which we can obtain different findings related to the teachers' awareness. In fact, it will be interesting to gather different overviews from the comparative study.

Finally, it is also essential to seek the awareness among the students. They are the ones who will be involved in this implementation besides the teachers. If we want to ensure our education system achieves the world-class standard, it requires the involvement from all parties. Thus, future research can focus on both teachers and students.

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