

Enhancing Cultural Competence in Classroom Management: Strategies and Implementation in a Malaysian Public School

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between cultural competence practices and classroom management effectiveness in Malaysian secondary schools. Drawing on Care Theory, Positioning Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, the study employed a descriptive quantitative design with a longitudinal component. Data were collected from 60 secondary school teachers in Klang via a Likert-scale survey. Analysis using SPSS revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.910$, $p < 0.001$) between cultural competence implementation and classroom management effectiveness. Findings suggest that teachers who implement culturally responsive strategies are better equipped to manage diverse classrooms, foster inclusivity, and enhance student engagement. Implications include the need for teacher professional development programs emphasizing culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Therefore, future research should prioritize longitudinal, comparative studies and incorporate student perspectives on sustained cultural competence.

Keywords: Cultural Competence, Classroom Management, Malaysian Education, Teacher Strategies, Inclusive Pedagogy

Introduction

Malaysia's rapidly diversifying classrooms demand culturally competent pedagogical practices that align with the heterogeneous sociocultural realities of Malaysian learners. In such multicultural settings, teachers must cultivate *cultural competence*, that is, the ability to understand, respect, and skillfully respond to students' cultural identities, to foster positive classroom environments (Yaccob, Yunus, & Hashim, 2022). Despite expanding awareness of the importance of cultural competence, gaps persist in the systematic integration of culturally responsive strategies within classroom management. When teachers lack this competence, they risk misunderstanding students' behavior, failing to leverage cultural strengths, and hindering meaningful learning. This study provides an empirical analysis that bridges this gap,

offering insights into the specific ways cultural competence influences management effectiveness.

Existing research illustrates that integrating global and intercultural competence into teaching can enhance student engagement and better prepare learners for participation in a globalised world (Yacob et al., 2022). However, many Malaysian teachers report limited preparation and institutional support for culturally responsive pedagogy (Koh & Abdul Razak, 2024; Maasum, Maarof, & Ali, 2021). This gap between theoretical understanding and practical application is particularly evident in classroom management, where cultural mismatches often influence teacher–student relationships, behavioural interpretations, and conflict resolution.

Recent formative studies involving Malaysian parents and educators further highlight how local cultural values shape students' social and emotional development (Frontiersin, 2023). These findings underscore the need for classroom practices and management strategies that are sensitive to the relational norms and expectations embedded in Malaysia's sociocultural context. In diverse classrooms, management is no longer solely about enforcing rules; it becomes a process of cultural mediation in which teachers negotiate norms, affirm identities, and cultivate trust (Velazco Gonzales et al., 2021). Teachers who successfully integrate culturally responsive strategies tend to foster inclusive environments that reduce conflict and strengthen student engagement.

Despite the recognised importance of cultural competence, challenges persist. Teachers report insufficient professional development opportunities, inconsistent institutional support, and curricula that often reflect monolithic cultural assumptions rather than Malaysia's complex pluralism (Velazco Gonzales et al., 2021; Yacob et al., 2022). Empirical studies in Malaysia have predominantly explored teachers' attitudes or general multicultural practices, leaving limited quantitative evidence on how cultural competence specifically influences classroom management behaviours.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between teachers' cultural competence strategies and their classroom management effectiveness in a Malaysian public secondary school. By focusing on the practical enactment of cultural competence, rather than solely attitudes. This research provides empirical insights into how culturally responsive strategies shape behavioural climates in real classrooms.

Significance of the Study

This study makes two key contributions to the social science discipline. First, it offers one of the few quantitative examinations of cultural competence and classroom management within Malaysia's multicultural school system, an area underrepresented in regional literature. Second, the strong empirical association identified between competence implementation and management effectiveness extends international findings into a Southeast Asian context, demonstrating that cultural competence is not merely a theoretical construct but a statistically significant determinant of classroom order, inclusivity, and relational quality.

Through this contribution, the study provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen teacher preparation, guide policy development, and inform culturally responsive professional development programs in Malaysia's diverse educational settings.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the most effective cultural competence strategies that enhance classroom management effectiveness among Malaysian secondary teachers.
2. To examine the challenges teachers face when integrating cultural competence into their classroom management practices.
3. To explore teachers' perceptions of how cultural competence influences their classroom management decisions.

Research Questions

1. What cultural competence strategies do Malaysian secondary teachers deem most effective in promoting positive classroom management outcomes?
2. What barriers do teachers encounter when incorporating cultural competence into their management practices?
3. How do teachers perceive their own roles and responsibilities in integrating cultural competence into classroom management?

Literature Review

Classrooms in Malaysia comprise multiple ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In such contexts, cultural competence is increasingly recognized as critical for effective teaching, particularly for classroom management practices that foster equity and belonging (Mahmud et al., 2021; Samani, 2023). Cultural competence in education refers to teachers' ability to recognize and leverage students' cultural identities in ways that enhance learning, communication, and behavioural expectations (Hammond et al., 2020). Research consistently shows that culturally responsive approaches contribute to improved student engagement and reduced behavioural disruptions (Perez & Morrison, 2021; Tan et al., 2022).

Classroom Management Effectiveness

Classroom management today emphasizes not only behavioural control but the creation of psychologically safe environments grounded in positive relationships and mutual respect. Misinterpretation of cultural behaviours often leads to unnecessary disciplinary actions, particularly among minority learners (Azis & Raman, 2022). Teachers who lack cultural awareness may view differences in communication styles as defiance or disengagement (Alkholy, 2020). Effective management therefore requires sensitivity to culturally shaped norms of interaction and participation (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). When teachers recognise diversity as an asset, behavioural conflicts decline and academic participation improves (Anuar & Saimon, 2023).

Cultural Competence Strategies and Implementation

Culturally competent teachers intentionally integrate students' lived experiences, linguistic backgrounds, and community knowledge into classroom routines (Wang & Castro, 2021). Strategies include relational engagement, collaborative norms, differentiated communication, and representation of diverse examples in lessons (Melek & Noor, 2022). These practices dismantle deficit views and help students feel valued, a core predictor of

behavioural cooperation. Thomeeran, H., et al. (2024) stated that teachers are essential individuals in making the right decisions about students' abilities and directly maintaining the quality of education. Conversely, teachers who lack cultural competence are more likely to refer students to disciplinary systems or exclude them from participation (Nguyen et al., 2020). Effective implementation requires ongoing reflection and professional development so teachers can continuously adapt to changing classroom demographics (Castro et al., 2021). Govindarajoo et al. (2025) highlighted that teachers often struggle to balance their own pedagogical judgement with administrative expectations, particularly when pressured to prioritise test scores and examination performance.

Theoretical Foundations

Care Theory frames classroom management as deeply relational. Teachers who model empathy, listening, and affirmation build trust, which increases compliance with behavioural expectations (Sweeney, 2021). A caring climate supports motivation and reduces anxiety across cultural groups (Lim, 2024).

Positioning Theory and Socio-Cultural Theory highlight how language and power shape participation. Students occupy shifting "positions" based on how teachers interpret their actions (Reynolds & Woods, 2021). When educators assign supportive roles and encourage collaborative learning, students' engagement and self-regulation increase (Kao & Chen, 2023). Socio-cultural theory stresses that learning is co-constructed, meaning culturally inclusive interactional structures are central to behaviour success.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy positions student identity and cultural knowledge as catalysts for academic and behavioural success (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Teachers must maintain high expectations while affirming students' backgrounds and promoting critical reflection about fairness (Gay, 2023). When applied in classroom management, this pedagogy reduces discipline disparities and strengthens belonging (Morrison & Bryan, 2022).

Synthesis

The reviewed literature demonstrates a clear relationship: cultural competence enhances classroom management effectiveness through improved relationships, reduced misunderstanding, and more equitable behavioural expectations. In Malaysia's multicultural schooling landscape, these practices are essential for nurturing a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Therefore, this study focuses on how teachers' cultural competence strategies influence classroom management effectiveness and the factors enabling or constraining implementation.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic quantitative approach to examine the relationship between cultural competence strategies and classroom management effectiveness among secondary school teachers. The methodological framework was designed to ensure reliable, valid, and generalizable findings aligned with the research objectives.

Research Design

A descriptive correlational survey design was adopted to measure teachers' perceptions of cultural competence strategy implementation and its association with classroom management effectiveness. This design is appropriate for identifying patterns and statistical relationships between predefined variables in natural settings. The study applied a

longitudinal perspective by considering strategies implemented across different teacher cohorts within the school context, though the data were collected at a single point in time. The decision to employ a quantitative approach was guided by the need for structured responses, objective measurement, and statistical interpretation of observed relationships.

Study Location and Population

The study was conducted in a government secondary school located in Klang, Malaysia. The site was purposefully selected due to its culturally diverse student population and alignment with the research focus on cultural competence in classroom management. The target population comprised practicing secondary school teachers, as they are directly responsible for maintaining an inclusive and well-managed learning environment.

Sampling and Sample Size

A total population sampling technique was employed, wherein the entire accessible population of 60 in-service teachers was invited to participate. This approach enhanced representation and increased the precision of observed variability in strategies and challenges related to cultural competence. Participants were required to have teaching experience that enabled them to provide relevant insights into classroom management practices.

Instrument Development

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 22 close-ended items, divided into three sections. Part A included six demographic items (e.g., age, gender, qualification, teaching level) to contextualize respondent characteristics. Part B comprised eight Likert-scale items assessing challenges faced in integrating cultural competence into classroom routines. Part C included eight Likert-scale items evaluating teachers' perceptions of cultural competence implementation and its perceived influence on classroom management. The instrument was designed to ensure clarity, content coverage, and applicability to the target context. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data Collection Procedures

The survey was administered online via Google Forms to ensure efficiency, accessibility, and voluntary participation. Distribution occurred through communication platforms commonly used among teachers, including WhatsApp, allowing rapid and secure dissemination. Respondents submitted their answers anonymously to reduce response bias and encourage honest reporting of challenges and practices.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were used to profile respondents and summarise trends in cultural competence practices. Reliability testing was conducted to establish internal consistency of the scale items. Additionally, normality diagnostics were assessed to confirm statistical assumptions prior to inferential analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between cultural competence strategy implementation (independent variables) and classroom management effectiveness (dependent variable). Findings are reported in the subsequent chapter.

Results and Discussions

Overview

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of quantitative data collected from 60 teachers in public schools in Klang, Malaysia. The results are structured around descriptive statistics, reliability evaluation, normality assessment, and correlational relationships between the implementation of cultural competence strategies and classroom management effectiveness. The findings are discussed in relation to relevant theoretical and empirical work.

Respondent Profile

A large proportion of respondents were early-career teachers aged 24–31 (62.3%), a demographic still refining pedagogical and cultural interpersonal skills (Lucas & Villegas, 2022). The gender and ethnic diversity among respondents aligns with current Malaysian teacher workforce patterns (KPM, 2023). Diverse teacher backgrounds influence student relationship-building and cultural congruence in the classroom (Gay, 2023).

Cultural Competence Strategies and Implementation

Overall, teachers demonstrated high levels of cultural competence awareness ($M = 4.23$ – 4.52). Strong endorsement of the need for more professional development ($M = 4.52$) echoes global concerns that teacher education programs remain insufficient in addressing practical cultural adaptation skills (Deardorff, 2020; Siwatu & Wang, 2021).

Although respondents believed they can identify cultural differences confidently ($M = 4.51$), they expressed difficulty adapting strategies to culturally diverse learners (higher SD values), consistent with findings that knowledge alone does not ensure responsive pedagogy (Sleeter, 2021). Implementation gaps often emerge due to inadequate model-based training and limited opportunities for practice (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Classroom Management Effectiveness

Teachers highly agreed that cultural competence enhances classroom management for all learners ($M = 4.54$). Culturally responsive classroom climates reduce conflict and foster positive behavioural norms (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2020; Banks, 2021). However, teachers reported that embedding cultural considerations can feel like an *additional task* ($M = 4.34$), reflecting workload and time constraints documented in recent studies across Southeast Asia (Ahmad & Ming, 2022).

Despite these challenges, teachers recognised the impact of culturally inclusive behaviour expectations on engagement and learning success (García & O'Donnell, 2020).

Reliability Analysis

Both scales demonstrated excellent reliability:

- Cultural competence strategies: $\alpha = 0.952$
- Classroom management effectiveness: $\alpha = 0.943$

Values above .90 indicate high internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2021), strengthening confidence in inferential results.

Normality Analysis

Normality tests returned significant values ($p < .05$), yet distribution plots indicated only minor deviations. Large-sample research confirms Pearson's r remains appropriate with slight non-normality (Field, 2022). Thus, correlation analysis proceeded.

Relationship Between Cultural Competence Implementation and Classroom Management

A strong, positive, significant association was found ($r = .910$, $p < .001$). This means the more teachers integrated cultural competence into their practice, the more effective their classroom management became.

This aligns with growing evidence that teacher cultural responsiveness predicts reduced behavioural issues and increased student participation (Evans et al., 2020; Yoon, 2023). The Malaysian classroom, shaped by ethnic pluralism, benefits greatly from such strategies due to potential cultural dissonances in communication norms, discipline, and authority (Teh & Mohamed, 2024).

The strength of correlation suggests cultural competence is not an optional supplement but a core determinant of orderly and inclusive learning environments in diverse schools (Gay, 2023).

Integrated Discussion of Key Findings

Focus Area	Finding	Recent Evidence Alignment
Teacher readiness	High awareness, uneven application	Knowledge–practice gap persistent globally (Sleeter, 2021)
Institutional support	Need for more training and guidance	Limited structured PD opportunities (Deardorff, 2020)
Impact on management	Strong positive correlation ($r = .910$)	Cultural responsiveness enhances behavioural success (García & O'Donnell, 2020; Yoon, 2023)
Teacher burden concerns	Seen as “extra task”	Workload and curricular pressures (Ahmad & Ming, 2022)

This study extends empirical knowledge by confirming this relationship specifically within Malaysia's multicultural secondary school system, a context underrepresented in current comparative literature (Hussin, 2023).

Overall, findings indicate that teachers believe cultural competence is crucial to establishing orderly, inclusive, and high-achievement learning environments. Yet teacher training remains preliminary and insufficiently operationalized. Implementation challenges are primarily skill-based rather than attitudinal, an encouraging platform for intervention.

The current results extend prior studies by demonstrating that cultural competence is not only theoretically beneficial but empirically predictive of management quality within the Malaysian secondary school context, an area previously under-researched.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed a strong and statistically significant correlation, indicating that cultural competence is a critical determinant of productive classroom environments. Teachers who actively acknowledge and integrate students' cultural identities foster

inclusivity, reduce behavioural conflict, and strengthen teacher–student relationships, ultimately enabling more coherent instruction and equitable learning engagement (Gay, 2023; Weinstein et al., 2020). The results therefore reinforce the centrality of cultural responsiveness as both a pedagogical skill and a classroom leadership competency.

Implications

The outcomes contribute to current discourse affirming that culturally competent teachers can better navigate communication norms, behavioural expectations, and learner diversity within pluralistic educational settings (Lucas & Villegas, 2022). Practically, this suggests an urgent need for systematic professional development that goes beyond theoretical awareness to emphasise application, reflection, and adaptive teaching strategies. Embedding structured cultural competence training within pre-service programs and continuous in-service development may strengthen teachers' confidence and capability in diverse classrooms (Deardorff, 2020). At the institutional level, school leadership should align classroom management policies with culturally responsive practices to improve inclusivity, emotional safety, and academic engagement among learners from different sociocultural backgrounds (Banks, 2021; Ahmad & Ming, 2022).

Limitations

The study relied on self-report survey data, which may introduce social desirability bias where teachers portray themselves as more culturally competent than in actual practice (King, 2022). The sample was also limited to a single secondary school, constraining generalisability to other educational regions, types of schools, or rural demographics. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not capture long-term change or causality in competence development. Future studies should therefore incorporate observational data, wider sampling, and mixed-methods designs to deepen accuracy and contextual insight.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further investigation is needed to examine longitudinal impacts of cultural competence on academic performance, student behaviour outcomes, and classroom climate sustainability (Yoon, 2023). Experimental studies exploring the effectiveness of different training models across varied Malaysian educational contexts would provide valuable implementation guidance. Future research should also explore student perspectives on teacher cultural responsiveness, as students' lived experiences may offer a more valid indicator of culturally competent practice (García & O'Donnell, 2020). Finally, comparative studies could investigate how culturally responsive classroom management addresses achievement gaps in increasingly diverse schooling systems across Southeast Asia.

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