

Making British and American Culture and Civilization Classes Engaging and Enjoyable:

A Case Study of L1 EFL Students at the University of Saida

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Receipt date : 14/04/2023 ; Acceptance : 27/12/2023

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to highlight the challenges encountered by L1 EFL students at the University of Saida who encounter British and American culture and civilization for the first time. It delves into the negative attitude that students have towards this course and examines the teacher's role in alleviating the stress experienced by students in these classes. Furthermore, it investigates ways to make the course more engaging and enjoyable. In this work, I draw on my teaching experience in culture and civilization at the department of English which spans over from 2007 to this time.

The results revealed several multifaceted factors associated with the failure of this module. Some of these factors pertain to the subject matter itself, while others are due to the inadequate background knowledge of students who come from high school. The researcher concluded this study by proposing recommendations that emphasize active learning to generate enthusiasm in the classroom. This can be accomplished by utilizing different teaching approaches, incorporating technology, and moving away from conventional methods that rely on memorization and outdated teaching styles.

Key Words: civilization; EFL teaching; negative attitudes; active learning; ICT.

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1- Introduction

In Algerian universities, culture and civilization classes have become a crucial aspect of EFL learning to align with the global trend that emphasizes the incorporation of culture and civilization in EFL teaching. **Byram, M., Morgan, C., et al. in their book “Teaching and Learning Language and Culture” (1994) note that there is a growing interest in the cultural dimension of language learning.** Curriculum designers and high education officials are dedicating significant time and effort to make this course a fundamental unit alongside license and master cycles. Educators recognize the importance of culture and civilization in developing students’ character and providing them with a better understanding of facts. Murphy (2009) contends that to understand a culture different from one’s own, it is essential to create a reciprocal exchange between the original culture and the culture being studied. Culture and Civilization enhance **students’ social skills** and civic feelings by recording all experiences and expertise of human beings to overcome challenges and obstacles throughout different spans of time in human history. The aim of this paper is to highlight the challenges encountered by L1 students at the University of Saida who are studying British and American culture and civilization for the first time. It delves into the negative attitude that students have towards the course and examines the teacher’s role in alleviating the stress experienced by students in these classes. Furthermore, it investigates ways to make the course more engaging and enjoyable.

1.1- Understanding Education: Its Meaning and Purpose

In its broad sense education is commonly defined **as** any act or experience that has a formative and constructive effect on the mind, character, or physical ability of an individual. From a technical perspective, education comes to mean the process through which a society purposefully passes and transmits what has already been accumulated of wisdom, knowledge, skills, and values throughout different generations through a network of institutions. Historically, education was considered as a very important value by almost all emerging modern nations since the Renaissance. This led to a focus on classical education, including the study of ancient Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, and art. As a discipline, education is concerned with teaching methods and learning in schools and similar learning environments (Encyclopedia Britannica 2007). It is generally agreed that education is a basic human right reinforced by different human right organizations and conventions. According to UNSCO, education is ‘a fundamental human right

and essential for the exercise of all other human rights' (UNESCO, 2015). Governments worldwide have intensified their focus on providing education to their citizens. However, learning mentors proposed a more general education rather than a specialized one to develop the learners' knowledge and forge culturally rich personalities capable of coping with the profound innovations in technology which change the *modus operandi* of society.

1.2- Integrating culture and civilization in Education: A necessity for the 21st century

Following the works of Byram and Kramersch in the 1980's, at the dawn of 21st century and apart from foreign language departments, the inclusion of civilization and culture courses has become an urgent claim (Targowsk, 2011). More in particular Murphy describes how 'Cultural learning becomes an educational objective in its own right, distinct from language acquisition' (2009).

Many technical universities throughout the world have already included this course as part of their teaching curricula. This trend (the study of civilization) was actually pioneered by **Arnold Toynbee** (1889- 1975). The call for the integration of culture in teaching was later renewed in order to attain to its benefits. Civilization courses develop logical thinking, enhance the power of analysis and make students involved and immersed in voluntary activities to preserve the national heritage. **According to Hirsch (1988)** "the most obvious function of history education is to pass on knowledge of the past to encourage the development of cultural literacy" (p. 64). By learning history, man gets all lessons of life. This helps him overcome problems of the present and to plan for his future life

1.3- Exploring the Dialectical Relationship between language and culture

In this article, culture and civilization are used interchangeably, where culture is a constituent of civilization, and language is a vital element of culture. According to Sapir (1949), culture refers to behavior peculiar to Homo sapiens, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior; specifically culture consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and so on (p.874). In his description of the close relationship between culture and language, Brown (1994) maintains that "A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the

significance of either language or culture” (p. 164). It is emphasized that including culture in language teaching is crucial as language is a reflection of culture. It is also argued that teaching language without cultural context is insufficient.

1.4- The Importance of Culture and Civilization in Algerian EFL Higher Education Curriculum

Civilization course is an important component of Algerian EFL higher education curriculum. It is a dual-task discipline that aims to improve both language and content, while also providing the students with opportunities to develop academic and life skills. “Culture and civilization” is considered one of the most challenging subjects for EFL students who may encounter it for the first time. It is worth noting that the need for teaching culture in language classes was not emphasized until 1980s, even though the teaching of civilization began much earlier at the universal level.

“Culture and Civilization” Syllabus aims to provide students with a general overview of English and American Cultures and Civilizations, respectively, from the Celtic era to the signing of the Magna Carta, and from Native America to the Declaration of Independence. The courses are chronologically designed to help learners have precise ideas and information on a wide range of key facts, events, and the processes that have shaped both periods of the aforementioned nations, Great Britain and the United States. Another aim of “culture and civilization” course is to introduce learners to concepts and notions related to this scope.

Thus, by the end of the academic year, students should have developed extensive background knowledge about both British and American civilizations, improved their English language proficiency, and grasped the content of the subject simultaneously.

1.5- The Significance of Studying Culture in Algerian EFL Classrooms

Most Algerian universities include the study of British and American civilization in their curriculum for the Faculty of Letters, Languages, and Arts. The course has three primary objectives, including, providing students with a foundation of knowledge about the culture and civilization of both nation, developing a positive attitude towards foreign languages, and enhancing the students ‘understanding of their own culture and identity. To achieve these goals, students must develop their learning capacities to comprehend civilization and give significance to this discipline. The primary goal of teaching English as a foreign

language is to develop both intercultural competence and language skills, including reading, speaking, **listening, and writing** which ultimately lead to the development of cultural awareness. Maalej (2016) argues that language learning should not be limited to linguistic competence but also encompass intercultural competence, which includes the ability to understand and navigate cultural differences. In this sense, culture and civilization are pervasive in language teaching EFL classes. It is, however important to select appropriate cultural materials where culture should be the message to students, and language the means or medium. Therefore, instructors must adopt effective approaches to teaching civilization that best suit their students' level and meet their expectations.

1.6- Teaching civilization Approaches

The teaching of culture and civilization in language classrooms has utilized different approaches. As defined by Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002), the term approach refers to the theories, philosophies, and principles that guide teaching practices .Different approaches have been used in the teaching of culture and civilization.

1.6.1–The Mono–cultural approach

This approach centers on the culture being studied and is based solely on comparing the learner's culture with the cultures of the countries whose languages are being learned emphasizes that foreign culture should be related to learner's own culture. Learners should not stick to one source of information but rather to their own culture and the foreign culture being studied in order to acquire a dual perspective.

1.6.2-The Thematic approach or the theme based approach

The thematic approach also known as the theme based approach centers specific themes or topics similar to education, religion, the art of living, rituals, beauty...etc.. Seelye (1993:133) suggests that the most effective way to teach the culture of a community is by categorizing it into major themes.

1.6.3- The Topic-based approach

The Topic-based approach in language teaching is based on more core themes that encompass cultural issues. For example, topics such as ,class, education, health and art are explored to provide a comprehensive view of the target culture,

specifically in contexts of British and American life respectively. In their book, *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, Eli Henkel & Sandra Fotos suggest that the topic based approach can be used to create authentic and meaningful language learning experience.

1.6.4 The problem-oriented approach

The problem-oriented approach aims to keep learners engaged with the target culture by focusing on specific problems that are relevant to them. This approach prevents learners from being overloaded with cultural information resulting from research (Kramsch, 1993).

1.6.5- The task-oriented approach

The task-oriented approach involves working in pairs or small groups. Where learners share their research and interpret the information in collaborative way.

1.6.6- The skill-centered approach

The skill-centered approach focuses on improving learners' abilities. This approach is more practical and requires learners to be immersed in the target-language community.

Despite the numerous and diverse approaches to teaching civilization, these methods have failed to achieve their desired goal, causing significant frustration and resentment among learners. The failure of these approaches may stem from a variety of vectors such as outdated or ineffective teaching materials, inadequate teacher training, or lack of emphasis on practical applications. As a result, students may feel that they are not gaining the knowledge and the skills necessary to engage with the complexities of civilization, which can be discouraging and demotivating. In their article 'Rethinking Higher Education in the Age of Technology,' Young & Cavanagh (2015) suggest that 'the traditional model of higher education is ripe for disruption' and those new approaches are needed to better serve students.

1.7- Understanding Students' Negative Attitudes lack of motivation towards civilization Course

Motivation can be defined as the driving force that compels an individual to take action or pursue a goal. In the context of learning a foreign language,

motivation plays a crucial role in determining the level of success an individual will achieve in acquiring proficiency in the language.

Kamel Daoud the famous Algerian author emphasizes the role of motivation in language learning. He argues that motivation is the key to unlocking the door to language learning and that without learning will struggle to learn a foreign language and may become frustrated and give up (The Guardian, 2019). Similarly, **Albert Camus (1955)** recognized the importance of motivation in language learning to achieve proficiency and overcome obstacles.

Many students around the world are unmotivated and approach civilization courses with resentment and disinterest. They view these courses as mandatory with little relevance with their personal interests and expectations. There are several reasons why students may not enjoy learning civilization mainly when teachers stick to old-fashioned methods. Paulo Freire (1970), a Brazilian philosopher and educator argued that traditional education often give priority to rote memorization.

Keeping the same line of thought, Haward Gardner, an American psychologist and professor at Harvard University thinks that traditional education bears a big responsibility because it often favors certain subject matters such as Mathematics, Natural Sciences and the like. This may lead students to disengagement and intolerance towards civilization classes.

Algerian students are dissatisfied with learning civilization courses, particularly under the LMD system. The researcher identified several reasons for this behavior, including challenges when switching from school to university, insufficient and limited background knowledge, and a lack of confidence in key skills in addition to viewing the teacher as the primary source of information. Furthermore, the quantity of students registered in these courses and who did not opt for this field of study, and inadequate school facilities. For example, when asked about the time allocated to civilization classes, L1 students gave different opinions as displayed in the following table:

| | Sufficient | Insufficient | Total |
|--------------------|------------|--------------|-------|
| Number of Students | 34 | 36 | 70 |

| | | | |
|------------|-----|-----|------|
| Percentage | 49% | 51% | 100% |
|------------|-----|-----|------|

Table 1: Students' Opinions about the Time that is Allocated to Study Civilisation

49% students thought that time allocated to civilization course is sufficient whereas 51% students believed one hour and half is not sufficient because of the load of module, the absences of the teachers, and the days- off.

1.8 Strategies for shifting Students' Negative Attitudes toward Civilization Course

Educators may face difficulties in changing students' negative attitudes towards civilization courses, but there are effective strategies that they can use to promote greater interest and involvement in these classes. One such method is to incorporate more active learning opportunities as group discussion, role playing exercises, and written projects (Bouزيد, 2021). Syllabus designers find it also important to introduce game- based learning and interactive quizzes in the curriculum to stimulate critical thinking and to develop problem solving skills in students. To shift students' negative attitudes towards civilization courses educators can also tailor the course content to the students' interest and backgrounds by incorporating topics and material that students find relevant and engaging, additionally, educators can encourage debates to develop a sense curiosity and openness to new ideas. It is important for educators to include practical methods. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, incorporating information and communication technologies (ICTs) into civilization courses can also be an effective way to engage students and shift their negative attitudes. For example, educators can use multimedia resources, such as videos and interactive websites to present the course in a dynamic and more engaging way. Online discussions and social media platforms are also effective means to encourage students' interaction and collaboration, which can help foster a sense of community and create a more positive learning environment.

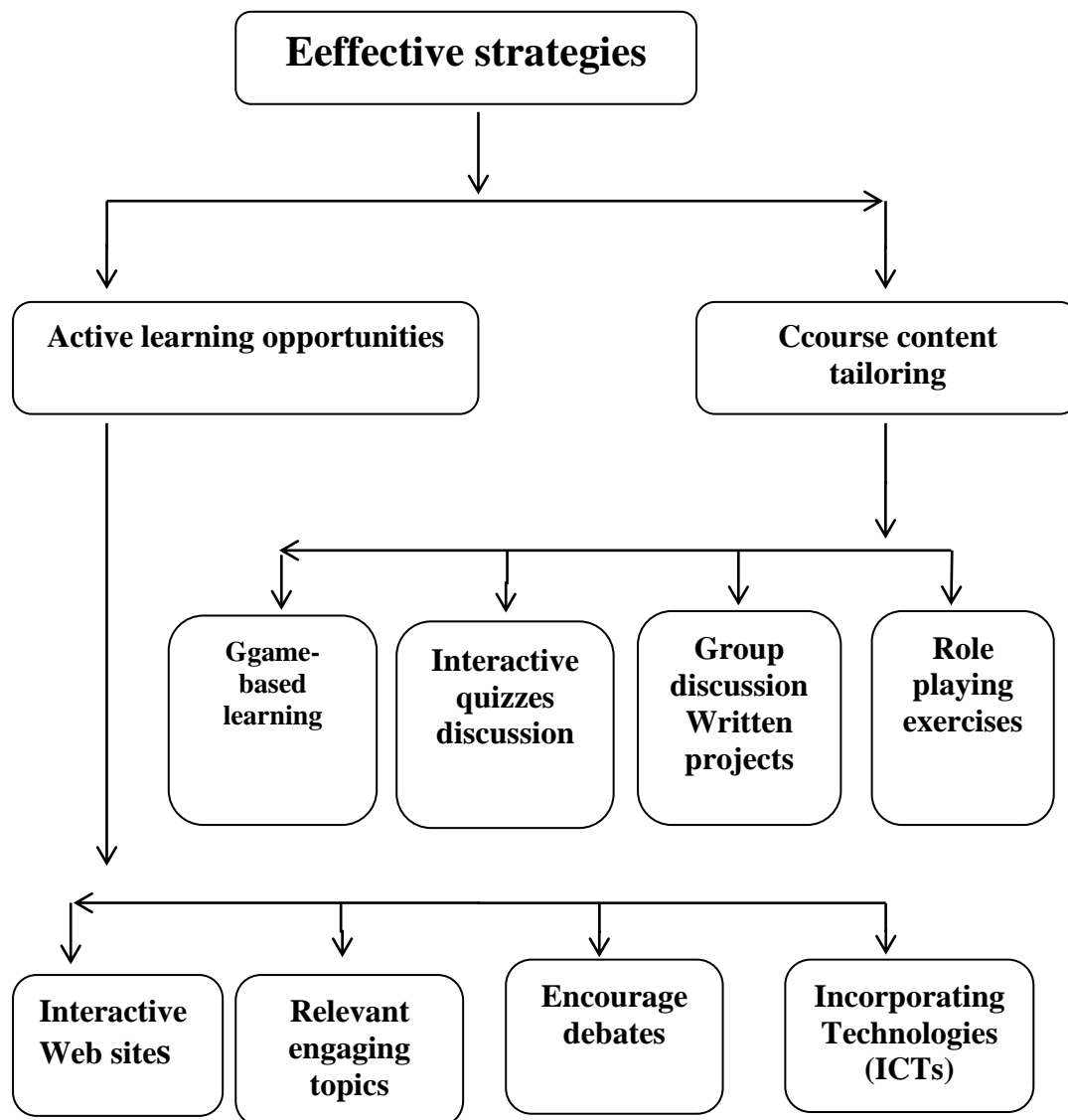
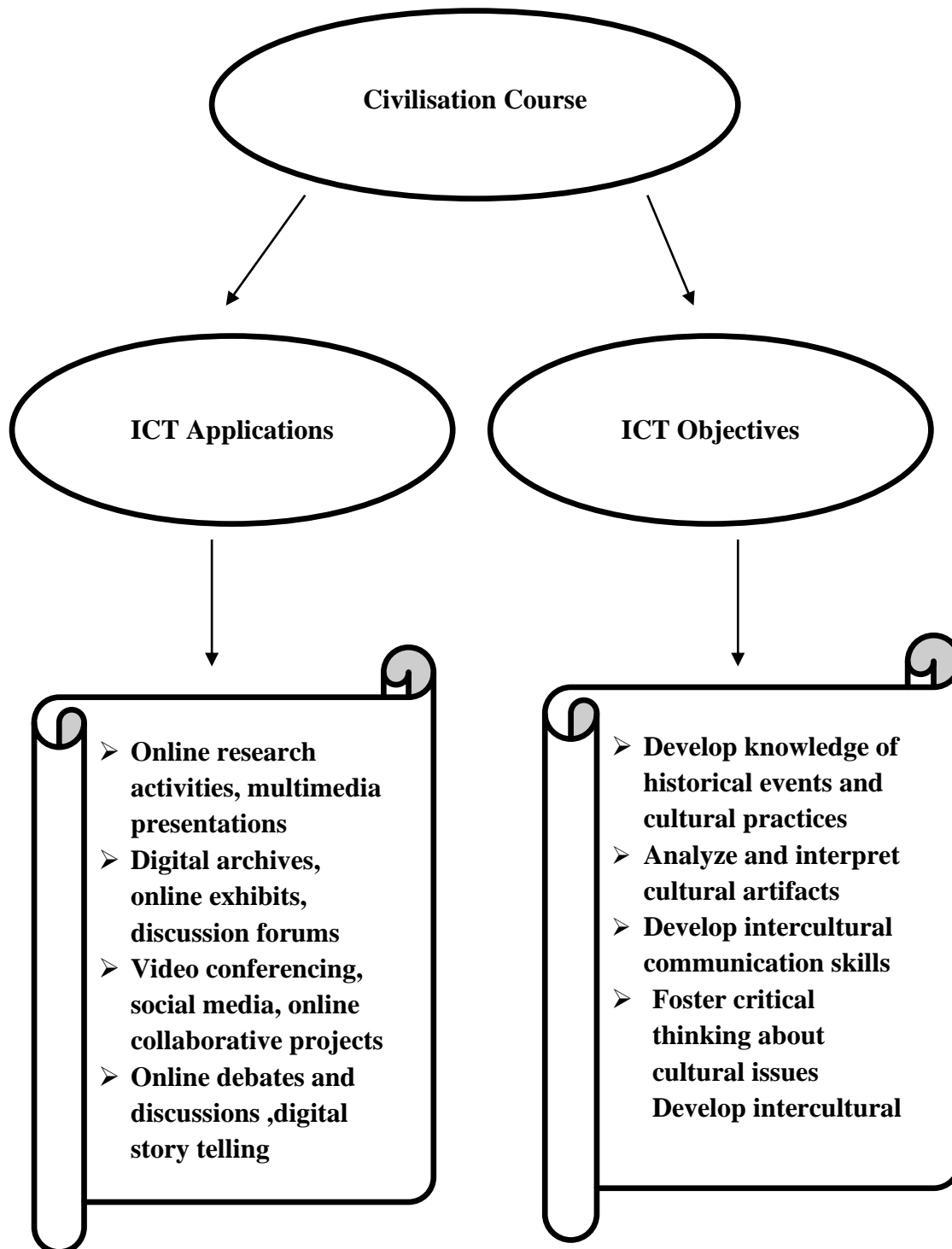


Diagram (1): Effective Strategies to change students ‘negative attitudes towards Civilization course

The following figure provides a helpful framework for instructors to align specific learning objectives with the appropriate ICT applications that can support civilization learners and ease their stress and frustration.

Figure (2): Learning Objectives and ICTs in Civilization Teaching



Source: self adapted

1.9- Challenges hindering the adoption of ICTs in Algerian schools and universities

Despite the ongoing efforts towards modernization by the Ministry of Higher Education, Algerian universities continue to struggle in keeping up with the rapid advancements in technology and the changing needs of the education sector (Mokhefi (2016).

Algeria faces several obstacles in effectively utilizing technological means in its educational system. One major hindrance is the lack of adequate infrastructure and connectivity, especially in rural areas where access to reliable internet services is limited. Another obstacle is the shortage of funding and resources allocated for the implementation of ICTs in schools and universities, which includes inadequate budgets for purchasing and maintaining necessary equipment and software. Additionally, many teachers and students lack the necessary ICT skills and knowledge to utilize technological means effectively. Some teachers may also refuse and even resist change and stick to traditional methods, consequently hindering progress towards digital transformation in education. Furthermore, economic and social factors such as poverty and inequality and limited access to education impede the use of technological means. In the light of these challenges, there is an urgent need for focused efforts and wise policies to overcome these obstacles and thus facilitate the successful implementation of ICTs in Algerian educational settings.

The integration of ICTs in civilization classes can bring numerous benefits. They can provide students with interactive and multimedia experiences, enhance their engagement. ICTs facilitate access to a wide range of cultural resources, including videos, audio recordings which can enrich students' understanding and appreciation of different cultures and civilizations.

1.10- Understanding Students' Negative Attitudes and lack of motivation towards civilization Course

The use of ICTs has increased significantly; particularly with the onset of COVID-19. Universities adopted some form of e-learning during the pandemic with video conferencing tools spearheading the use of ICTs in higher education. Various studies reported that students have favored video conferencing over face-to-face classes mainly in civilization courses. Students expressed high levels of satisfaction, because ICTs allow for greater flexibility in terms of where and when learning takes place.

4- Conclusion

In conclusion, while there may be challenges facing EFL students in Algerian universities when learning about civilization, there are also several strategies that can be employed to overcome these challenges. By making the subject more interesting, providing more resources, offering extracurricular activities and integrating technology, students can gain a better understanding of English speaking cultures and improve their language skills.

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Appendix of Tables and Figures:

1. What do you think about the amount of time allocated to the civilization course?

a. Sufficient

b. Insufficient

2. Do you enjoy the civilization course?

a. Yes

b. A little

c. Not at all

3. Why do you dislike the civilization course?

a. Because of its content

b. Because of the time allocated

c. Because of the lack of the teaching tools

d. Because of the teaching methods

e. Other

4. What are the tools used in your civilization course?

a. Audio tapes

b. Visual aids

c. authentic texts

d. Chalk and board

5. Are the tools used in your civilization course helpful in acquiring cultural Information?

a. Yes

b. No

6. Are you satisfied with the teacher's methods in learning about foreign cultures (American & British Cultures)?

- a . Very interested
- b. Somewhat interested
- c. Not interested at all

7. Do you enjoy learning about different aspects of foreign cultures (American & British cultures) via:

- a. The Internet
- b. Television
- c. Documentaries
- d. Books
- e. Movies
- f. None of the above

8. The civilization module is interesting because:

- a. It enriches your vocabulary
- b. It makes you know about the history of British and American people
- c. It makes you understand the culture of British and American people
- d. It raises your awareness to cultural differences
- e. It does all of the above

Teachers' Questionnaire

What are the biggest obstacles you face when teaching civilization? Please rank the following from most to least challenging:

- (a) Lack of student interest,
- (b) Limited access to resources,
- (c) Lack of time to cover material,
- (d) Student diversity,
- (e) Other (please specify).

In your opinion, what topics related to civilization are the most challenging to teach? Why?

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How do you incorporate diverse perspectives and cultural awareness into your teaching of civilization?

.....

How do you address sensitive or controversial topics related to civilization in your classroom?

.....

What strategies have you found to be effective in engaging students and promoting critical thinking when teaching about civilization?

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What resources do you use to support your teaching of civilization, and how accessible are they to you?

.....

In your experience, what are some common misconceptions that students have about civilization, and how do you address them in your teaching?

.....

How do you adapt your teaching of civilization to meet the needs of diverse learners in your classroom?

.....

What professional development opportunities or resources have you found to be helpful in improving your teaching of civilization?

.....

In your opinion, what support or resources would be most helpful in overcoming obstacles when teaching civilization?

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