The Role of Intercultural Competence in Teaching Literary Texts: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives
Le Rôle de la Compétence Interculturelle dans l'Enseignement des Textes Littéraires : le Point de Vue des Enseignants et des Etudiants

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Abstract:

Developing the teaching of literature through intercultural competency could be a powerful tool for achieving a well intercultural understanding, appreciation, and awareness. It could help people to develop the competency that they need for participating in meaningful intercultural communication. This study intends to argue that teaching literature through intercultural communication competence provides an excellent opportunity to foster the skills that Algerian students will need to comprehend and analyse literary texts. The findings were collected through two questionnaires administrated to a sample of EFL students and teachers from various universities in Algeria. The main conclusion we reached is that, intercultural competence has a pivotal contribution in teaching literature; teachers of literature should give the crucial role of culture in their teaching practices so that EFL students raise their intercultural competence in the EFL classroom as well as maintain positive attitudes to successfully interact with people from other cultures.

Keywords:

English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Teaching Literary Texts, Culture, Intercultural Competence.

Résumé:

Développer l'enseignement de la littérature à travers la compétence interculturelle pourrait être un outil puissant pour parvenir à une compréhension, une appréciation et une prise de conscience interculturelles. Cela pourrait aider les gens à développer les compétences dont ils ont besoin pour participer à une communication interculturelle significative. Cette étude entend soutenir que

l'enseignement de la littérature à travers la compétence de communication interculturelle offre une excellente opportunité de développer les compétences dont les étudiants algériens auront besoin pour comprendre et analyser des textes littéraires. Les résultats ont été collectés à travers deux questionnaires administrés à un échantillon d'étudiants et d'enseignants du l'anglais comme langue étrangère de diverses universités en Algérie. La principale conclusion à laquelle nous sommes parvenus est que la compétence interculturelle a une contribution essentielle dans l'enseignement de la littérature; les enseignants de littérature devraient donner le rôle crucial de la culture dans leurs pratiques d'enseignement afin que les étudiants du l'anglais comme langue étrangère élèvent leurs compétences interculturelles dans la classe du l'anglais comme langue étrangère et maintiennent des attitudes positives pour interagir avec succès avec des personnes d'autres cultures.

Mots Clés:

Anglais comme Langue Etrangère, Enseignement de Textes Littéraires, Culture, Compétence interculturelle.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

In recent years, the teaching of literature has taken great attention among researchers and teachers in the English foreign language (EFL) classroom. Literature can be viewed as an essential source of "authentic material" in ELT because it carries two main features within its written text; on one hand, "language in use" that is, the linguistic features (grammar, morphology, phonology, and phonetics), on the other hand, the aesthetic representation of the spoken language within a certain cultural context (Collie and Slater, 1988).

It is now becoming taken for granted that teaching literary texts can, by no means, be limited to the study of the linguistic and literary features of the text. Currently, university teachers of foreign language (FL) teach in a pedagogical environment where two areas have developed; the first one is the emphasis on communicative competence, and the other is shedding light on the importance of exposure to culture. EFL Teachers seem to be more aware of the need of providing

students with cultural backgrounds about the foreign language they are learning. In fact, being conscious of the importance of intercultural competence in teaching literature is a prerequisite for any language teacher and learner, because learning any language is dependent on cultural values.

This study aims to cast light on the vital role of intercultural competence in the teaching of literature in EFL classrooms. To achieve the best results, this research followed a mixed method; two questionnaires were directed at 25 teachers of literature and 40 EFL students from different universities in Algeria. In line with this aim, the research questions for this paper can be formulated as follows:

- Is culture integration in EFL teaching important? Why?
- What is the role of intercultural competence in the teaching of literary texts to EFL learners?

2. Culture in English Language Teaching and Learning

2.1 Defining Culture:

Culture has received many definitions from different perspectives by scholars. Certainly, Williams (1976) claims that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" as cited in Kumaravadivelu (2008, p 9). So, it is not an easy task to define the concept of culture. Edvard Tylor (2010) has offered the oldest and the original definition of culture, he states that "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 2010). Moreover, Liddicoat et al (2003) define culture as "a complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals, and lifestyles of the people, who make up a cultural group, as well as the artifacts they produce and the institutions they create" (p. 45). Thus, culture

is an integral part of the fibers of our being and every area of our lives and also in the forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal.

Additionally, Hall (1976, 3) focuses on the significance of cultural understanding, He argues that today's global issues cannot be dealt with unless there is a clear understanding of the diverse ways of thinking.

> [Culture] it is not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are interrelated – you touch culture in one place and everything else is affected; it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups. Hall (1976, p 16)

Hall's opinion on culture is a bit broader, he stresses not only one culture but rather different cultures, and how they affect each other.

Two categories of culture have been distinguished; the Big C culture and the Small c culture (Kun, 2013). The former stands for general knowledge of the arts and literature. It is usually taught in standard national languages (Kramsch, 2012). The latter, the Small c culture is linked with "the culture of English, including the economic, society, politics, history, heroes, writers, and artists in English-speaking countries" (Kun, 2013, p.197). Therefore, the small c culture comprised all that is related to people's way of life including behaviours, eating habits, beliefs, attitudes, customs, and traditions (Kramsch, 2012).

In fact, it is important for EFL teachers to know how to integrate culture into their teaching process. They can guide their students through multiple activities which need their thinking and reflection about certain issues related to their own culture. Frank (2013, p. 3) summarizes the main points that EFL teachers should

focus on in order to guide their learners while teaching culture through the following questions:

- What behaviors reflect our culture, and how are they learned and shared?
- What important factors (social, religious, and economic) influence our culture?
- What are some important traditions that are unique to our country?
- What ideals and values bind our culture together?
- How does culture in our country function as a way for humans to live with one another?
- What symbols are prevalent in our culture?

Hence, if EFL learners are skillful to discuss issues like what Frank (2013) has mentioned, they will be encouraged to think not only about their own culture but also about other cultures. In this way, integrating culture in ELT will open doors to new horizons for EFL students to enhance their level of intercultural competence and help them to look at other cultures from different angles.

2.2 Defining Intercultural Competence:

Nowadays, incorporating intercultural competence (IC) in EFL classes is highly recommended by EFL teachers. Studies on intercultural communication are conducted in multiple areas of academic disciplines; such as education, communication studies, sociology, cultural anthropology, and behavioral psychology, this is what makes the term intercultural competence too complex to define.

Intercultural competence is defined by Byram as "the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to

interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (Byram, 2000). In other terms, intercultural competent learners need to get insights on both, their own culture and the other culture(s), and to look at the other not only from their own perspective but from more than one perspective. According to Fatini (1997):

> A concern with cross-cultural effectiveness and appropriateness _coupled with second or foreign language development- will, I hope, lead beyond tolerance and understanding to a genuine appreciation of others. For this to happen, we need to develop the awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will make us better participants on a local and global level, able to understand and empathize with others in new ways. Exposure to more than one language, culture, and world view, a positive context, offers such a promise. (p13)

Accordingly, intercultural competence is based on understanding and appreciating intercultural differences, and that will promote successful intercultural communication and breaks down barriers between different cultures.

2.2.1 Dimensions of Intercultural Competence:

In her book, *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural Adaption*, Kim (2001) defined intercultural competence as the general internal ability of an individual to manage the main challenging features of intercultural communication: that is, cultural differences, unfamiliarity, intergroup situation, and the accompanying experience of stress. These three dimensions of intercultural communicative competence ICC; cognitive

dimension, affective dimension, and behavioral dimension have different patterns of performance. Those three dimensions are:

a. Cognitive Dimension:

Kim (2001) suggested that the Cognitive dimension is the knowledge dimension of ICC, which encompasses intercultural awareness, general knowledge, and specific cultural knowledge (the knowledge of the target language and culture). However, knowledge of the target language goes beyond linguistics, phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary to include the pragmatic use of the language. The knowledge of culture includes the degree of understanding the target culture's history, tradition, customs, beliefs, etc.

b. Affective Dimension:

The Affective dimension refers to the motivation to learn, attitude towards intercultural communication, individual's curiosity towards other culture, cognitive flexibility and being open-minded. Emotional competence facilitates adaptation across cultures by providing an emotional and motivational capacity to deal with the various challenges of intercultural exchanges. (Kim 2001)

c. Behavioral Dimension:

Behavioral competence is the ability of communicators to outwardly activate or express their cognitive and emotional experience when communication begins. It has the capabilities to be flexible and resourceful in implementing what it is actually capable of doing in the cognitive and affective dimensions. (Kim 2001).

2.2.2 Intercultural competence Practice in EFL Classroom:

With the intention to foster intercultural awareness in EFL class, one question relevant to the present study is how can EFL teachers integrate culture successfully into the foreign language class? To raise intercultural communicative competence in our learners, it is beneficial to provide some appropriate guidelines for culture teaching, the following guidelines are mainly based on Lessard-Clouston (1997):

- First, learners should acquire some skills in culturally appropriate communication.
- Second, to avoid what Lessard-Clouston (1997) calls 'a laissez-faire approach' when it comes to teaching methodology, and to deal with culture teaching in a systematic and structured way.
- Third, to include evaluation of culture learning as a necessary component of the foreign culture teaching, providing students with feedback and keeping teachers accountable in their teaching.

3. Methodology:

The main objective of this part is to examine the status of culture and the role of intercultural competence in EFL classrooms, mainly in the teaching of literary texts in Algerian Universities. Two questionnaires were designed for a sample of 25 teachers and 40 students from various universities across Algeria. A common part of both questions was intentionally made to see if students' and teachers' views on culture and its teaching converged.

Participants		
Type of Participants	**Degree**	**University**

Teachers	**25 Teachers**	**Doctorate = 19** **Professor = 06**	**Different universities in Algeria, mainly from:** Setif 2, M'sila, Constantine, Biskra, Ouargla, Batna 2, Tlemcen, Tiaret, Bejaia, Khenchela, Algiers 2, Ain Temouchent.
Students	**40 Students**	**Master Students = 14** **3rd Year Licence (L3)=11** **2nd Year Licence (L2)= 15**	

Table n° 01: Details about the Participants of the Study

3.1 Questionnaires:

The questionnaires were directed to teachers as well students mainly around the following axes:

Description of the Questionnaires	
Teachers	**Students**
Q1: Are your students interested in literature courses?	**Q1: Are you interested in literature courses?**
The aim behind this question is to evaluate learners' level of interest in studying literature, whether they care to learn and participate in literature courses, or they find literature as a supplementary course.	
Q2: In your own opinion, what are the difficulties that impede your learners' understanding of literary texts?	**Q2: What are the most important difficulties that impede you to understand literary texts?**

This question was asked for both teachers and learners in order to check the major difficulties that learners face when studying literary texts, so that, teachers should overwhelmed these problems.	
Q3: Is integrating culture in EFL teaching important? Why or why not?	Q4: Do you enjoy learning about other cultures?
Teachers were asked about the level of culture's importance EFL teaching for recognizing the role of culture in EFL classes.	Students were asked if they enjoy learning about other cultures to check their opinions and the extent of their openness towards others' culture.
Q4: Does intercultural competence have an important role in teaching literary texts?	Q4: Do you think that learning about the foreign language culture is important? Why or why not?
The last question was asked in order to assess the teachers' views on the significance of intercultural competence in teaching literary texts.	The last question was asked in order to assess the students' views on the importance of learning about other foreign cultures.

Table n° 02: Description of the Questionnaires

4. Results:

The first question was asked to the teachers as well as the students in order to assess the students' level of interest in the literature courses. Figure 01 shows the students' level of interest in literature courses.
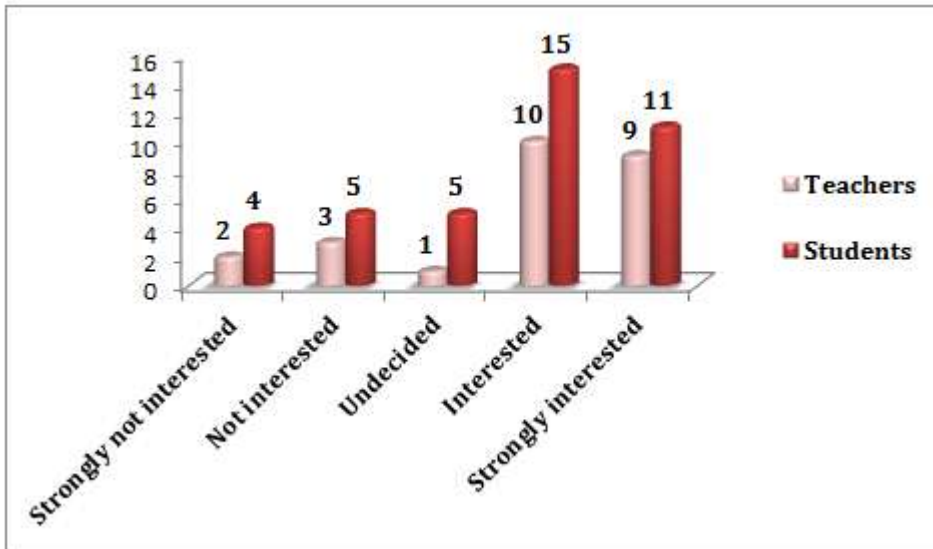
Figure n° 01: Students' Level of Interest in Literature Courses

Figure n° 01 shows that EFL students in Algeria are interested in studying literature. According to teachers, most students are highly interested in studying literary texts (09 of the students are strongly interested and 10 of them are interested). Correspondingly, students approve the teachers' point of view, (11 of the students are strongly interested and 15 of them are interested).

The following question aims to discover the main problems that hinder the full comprehension of literary texts for EFL learners. The main difficulties have been proposed to both teachers and students (see table n° 03):

Problems	Comments	
	Teachers (N°)	**Students (N°)**
Lack of background knowledge and cultural awareness of foreign cultures.	8 (32%)	12 (30%)
Linguistic complexity of a literary text	4 (16%)	5 (12.5%)
Texts that are not culturally related to students' interests	3 (12%)	5 (12.5%)
Lack of vocabulary	4 (16%)	8 (20%)
Unavailability of materials to teach literature	1 (4%)	3 (7.5%)
Low language proficiency levels of students	3 (12%)	4 (10%)
Cultural prejudices about foreign literature	2 (8%)	3 (7.5%)

Table n° 03: Students' and Teachers' Evaluation on the Problems of Understanding Literary Texts

The main problem that was chosen mainly by both students and teachers (8 teachers and 12 students) is the lack of background knowledge and cultural awareness of foreign cultures. The lack of vocabulary, linguistic complexity of the literary text, and texts that are not culturally related to students' interests have also gained attention students' and teachers' attention to be seen as difficulties in understanding literary texts. Other problems mentioned have received a low percentage of teachers' and students' reviews.

Regarding whether incorporating culture into EFL teaching is important or not, most teachers recognize the importance of integrating culture into the teaching of literature in order to successfully develop their students' motivation to learn foreign literature and improve their skills in understanding literary texts.

When asked if students enjoy learning about other cultures, most students (87%) answered positively with a great desire to learn more about other cultures, and they assert that learning about other foreign cultures is so important, as Figure 2 illustrates:
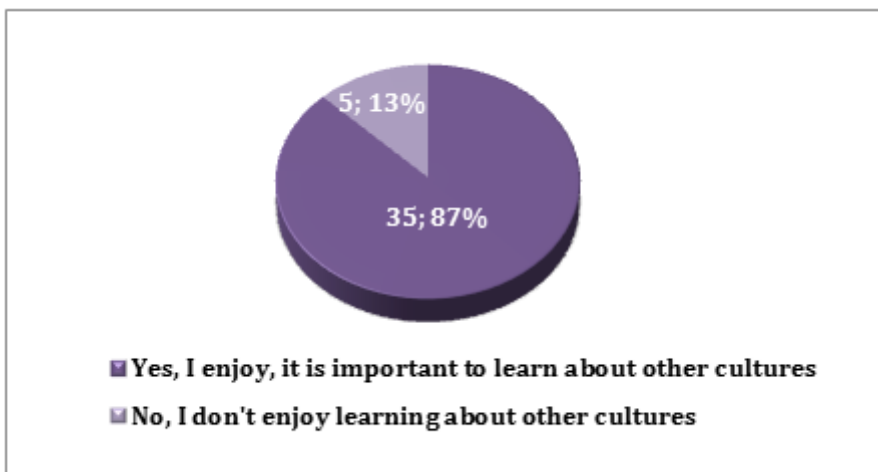

Figure 02: Evaluation of Students' Enjoyment in Learning other Cultures

The vast majority of teachers (21 out of 25 teachers) agree on the importance of intercultural competence in teaching literary texts because it opens doors and new horizons for EFL learners to learn about other cultures and their backgrounds so that it is easier for students to understand literary texts.

5. Discussion:

According to the results discussed above, although EFL students are greatly interested in studying literature, they have some problems that they encounter while reading and trying to understand the meaning of literary texts. In order to resolve these serious matters, responsibility must be shared between teachers, learners, and curriculum designers. The syllabus should include well-designed

literary texts of interest to learners, taking into account the level of difficulty of these selected texts as well as learners' current abilities and levels of mastery of language.

Both teachers and learners understand the importance of integrating culture into EFL teaching because it is the key to seeing other cultures from different angles. It helps to increase learners' motivation, gain new vocabulary, and master the target language. Furthermore, it is considered a rich resource for developing the ability to communicate appropriately in exotic cultural environments. It also encourages them to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. That is to say, culture has a great influence on how we think, act, perceive and communicate, in addition, it affects teachers and learners; for the students, it affects their motivation, either positively or negatively, and for the teachers, culture shapes and guides teachers' behaviours in the classroom because teachers bring all their cultural beliefs, values and practices with them, so it reflects their teaching pedagogy. So, the cultural standards of society guide its educational norms.

Additionally, from the EFL teachers' point of view, Intercultural competence has a very important role in teaching literary texts. Literature can only be fully assimilated, understood, and restricted by bringing it into a theoretical relationship with cultural, social, and historical events. Intercultural competence helps EFL learners to develop their abilities in understanding literary texts from different angles, because if students have a little background about the target culture, they will not catch the exact meaning of the literary work, and their interpretation will remain only superficial and not an accurate interpretation that reveals the hidden meaning. Subsequently, intercultural competence encourages learners to communicate effectively, be intercultural competent, and overcome culture shocks.

6. Conclusion:

This paper set out to examine the role of intercultural competence in the teaching of literary texts. Results revealed the high position that intercultural competence plays to facilitate the process of teaching and learning literature. EFL learners' motivation, level, interest, and aptitudes should be taken into account in selecting literary works.

Literature and culture are correlated; therefore, this paper recommends that enhancing the students' intercultural competence should be the objective of all foreign language literature teachers to help learners gain knowledge and backgrounds about the target culture, also, to put down all barriers that could result from the students' ignorance of the target culture, as well as to be opened to other values, so that it will simplify literary texts' perception and understanding of the deep meaning. This study concludes that more work with intercultural competence is required in future EFL teaching, and further studies are needed for the improvement of students' intercultural competence.

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