



Shaping Attitudes Towards Diversity: The Role of a Diversity Education Course in Kurdish EFL Classrooms

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<https://doi.org/10.57064/2164/27307>

Abstract: In recent years, diversity education has become increasingly important in English language programmes, as students encounter differences in gender, religion, nationality, and political beliefs. This study investigates Kurdish EFL students' self-reported attitudes towards diversity following completion of a Diversity Education course offered in the Departments of English at Salahaddin-Erbil and Soran Universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study hypothesises that students who have completed the course report more positive attitudes towards others and greater acceptance of diversity. To examine this hypothesis, a closed-ended questionnaire was administered to EFL students in the College of Basic Education at both universities, and the collected data were statistically analysed. The findings indicate that students who completed the course report a stronger understanding of how to navigate and engage with diversity in society. Based on these findings, we recommend that university stakeholders in the Kurdistan Region focus on designing a contextually appropriate Diversity Education course that reflects the unique social fabric of the region. Adopting curricula developed for other communities may not be suitable in this context and could risk misalignment with students' social experiences. Supporting this goal through national and international seminars, as well as workshops across public universities, is also advised.

Keywords: Diversity Education, EFL Students, Gender, Religion, Nationality, Culture, Higher Education.

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1 Introduction

Diversity refers to the variety of differences that exist among individuals in terms of race, gender, identity, religion, and political views (Tan, 2019; Moore et al., 2020; Servaes et al., 2022; Riedel et al., 2023). Living in a society where people of different backgrounds interact daily, having a course like Diversity Education (hereafter DE) is of considerable value, particularly in educational contexts where communication, interaction, and meaning-making are central. In diverse societies, challenges may arise when individuals struggle to accept differences or to recognise diversity as a potential source of social enrichment rather than division. As Smith and Schonfeld (2000) state, higher education holds a significant responsibility in fostering diversity and inclusivity within broader society.

In English as a Foreign Language (hereafter EFL) context, diversity education carries particular significance. Language learning is inherently social and intercultural, requiring learners to engage with perspectives, identities, and values that may differ from their own. EFL classrooms often serve as spaces where global issues, cultural narratives, and sensitive social topics are discussed through language use. Consequently, integrating diversity education within EFL programmes may influence not only students' social attitudes, but also how they interpret texts, interact in classrooms, and communicate across differences.

Despite the growing global attention to DE, limited research has been conducted on its impact within Kurdish higher education context. Given the complex sociocultural fabric of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (hereafter KRI), where ethnic, religious, and political diversity coexist, there is a pressing need to explore how formal education can foster greater acceptance and understanding among university students. Addressing this gap, the current study seeks to examine Kurdish EFL students' self-reported attitudes following the incorporation of a DE course into the university curriculum.

The KRI is characterised by considerable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. While Kurds constitute the largest ethnic group, the region is also home to other ethnic communities such as Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians, as well as diverse religious groups, including Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and Kakais (Yarsanis). This pluralistic



social landscape positions higher education institutions as important spaces for fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance, particularly within language education contexts.

This study, therefore, attempts to identify the significance of DE in higher education, particularly at Colleges of Basic Education in the KRI. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent is participation in a DE course associated with students' reported understanding of diversity and social differences?
2. To what extent is participation in a DE course associated with Kurdish EFL students' reported acceptance of people of different genders?
3. How are students' attitudes towards other nations and their cultures reported following completion of the DE course?
4. To what extent are students' attitudes towards religion reported following participation in a DE course?
5. How accepting do Kurdish EFL students report being towards various political views after completing the DE course?

2 The Concept of Diversity

Diversity has been broadly defined as the representation of a wide range of individual differences and similarities among people (Thomas, 2004). According to Wellner (2000), diversity encompasses both the resemblances and variances that exist among individuals. Similarly, Saxena (2014) argues that diversity spans the spectrum of similarities and differences, including factors such as age, cultural heritage, physical abilities, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. This expansive understanding highlights the complexity and richness inherent in diverse societies. Moreover, as Coleman and Taylor (2023) point out, diversity initiatives in higher education aim to recognise and embrace individuals from varied racial, religious, socioeconomic, and philosophical backgrounds, as well as varied sexual orientations and gender identities, in order to foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment.



Esty et al. (1995) and Harrison and Klein (2007) further define diversity as the process of recognising, comprehending, embracing, and valuing differences among individuals. Recognising these distinctions allows individuals to contribute their unique perspectives and experiences to collective achievements (see also Nishii et al, 2018; Gomez & Bernet, 2019). In this sense, diversity is not merely a list of differences but an active engagement with the unique attributes each individual brings.

However, Van Ewijk (2011) warns that defining diversity too narrowly may result in unintended practical consequences. Studies that focus exclusively on aspects, such as gender or religion, risk overshadowing other equally significant forms of diversity. This indicates that while aspects like gender and religion are important, all types of diversity deserve attention depending on the aims and focus of any given study.

Supporting this broader view, Jackson et al. (2003) and Kreitz (2008) argue that diversity includes any meaningful distinction that separates one person from another. Dobbs (1996) and Jones (1999) further emphasise that diversity encompasses a wide range of human characteristics, including race, age, creed, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and personal experiences. Therefore, diversity should be understood as a comprehensive concept that embraces the full complexity of human differences.

3 Diversity Characteristics and Benefits

Diversity refers to the variety of characteristics and backgrounds that individuals bring to the table, and it can be understood in different layers. Gardenswartz and Rowe's (2003) Four Layers of Diversity Model illustrates this concept, comparing diversity to an onion with multiple layers. The outermost layer is the organisational dimension, which encompasses characteristics that are influenced by the organisation, such as management status, union affiliation, and work content. The external dimension, the next layer, involves characteristics that reflect an individual's life choices and personal habits, such as religion, education, work experience, and geographical location. The internal dimension is the layer in which individuals have no control, as these characteristics are assigned at birth. These include traits like age, race, ethnicity, gender, and physical ability, which, according to Winstanley et al. (2006), are often the sources of prejudice and discrimination. At the core of the model is an individual's



personality, shaped by the outer layers of diversity, which influences how a person perceives and interacts with the world (Washington, 2008).

Recognising the diverse characteristics of individuals offers numerous benefits, both in societal and organisational contexts. Diversity fosters a range of skills and perspectives that stimulate innovation, competitiveness, and growth. According to Fassinger (2008), organisations that embrace diversity can benefit from improved employee relations and strategic advantages. Chavez and Weisinger (2008) and De León (2014) emphasise that a diverse environment fosters interaction and idea exchange, which leads to a healthy and growing organisation. Moreover, when individuals feel that their backgrounds and ideas are valued, it strengthens their sense of ownership and belonging, enhancing both personal and organisational growth (Heilborn and Carrara, 2012).

3.1 The Importance of Diversity in Higher Education

Diversity plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of higher education. According to the American Council on Education Board of Directors (2012), it significantly enriches the educational experience by fostering an environment where individuals from varied backgrounds can exchange experiences, beliefs, and perspectives. Each person contributes unique qualities, thereby creating a richer learning environment that promotes both intellectual and social growth. In such a diverse environment, students are not only exposed to different viewpoints but also learn valuable lessons about tolerance and understanding.

Moreover, diversity promotes personal development and cultivates a healthy society. Diversity enhances critical thinking by challenging students to engage with perspectives different from their own, thereby broadening their intellectual horizons. Diversity also fosters effective communication skills, preparing students to navigate interactions with people from various backgrounds and professions. In the context of preparing students to be active and responsible citizens, diversity is key to promoting mutual respect, teamwork, and collaboration in complex, pluralistic societies.

Finally, diverse classrooms bring together individuals with a wide range of talents and abilities from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, diversity is essential for ensuring



the prosperity and growth of nations in the 21st century (Holdsworth, 2006; Morgan, 2012; Kleiman, 2015; Hakkola & Ropers-Huilman, 2018; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2022; Richards et al, 2023). By leveraging these diverse perspectives and skills, higher education institutions contribute to creating a more inclusive and globally aware workforce, driving innovation and progress in society.

3.2 The Emergence of the DE Course in KRI Higher Education

The concept of DE was introduced at KRI universities as part of a collaborative project between Salahaddin University-Erbil (SUE) and Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (hereafter FAU) in Germany. This initiative emerged following a visit by Prof. Dr Anatoli Rakhkochkine to SUE, including its College of Basic Education. The visit sparked a partnership between the two institutions, leading to the development of the project “Capacity Building in Teacher Education and Research”. Following its submission to the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, DAAD), the project received implementation support. Its objectives were to: (a) enhance the capacity of academic staff in teacher education and research at SUE; (b) raise awareness among Kurdish students about diversity and entrepreneurship in education; (c) foster research development and collaboration through joint research projects; and (d) establish a collaborative network among universities in the KRI (Abdullah & Muhammad, 2019).

As a result of this partnership and the memorandum of understanding, DE was formally introduced as a course at the College of Basic Education at SUE in the 2017–2018 academic year. Subsequently, the course was adopted at the Faculty of Education, College of Basic Education at Soran University (SU) in the 2019 –2020 academic year. These steps marked the formal integration of DE within higher education in the KRI.

3.3 Context of the Study

The KRI has witnessed significant reforms in its higher education system over the past two decades, including the adoption of the Bologna Process, a Europe-wide initiative aimed at harmonising higher education systems to ensure comparability and quality (Brøgger, 2019), and the gradual internationalisation of university curricula. Amid



these reforms, the introduction of DE represents a critical step towards fostering more inclusive and equitable learning environments. However, this effort is taking place in a region marked by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, as well as a complex socio-political history that has shaped educational policies and practices. The historical marginalisation of minority groups, combined with recent regional instability, makes the integration of DE both urgent and challenging.

In this context, SUE has played a pioneering role, initiating a collaborative project with FAU. This initiative led to the introduction of a course on DE at the College of Basic Education at SUE during the academic year 2017–2018, followed by its subsequent implementation at SU. The project aimed to build local academic capacity, raise awareness of diversity-related issues among students, and promote collaborative research and networking. Nevertheless, the institutionalisation and impact of DE in Kurdish universities remain underexplored, especially in terms of how students and faculty perceive its relevance and effectiveness. The current study, therefore, is situated within this evolving landscape and seeks to examine the early experiences, challenges, and possibilities associated with integrating DE into higher education in the KRI.

3.4 Previous Studies on Diversity Education

Research on diversity and inclusion in education highlights the importance of creating culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments. Cardona Moltó et al. (2010) conducted a cross-cultural study of pre-service teachers' attitudes towards nine dimensions of diversity across Spain, England, and the United States. They found significant differences between countries in attitudes towards culture, religion, and sexual orientation: Spanish and American students held less positive attitudes towards cultural and religious differences than English students, while American students were less positive about sexual orientation than their Spanish and English peers. These findings suggest that teacher education programmes should address both broad and culturally nuanced aspects of diversity to promote inclusive practices.

Similarly, Mekheimer and Fageeh (2024) explored intercultural education in EFL programmes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Their study showed that intercultural education enhanced students' global competence and cultural understanding but faced



resistance from students and faculty. They stressed the need for systematic curriculum integration and specialised faculty training to better manage cultural differences and foster inclusion.

Across six countries in Europe, Pérez Cañado (2021) examined inclusion and diversity in bilingual education, particularly Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes. Despite growing awareness of diversity, many of these programmes lacked support systems such as differentiated instruction and inclusive assessment. Subsequently, the study recommended reforms to better meet the needs of linguistically and socio-economically diverse students.

Although these studies demonstrate global efforts to integrate diversity and inclusion, challenges persist, particularly regarding institutional support and teacher preparation. However, research on DE in the KRI remains limited, especially within EFL programmes. Given the region's distinct socio-political and cultural circumstances, examining the development and implementation of DE courses for Kurdish EFL students at the university level is crucial. This study addresses this gap by exploring how DE is conceptualised and experienced within EFL classrooms, offering insights into local challenges, opportunities, and pedagogical impacts. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of DE in under-researched EFL higher education contexts and provides practical implications for curriculum design and educational reform in the region.

4 Methodology

4.1 Study Participants

The population for this study consisted of all final-year students in the English Departments of public universities in the KRI. The participants were final-year Kurdish EFL students from two public universities, SUE and SU, intentionally selected because they were among the first to implement the DE course in their English Departments and represent typical DE implementation in the region. The inclusion criterion for participation was completion of the DE course.



To ensure a manageable and balanced sample size, thirty-six students were randomly selected from each university, resulting in a total of seventy-two participants. The sample included both male and female students from varied social and educational backgrounds, reflecting the demographic diversity of the student population. Their perspectives were considered essential for understanding the perceived impact and effectiveness of the DE course, particularly regarding students' attitudes, awareness, and preparedness to address diversity in their future teaching careers.

Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that all responses would remain confidential.

4.2 The Study Instrument

To address the research questions, a 25-item closed-ended questionnaire was designed to capture students' attitudes, perceptions, and preparedness regarding diversity and inclusion in educational settings. The instrument employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," allowing for nuanced responses. Sample items included statements such as "DE prepares me to see the existing differences and how one can deal with them" and "Equity and gender equality make life easier and more peaceful." These items illustrate how the questionnaire measured students' awareness of diversity and their attitudes towards equity, inclusion, and social differences.

4.3 Data Collection

The questionnaire was completed by participants as described previously, during regular class sessions to maximise convenience and ensure a high response rate.

To maintain the integrity of the responses, the questionnaires were completed individually during class time without discussion. Students were seated apart to ensure privacy; no identifying information was collected; and completed questionnaires were collected by members of the research team present at each institution.

The use of in-class distribution also helped to mitigate any issues related to low response rates or logistical challenges. By completing the questionnaire during class,



participants were more likely to engage fully with the instrument, and the researcher was able to reach a broader cross-section of students, thus enhancing the representativeness of the data collected.

4.4 Data Analysis and Results

The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items with response options ranging from Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The responses were analysed quantitatively by calculating frequencies (counts) and percentages for each response category. This approach allowed the researchers to identify patterns and trends in participants' views on different aspects of diversity.

The results were subsequently organised according to key diversity dimensions, including the impact of the DE course, gender, culture and religion, and political thought, providing a clear overview of how students perceive and engage with diversity in their educational environment.

All 72 participants completed the questionnaire, and responses were obtained for every item. Therefore, the number of responses (n) is consistent across all items in the analysis.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the College of Basic Education at the University of Sulaimani in the KRI. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured that participation was voluntary, and provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved by avoiding the collection of personal identifiers and securely storing all data. The collected data will be retained securely for three years for research verification purposes and will then be permanently deleted. . The questionnaire was designed to avoid harm, be simple and non-intrusive, and focus solely on participants' experiences and perceptions of the DE course. Efforts were made to prevent psychological or emotional distress by using neutral and respectful language, avoiding sensitive or personal questions, and allowing participants to skip any item they felt uncomfortable answering.



5 Results

5.1 Demographic Information

The participants in this study represent various genders and backgrounds. A total of 72 students completed the questionnaire. At SUE, 38.9% ($n = 14$) of the participants were male, and 61.1% ($n = 22$) were female. At SU, 22.2% ($n = 8$) of the participants were male, and 77.8% ($n = 28$) were female. Gender was recorded in three categories (male, female, and prefer not to say); however, no participants selected the “prefer not to say” option. The difference in male and female percentages may be attributed to the larger proportion of female students typically enrolled in English Departments at both universities. Participants were aged between 22 and 24 years. Gender was not analysed in this study, as the focus was on students’ shared experiences of diversity education rather than demographic differences. Table 1 illustrates the overall gender distribution across the two universities:

Gender	SUE n (%)	SU n (%)	Total n (%)
Female	22 (61.1%)	28 (77.8%)	46 (63.9%)
Male	14 (38.9%)	8 (22.2%)	26 (36.1%)
Total	36 (100%)	36 (100%)	72 (100%)

Table 1. Gender Distribution of Participants by University

5.2 DE Course Items

The first five items of the questionnaire were designed to explore the participants’ perspectives on the DE course and its impact on their attitudes towards diversity. The results, shown in Table 2, indicate that after taking the course, Kurdish EFL university students reported a better understanding of diversity and generally expressed acceptance and respect for differences.



Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral
1. DE makes me realise that the world we live in is quite diverse.	(20) 27.8%	(38) 52.8%	(14) 19.4%
2. We can overcome our problems through interaction with one another.	(26) 36.1%	(36) 50%	(10) 13.9%
3. I have been taught to be more open towards the existing differences.	(26) 36.1%	(25) 34.7%	(21) 29.1%
4. DE prepares me to see the existing differences and how one can deal with them.	(30) 41.6%	(26) 36.1%	(16) 22.2%
5. DE makes me avoid making fun of or belittling other cultures	(32) 44.4%	(26) 36.1%	(14) 19.4%

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to DE Course Items

Note: No participants selected “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” for any of these items.

The findings suggest an association between the course and students’ self-reported attitudes, with many participants indicating that human diversity is natural and should be acknowledged and respected. According to the results for item 1, 80.6% of the students strongly agreed/agreed that the course helped them realise the diversity of the world. Similarly, 86.1% of the participants strongly agreed/agreed with item 2, which suggests that human interaction can help overcome societal challenges. Regarding Item 3, which asked students had been taught to be more open towards existing differences, 70.8% of participants reported that the DE course encouraged them to do so. Furthermore, regarding Item 4, 77.7% of students strongly agreed/agreed that the course helped them recognise and address such differences. Lastly, regarding Item 5, 80.5% of students reported that the course influenced their attitudes towards avoiding mocking or belittling other cultures. Notably, for the items above, a minority of participants selected the Neutral option, highlighting some variability in responses and suggesting that the course’s effects may differ among students.

These findings suggest that the DE course may be associated with students’ self-reported understanding of diverse lives and existing differences. This addresses the first



research question by providing insight into students' perceptions of the course's contribution to their understanding of diversity, while recognising that causal conclusions cannot be drawn in the absence of a control group or longitudinal data. Responses may also be influenced by social desirability bias, as students might provide answers they perceive as socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true attitudes.

5.3 Gender-Related Items

The data reveal that the majority of the students at SUE and SU reported positive attitudes towards gender equality. The DE course may be associated with these self-reported attitudes, with many participants indicating that gender equality is important for a peaceful and harmonious life. Specifically, for Item 13, 72% of participants reported that the course influenced their perceptions regarding women's capabilities, while 18% did not report such changes. This highlights that effects varied across students. (see Table 3 for detailed gender-related item responses).

Moreover, for Item 14, the majority (76.4%) of students reported that human ability is not gender-dependent but is determined by individual capacity, with 15.3% remaining neutral and 8.3% disagreeing. For Item 15, 37.5% of students strongly agreed, and 47.2% agreed, totalling 84.7% positive responses. A minority of participants (15.2%) selected Neutral, and no participants selected Disagree or Strongly Disagree, indicating generally strong support for this statement.

These results provide a clear answer to the second research question. Many participants reported increased acceptance of gender diversity, although the effects varied across individuals.



Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13. DE course leads students not to consider women less than men.	(19) 26.4%	(33) 45.8%	(7) 9.7%	(7) 9.7%	(6) 8.3%
14. DE has made me realise that human ability is not gender-dependent; rather, it is determined by individual capacity.	(25) 34.7%	(30) 41.7%	(11) 15.3%	(6) 8.3%	0 (0%)
15. Equity and gender equality make life easier and more peaceful.	(27) 37.5%	(34) 47.2%	(11) 15.2%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Gender-Related Items

5.4 Items on Culture, Nationalities, and Religion

Religion plays a significant role in any culture, and differences in religious beliefs can sometimes lead to conflict. Due to the importance of religion, nationality, and culture in shaping human life, this study focuses on investigating students' perspectives on these issues through 13 items. (see Table 4)

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. I do not believe in taking acts of revenge.	(13) 18.1%	(29) 40.2%	(16) 22.2%	(14) 19.4%	0 (0%)
7. People have the right to follow what they believe in.	(30) 41.6%	(26) 36.1%	(9) 12.8%	(7) 9.7%	0 (0%)
8. I have been taught to be more open towards the world and see its beauty.	(33) 45.8%	(29) 40.2%	(10) 13.9%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
9. I believe in living with diverse cultures and interacting with them.	(30) 41.6%	(28) 38.9%	(14) 19.4%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
10. The course helps me avoid rejecting other nationalities (i.e., non-Kurdish groups).	(23) 31.9%	(28) 38.9%	(14) 19.4%	(7) 9.7%	0 (0%)



11. The course has helped me to respect people with different cultural backgrounds.	(35) 48.6%	(21) 29.2%	(9) 12.5%	(7) 9.7%	0 (0%)
12. It is quite normal to see individuals from other nationalities gain power in my country.	(19) 26.4%	(24) 33.3%	(16) 22.2%	(13) 18.1%	0 (0%)
16. The course has made dealing with other lifestyles and religions easier.	(28) 38.9%	(28) 38.9%	(8) 11.1%	(8) 11.1%	0 (0%)
17. Due to this course, I am now more familiar with other religions.	(16) 22.2%	(30) 41.7%	(18) 25%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
18. I am against other religions.	(4) 5.6%	(6) 8.3%	(15) 20.8%	(19) 26.3%	(28) 38.9%
19. Everyone is free to follow what religion they believe in.	(37) 51.4%	(26) 36.1%	(9) 12.5%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
20. I can make/be friends with people from different religious backgrounds.	(31) 43.1%	(28) 38.9%	(7) 9.7%	(6) 8.3%	0 (0%)
21. Different religions can coexist.	(25) 34.7%	(33) 45.8%	(14) 19.4%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 4. Percentages of Responses to Culture, Nationality, and Religion Items

The data suggest generally positive attitudes among the participants concerning cultural, national, and religious diversity, though responses varied across individuals. For example, item 6 shows that 58.3% of students reported that they do not believe in taking revenge, suggesting that the DE course fosters tolerance and understanding. However, 19.4% of participants did not share this view, highlighting variability in responses and potential areas where further emphasis may be needed in the curriculum.

Regarding freedom of belief, item 7 reveals that 77.7% of participants strongly agreed/agreed that people have the right to follow their own beliefs, with only 9.7%



disagreeing. This may suggest a positive association with the DE course, though not all students expressed the same view.

When asked about openness towards the world and its diversity (Item 8), 86% of students indicated that they had been taught to appreciate diversity, with no students explicitly disagreeing. Similarly, 77.8% reported that the course helped them engage with other lifestyles and religions (Item 16), although 22.2% remained neutral or disagreed. Furthermore, 80.6% strongly agreed/agreed that living with diverse cultures and interacting with people from diverse cultures is essential (Item 9), indicating a potential positive shift in attitudes, while a minority did not fully agree.

An interesting finding is that 77.8% of students reported that the DE course helped them respect individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Item 11), with 9.7% disagreeing. This aligns with the results for other nationalities, where 70.8% strongly agreed/agreed that the course helped them avoid rejecting people from different nationalities (Item 10), and 9.7% disagreed.

Regarding the issue of people from other nationalities gaining power in the KRI, 59.7% of the students had no objection (Item 12), suggesting some acceptance of power dynamics that transcend national boundaries, while 18.1% disagreed, indicating some resistance

For religious diversity, students generally exhibited positive attitudes. Items 17–21 show that 63.9% felt more familiar with other religions (Item 17), and 87.5% strongly agreed/agreed that individuals are free to follow their chosen religion (Item 19). Additionally, 82% indicated no problem making friends from different religious backgrounds (Item 20), though 8.3% expressed concerns. In terms of opposing religious cleansing, 65.2% of students strongly agreed/agreed that it should not occur (Item 18), while 13.9% disagreed, indicating divergence in opinion. Finally, 80.5% of the participants believe that different religions can coexist peacefully (Item 21), with 19.4% remaining neutral.

Overall, these results indicate that the DE course is associated with generally positive attitudes towards cultural, national, and religious diversity, although effects varied across participants.



5.5 Items Related to Political Thoughts

Given the KRI's historical and geographical context, which has been shaped by political conflicts, it is essential for instructors of the DE course to carefully address political perspectives. The goal is to help students expand their views and become more open-minded regarding political differences.

The data reveal that the majority of students, 87.5%, believe everyone has the right to hold their political views (Item 22), which reflects the importance of political freedom in the Kurdish community. In addition, the results of item 23 show that 75% of students do not harbour hatred for individuals with differing political opinions. However, 12.5% viewed those with opposing political views as enemies, while another 12.5% remained neutral. This suggests that there is still a need for instructors to emphasise the importance of tolerance and flexibility in political discourse.

Furthermore, the course appears to be associated with the students' willingness to engage with diverse political viewpoints, with 58.4% reporting that the DE course encourages them to listen to different political perspectives (Item 24), while 36.1% remained neutral and 5.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Regarding the societal consequences of rejecting differing political views, 63.4% agreed that such rejection can lead to division within society (Item 25), while 9.7% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Finally, the results from items 22–25 (Table 5) suggest that the DE course is linked to generally positive attitudes towards accepting various political viewpoints, though not all students expressed the same level of agreement.



Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
22. Everyone has the right to have their political views.	(29) 40.3%	(34) 47.2%	(9) 12.5%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
23. When someone's political viewpoint is not the same as mine, it does not mean he/she is my enemy.	(29) 40.3%	(25) 34.7%	(9) 12.5%	(5) 6.9%	(4) 5.6%
24. This course has made me listen to different political viewpoints.	(21) 29.2%	(21) 29.2%	(26) 36.1%	2 (2.7%)	2 (2.7%)
25. I know that rejecting people with different political views divides society.	(16) 22.2%	(30) 41.2%	(19) 26.4%	(6) 8.3%	1 (1.4%)

Table 5. Percentages of Responses to Political Thought Items

6 Discussion

The results of this study provide meaningful insights into the perceived impact of the DE course on Kurdish EFL university students' attitudes towards diversity. While the findings suggest a generally positive influence, it is important to note that, due to the absence of a control group and longitudinal data, causal claims cannot be definitively made. Additionally, participants' responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, which could affect the accuracy of self-reported attitudes.

Specifically, the data indicate that the DE course may be associated with students' greater understanding of diversity across several areas, including gender equality, cultural and religious diversity, political thought, and respect for others. However, variability in responses suggests that not all students were equally influenced, and some participants reported neutral or opposing views.



6.1 Understanding Diversity and Attitudes Towards Differences

The data highlights that the DE course appears to have fostered a broader understanding of diversity among many students. For instance, 80.6% reported that the course increased their awareness of the diversity of the world, and 86.1% agreed that interactions across different groups can help solve societal problems. These findings suggest that DE may contribute to greater understanding and cooperation among diverse groups. However, it is important to note that a minority of participants provided neutral or disagreeing responses, indicating variability in the course's perceived impact. Furthermore, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, as students may have felt compelled to provide positive answers.

Regarding cultural diversity, 72.2% of students indicated greater respect for other cultures, suggesting a positive shift in attitudes. Nonetheless, given the study design, it is not possible to conclude definitively that the DE course caused these changes. These findings are broadly consistent with existing research showing that DE can promote positive attitudes toward cultural differences and social cohesion (Bowman, 2010). Further research using longitudinal or controlled designs is recommended to confirm these results.

6.2 Perspectives on Gender Equality and Roles

The data indicate a generally positive shift in students' attitudes towards gender equality. For example, 72% of participants reported that the course influenced their perceptions, making them recognise that women should not be considered inferior to men. Additionally, 76.4% of students agreed that abilities are not gender-dependent, emphasising the importance of recognising equal potential in all individuals, regardless of gender. While these findings suggest that the DE course may contribute to addressing gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality, it is important to note that a minority of participants expressed neutral or opposing views.

Gender, as defined by Heilborn and Carrara (2012), refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a particular society deems appropriate for men and women. These roles often influence the status and value



ascribed to men and women, potentially leading to various forms of gender inequality. In the context of Kurdish EFL education, Abdulrahman (2018) highlights how such societal expectations can shape students' perceptions and attitudes. The present findings suggest that the DE course may help challenge traditional gender roles and promote more equitable attitudes among students.

It should be noted that responses could have been influenced by social desirability bias, as students may have provided answers they perceived as socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true attitudes. Overall, the results align with existing literature indicating that education can play a role in promoting gender equality and challenging traditional gender roles (Denson *et al.*, 2021). However, given the study's cross-sectional design and lack of a control group, definitive conclusions about causality cannot be drawn. Future research could explore gender-specific effects over time to better understand how DE courses influence students' attitudes.

6.3 Cultural and Religious Tolerance

The results indicate a generally positive shift in students' attitudes towards cultural and religious diversity. For example, 76.2% of students affirmed that people should have the right to follow their own beliefs, and 82% reported that the course helped them become more open-minded and appreciative of the world's diversity. These results suggest that the DE course may promote respect for people of different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The data also show a largely positive trend in attitudes towards religious tolerance, with 81.9% of students expressing support for the idea that all people should be free to practise their religion. While these responses indicate a potential effect of the DE course in fostering religious tolerance, a minority of participants expressed neutral or less supportive views, highlighting variability in student attitudes. Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced the responses, as participants could have felt inclined to provide answers perceived as socially acceptable.

Overall, these findings are broadly consistent with prior research emphasising the role of education in promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance (Gurin *et al.*, 2002; Bowman, 2011). However, given the absence of a control group and the cross-



sectional design, the results should be interpreted with caution, and causality cannot be definitively established. Future longitudinal research could explore how DE courses influence cultural and religious attitudes over time.

6.4 Political Tolerance and Acceptance of Political Diversity

The study indicates a generally positive trend in students' political tolerance following the DE course. Most students (83.3%) believed that everyone has the right to hold their political views, and 75% reported that they did not harbour negative feelings towards individuals with different political opinions. These findings suggest that the course may contribute to a more accepting approach to political diversity. However, there is notable variability in the responses. For instance, only 58.4% of students reported that the course made them more willing to listen to differing political perspectives, while 36.1% remained neutral and 5.5% expressed less openness. This indicates that some students may require additional support in developing the skills and dispositions necessary for engaging constructively with diverse political viewpoints.

It is also important to consider that social desirability bias may have influenced responses, as students could feel pressure to express politically tolerant views. Furthermore, given the lack of a control group and the cross-sectional design, causal conclusions about the course's impact cannot be definitively drawn.

Despite these limitations, the results are broadly consistent with the literature highlighting the role of higher education in fostering democratic values and political tolerance (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). Future research could employ longitudinal designs or include control groups to more rigorously assess the influence of DE courses on political attitudes over time.

6.5 Implications for Teaching and Practice

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for teaching and practice. The DE course appears to be a valuable tool in fostering students' understanding of and respect for diversity. The positive trends in students' attitudes towards gender equality, cultural and religious diversity, and political tolerance suggest



that DE may play an important role in promoting inclusive attitudes, particularly in demographically diverse regions like the KRI.

However, variability in responses, such as the relatively lower proportion of students agreeing to engage with differing political perspectives (all 72 participants responded), indicates that some students may require additional support to fully benefit from the course. Instructors should be attentive to such differences and provide opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue, particularly on sensitive topics like political and religious diversity.

Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses, underscoring the importance of complementing self-reported data with other methods, such as interviews or longitudinal observations, in future studies.

Overall, these results underscore the need to contextualise DE courses within the EFL and Kurdish higher education context, ensuring that curricula reflect local social, cultural, and political realities rather than relying solely on imported models. Integrating DE more systematically into teacher education and EFL programmes can help cultivate students who are not only linguistically competent but also socially and ethically aware in diverse settings.

6.6 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it relied exclusively on self-reported questionnaire data, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of participants' responses (see Section 3.4). Notably, while most participants reported positive attitudes, some responses diverged from the majority, suggesting variability that warrants further exploration.

Second, the study was limited to two universities in the KRI, restricting the generalisability of the findings to other regions, contexts, or EFL populations. The absence of a control group and the cross-sectional design also prevent causal inferences regarding the DE course's impact. These methodological limitations indicate that conclusions should be interpreted with caution.



To build on the current research, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how students' attitudes towards diversity evolve over time after completing the DE course. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide richer insights into the lived experiences of both students and instructors engaged in DE courses. Expanding the sample to include multiple universities or regions would enhance the representativeness of the findings and allow for comparative analyses between different contexts, including other areas within Iraq or internationally.

Further research might also explore gender-specific or other demographic effects of the DE course, identifying whether certain groups respond to diversity education. Finally, investigating the role of digital tools and cross-disciplinary integration, or alternative pedagogical strategies could provide innovative approaches for enhancing DE delivery in higher education, particularly in the EFL context.

7 Conclusion

Based on students' self-reported experiences, this study suggests that the DE course was perceived as having a positive influence on the attitudes of the Kurdish EFL university students' attitudes towards various aspects of diversity. Many participants (72%) described developing more constructive perspectives on gender equality, with the course appearing to challenge traditional norms and encourage the view that human potential is not determined by gender (76.4% agreed that abilities are not gender-dependent).

Students also reported greater awareness and acceptance of cultural and religious diversity. Participants indicated increased respect for individuals from different cultural backgrounds and religious traditions, alongside a stronger appreciation of coexistence and tolerance. These perceptions point to the potential of DE courses to support the development of inclusive attitudes within university settings.

In relation to political diversity, students similarly perceived the course as fostering greater openness towards differing viewpoints. Participants described becoming more receptive to alternative political perspectives, which they viewed as important for dialogue within the socially and politically complex context of the KRI.



However, these conclusions are based exclusively on self-reported data and a cross-sectional design, without pre-and post-course measurement or comparison with a control group. As a result, the findings cannot establish causal relationships between course participation and attitudinal change. Rather, they reflect students' perceptions of how the course influenced their thinking.

Overall, the study highlights the perceived educational value of DE within EFL higher education contexts and suggests that such courses may contribute to raising awareness and encouraging reflective engagement with diversity-related issues. Future research employing longitudinal designs, comparative groups, and mixed-method approaches would help to more robustly examine the extent and durability of attitudinal change associated with DE instruction.

8 Recommendations

Considering the generally positive trends observed in this study, it is recommended that the Department of English, as well as other departments within the College of Basic Education and the College of Education, consider integrating the DE course into their curricula. While the findings do not allow for definitive causal conclusions, they suggest that DE courses may support students' awareness of diversity and encourage more inclusive attitudes towards social, cultural, religious, and political differences. Such competencies are particularly relevant for EFL students, who are regularly exposed to diverse perspectives through language learning materials and intercultural communication.

It is also recommended that a national conference be organised for the Colleges of Basic Education in the KRI to further explore the role of DE in higher education. This conference could provide a platform for sharing pedagogical practices, critically reflecting on course design, and discussing contextually appropriate approaches to diversity education rather than relying on imported curricular models that may not fully reflect local social realities.

To address areas where student responses were more varied, particularly in relation to political tolerance and engagement with differing viewpoints, future iterations



of the DE course should place greater emphasis on dialogic teaching, critical reflection, and structured classroom discussions. Incorporating case studies, debates, and reflective tasks may help students engage more deeply with sensitive topics and develop skills for respectful disagreement.

Finally, systematic evaluation such as follow-up assessments or longitudinal studies would support future implementations of the course. Such approaches would allow researchers and practitioners to better understand the sustainability of attitudinal changes over time and minimise the limitations associated with self-reported data. Combining quantitative measures with qualitative methods, such as interviews or classroom observations, could also provide a more nuanced understanding of how DE influences students' attitudes and practices in EFL contexts.

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