

*A Cross Cultural Communication Course for Promoting
Interculturality in the EFL Classroom: Students' Perceptions Vs
Teachers' Aspirations*

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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting the results of a study conducted at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine, Setif 2 University. The study analyses the feedback collected from Master1 students regarding the cross cultural communication course they had been taking during their first semester. The course was designed with the ultimate objective of promoting interculturality in the foreign language classroom, discussing hot issues in cross cultural communication, like identity, stereotypes, culture, immigration, and the east Vs west dichotomy. The study also raised the concern of teachers regarding the attitudes of students toward such a course, its objectives, and its role in promoting interculturality in foreign language learning.

Keywords: Interculturality, Cross Cultural Communication, Foreign Language Learning

Résumé:

Cet article vise à présenter les résultats d'une étude menée à l'Université Mohamed Lamine Debaghine, Setif 2, et qui consiste à analyser le feedback recueillis auprès des étudiants de Master1, concernant le cours de communication interculturelle qu'ils avaient suivi au cours de leur premier semestre. Et dont l'objectif ultime est de promouvoir l'interculturalité en classe de langue étrangère, sur des aspects suscitant de la controverse tels que: l'identité, les stéréotypes, la culture, l'immigration et la dichotomie Orient/Occident. L'étude a également révélé un souci et des questionnements de la part des enseignants quant à l'attitude des étudiants à l'égard de la thématique du cours, de ses objectifs et de son rôle dans la promotion de l'interculturalité dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères.

Mots-clés : Interculturalité ; Communication Interculturelle ; Apprentissage des Langues Etrangères.

1. Introduction

In a globalized world, one cannot ignore the importance of cross cultural communication in bridging up different cultures, and narrowing down their differences. Whether in business, communication; or in education, interculturality became indispensable. Interculturality is one

of the key concepts in contemporary education, as part of a wider debate on globalization and its impact on society and education, in a widely mobile world. The importance of promoting interculturality has been recognized worldwide, Algeria is no exception; with new master programs incorporating courses like Cross cultural communication, one can see the opening up toward this issue, and the initiative to discuss it in educational settings, the university as a case in point.

2. Theoretical background:

➤ **Cross Cultural Communication and Intercultural Communication**

Myron W. and Koester (2010) define intercultural communication in their book *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication across Cultures* as “a symbolic, interpretative, transactional, contextual process,” which implies the engagement of culturally-different people. On the other hand, they define cross-cultural communication as “the study of a particular idea or concept within many cultures...in order to compare one culture to another. Whereas intercultural communication involves interactions among people from different cultures, cross-cultural communication involves a comparison of interactions among people from the same culture to those from another culture.” Ibid

That is to say Cross-cultural communication deals with the comparison of different cultures, in which differences are understood and acknowledged, and can bring about individual change, whereas intercultural communication deals with a deeper curiosity toward different cultures and respecting their norms and values. In cross-cultural societies, one culture is often considered “the norm” and all other cultures are compared or contrasted to the dominant culture. According to Myron W. and Koester (2010) **Intercultural** describes communities in which there is a deep understanding and respect for all cultures; hence it focuses on the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of deep relationships. In an intercultural society, no one is left unchanged because everyone learns from one another and grows together.

➤ **Interculturality and Foreign Language Teaching**

It has been long recognized by linguists and anthropologists that the linguistic forms and uses of a given language mirror the social context where the language is spoken (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 5); when people are talking to each other their social identities[sic] are unavoidably part of the social interaction between them. In language teaching the concept of ‘communicative competence’ takes this into account by emphasizing that language learners need to acquire not just the grammatical competence but also the knowledge of what is ‘appropriate’ language, appropriate in terms of context and culture.

Furthermore, one of the main concerns of today's research does not revolve around the kind of relation that governs language and culture, for it has long been recognized that language and culture are inseparable, but it rather has to do with what perceptions foreign language instructors hold concerning target culture integration, and how these integration may contribute in raising students' intercultural awareness.

It is very important to integrate the target culture within language study. Yet, the native culture should be integrated and emphasized so that learners can establish and perceive themselves as being distinct from the others and ultimately generate comprehensive comparisons. This view was adopted by many researchers, mainly by Kramch who stated that "teaching culture should be regarded as difference...the temptation is great to view culture only in terms of national traits; French do this; Germans do that. However, traditional questions like 'what does it mean to be French/ to be German?' Become increasingly difficult to answer. (1993, p. 206)

Since the development of communicative language teaching, the definition of the profession of teaching took another dimension, surpassing the traditional meaning of instruction. Hence "learners need not just knowledge and skill in grammar of a language but need also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways" (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 1997, p. 4). *The 'intercultural dimension' in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a simple identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity.*" (Byram, 2002, p9). As a matter of fact, interculturality in the foreign language classroom aims at helping students understand how interaction takes place, how social identities are part of interactions, and how to be able to participate in these interactions despite the cultural differences, perspectives and social values. Promoting the intercultural dimension in the foreign language classroom may contribute in making students more open minded toward otherness, and toward cultural differences. Teachers as Byram (2002) stated should help students acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives; they should be able to see their own cultural from a critical point of view, while being open and tolerant toward other cultures.

3. The Cross Cultural Communication Course :

The Cross cultural communication course used in the current study was first introduced in the programs of Master 1 during this academic year 2016-2017, to students of both specialties: language sciences and literature Civilization .The course includes one lecture and one tutorial weekly and is taught for one semester. This course aims at making the students aware about misconceptions and distortions that arise among differing cultures; thus, it provides them with the necessary tools that intellectually stimulate and improve their intercultural awareness. Furthermore, this course aims at getting students exposed to the cultural differences between their own culture and the target culture, in addition to this; it seeks to make students aware of the importance of cross cultural communication, and making them better intercultural communicators. The content of this course was developed as to incorporate 14 topics. See table 1.

Table 1: Topics Covered During the Semester

1	Understating Cross cultural communication, Intercultural Communication, and Multiculturalism
2	A conceptualization of Culture
3	Big C culture Vs Small C culture
4	Identity (the concept, identity development theories, types of identity)
5	Stereotyping, Prejudices, and Misunderstanding
6	The East Vs The West(origin of the dichotomy, cultural differences, political implications, hot issues between the west and the east)
7	Body language and non-verbal communication across cultures
8	Globalization, Media, and Cross cultural communication
9	Religion and Cross cultural communication
10	Norms and Values across cultures
11	Immigration: acculturation and enculturation
12	The cultural shock and the reverse cultural shock
13	Challenges of cross cultural communication for EFL Learners
14	Achieving cross cultural communication

4. Aims of the study:

This study is a concretization of the contention that students and teachers perceptions should be taken into consideration in planning, designing, and implementing new courses. Apart from serving as a professional development contribution to the researcher by making the experience better for both students and teachers in taking this course.

Hence, the present study aims at:

- ✓ Unveiling the perceptions of master students' towards the course of Cross Cultural Communication.
- ✓ Pointing out at students' understanding of the cross cultural communication course , and how was it perceived in terms of its role in promoting interculturality in the EFL classroom, by exploring the teachers' objectives, students' attitudes, and the possible positive impact achieved at the end of the course.

5. Research questions:

- ✓ The present study is guided by two research questions, to achieve the above mentioned aims; how did Master 1 students perceive the course of Cross Cultural Communication?
- ✓ How did the teachers perceive their students' attitudes towards the course's objectives and content, and its role in promoting interculturality in the classroom?

6. Methodology

The present study followed a mixed method approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Questionnaires were administrated to a sample of 80 students, and interviews were conducted with the teacher who taught the course. Participants in the current study are first year master students, specialized in language sciences and Literature /civilization in the department of English Language and Literature at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine. Setif 2 University. The whole number of the population is 140 students, but the real number of those who are regularly attending is 110.

Data were collected using a questionnaire for students, this questionnaire was self designed by the researcher, and contains 15 items. Covering the following areas: students' perceptions toward the course, students understanding of Cross Cultural Communication, students' perceptions of the course's objectives, and students' recognition of the role of this course in raising their openness towards others, towards cultural differences, and toward raising their self awareness about their own culture. The newly designed questionnaire has a satisfactory psychometric characteristic with a Cronbach Alpha of .72 and a total variance contribution of 74% hence it can be safe to say that it is a reliable tool.

Table 2 : Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.72	.72	15

Table 3 : Total Variance Explained

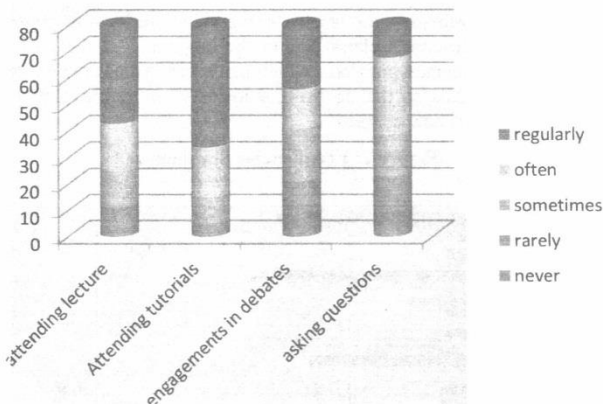
Component	Initial Eigenvalues	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	20.715	2.900	20.715	20.715
2	36.253	2.175	15.538	36.253
3	47.908	1.632	11.654	47.908
4	57.913	1.401	10.005	57.913
5	66.832	1.249	8.919	66.832
6	74.103	1.018	7.271	74.103

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

The study took place in February 2017 at the department of English language and literature, Setif 2 University. The questionnaires were administrated with the help of another teacher, during the lecture, and the return rate of questionnaires was 100 %. Students took 15 minutes to finish completing the questionnaire. Quantitative Data collected were processed using the statistical package of Social Sciences (SPSS), the answers from the open ended question were analyzed qualitatively, and data collected from the interview were analyzed using the thematic method of qualitative data analysis.

7. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

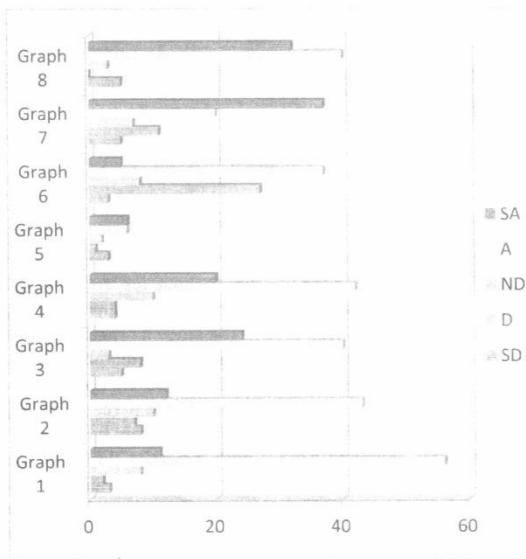
✓ Students' Attendance and Engagement in the course: Figure 1: Frequency of Attendance and Engagement in the Course



As displayed above in figure(1), the frequencies for attending the lecture and the tutorial of the cross cultural communication course denote satisfactory levels, with 46% of the students regularly attending, 23% attending often, and 18 % sometimes attending the lecture. Likewise, in the tutorial session, 57% of the students regularly attended, 23 % attending often, and 12% sometimes. These percentages exhibit a positive inclination toward the course, which can be interpreted in relation to answers compiled from item 6, whereby the majority of the students shared their high interest and motivation to learn about other cultures, an incentive attitude also confirmed via the teacher's interview. The reluctant engagement exhibited in the students who rarely or never attended may be attributed to the negative attitudes of some students toward other cultures expressed again in answers to item 6, and can be further inferred from lack of interest and motivation in debating issues related to cross cultural communication. These results are confirmed by Toomey (2012) who argued that many students can show a slight panic or sometimes a "fear of identity loss" when the teacher presents target cultural facts that are not similar to their native culture, the students may avoid attending the lecture solely because of the cultural differences, and small c culture issues presented in the course. Another possible cause for students' limited engagement may be due to students' not understanding of the concept of cross cultural

communication, and the objectives, results from answers to item 7 denote that 18% of the students did not understand what is cross cultural communication, where 12% remained uncertain regarding what the course was about. This may have affected their interest in the course, and hence caused the reluctant attendance, and engagement in the course. Accordingly, the teacher's interview confirm this possible reason, via the teacher's claim that in the beginning of the course, many students' seemed puzzled, which made her explain the course's objectives in details so that to make students comfortable, and more open to taking this new course.

Figure 2: Frequencies Summarized



Graphs in the above figure refer to:

- ✓ G 1 awareness of the courses objectives
- ✓ G2 understanding of cross cultural communication
- ✓ G3 awareness of the importance of cross cultural communication
- ✓ G4 Impact of this course on students' understanding of otherness
- ✓ G5 impact of this course on students' openness to cultural differences
- ✓ G6 awareness of one's own culture
- ✓ G7 awareness of other cultures

✓ G8: motivation to learn about other cultures

➤ **Students' awareness of the courses' objectives, understanding of Cross cultural communication, and Motivation to learn about other cultures:**

Graph (1) investigated the extent to which students are aware of the course's objectives, results show that 72% of the students are aware, conversely only 6 % shared their unawareness of the course's objectives, this findings is further confirmed by the understanding of cross cultural communication, graph (2) where the majority of the participants exhibited a high understanding of the course, where 63% of them positively responded to the question. Notwithstanding these results, it is crucial to mention that 6% of the students were unaware of the course's objectives, and 18% didn't understand at all what is Cross cultural communication, where 10 % remained uncertain. This may be due the lack of interest in the course, or to the negative attitudes some students' may have toward other cultures, an exhibited percentage of 10 % of the students said they are not motivated to learn about other cultures, and 20% who shared their unawareness about other cultures clearly shown in graph (7) . The results are not different from what many scholars found so far, Ho (2010) who thinks that when students are introduced to other cultures that are different from theirs; they would feel psychologically frustrated, and lack motivation to learn.

➤ **Students' awareness of the importance of cross cultural communication**

As displayed in graph (3) is rather compelling, with 30 % who strongly believe that cross cultural communication is important for them, and other 50 % agreeing to the statement. This is indeed supported by many scholars, Byram (2002) who endorse the idea, and state that it is essential to "introduce the Intercultural Dimension into language teaching, to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages onequal terms and to be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors". Only 7% of the students believe that Cross cultural communication is not important for them, may be this is due to their lack of interest in learning about other cultures, their fear of losing their own identity, or their ignorance of the importance of cross cultural communication.

➤ **Impact of this course on students' understanding of otherness and their openness to cultural differences**

As shared by the students in their answers to items (14, 15) and displayed in graph (4,5) , the impact of this course on students' understanding of otherness is rather remarkable; with 75 % of the participants admitting that the cross cultural communication course they have been taking during the first semester contributed in making

them more open to cultural differences, and accordingly having an impact of their understanding of otherness with 82% of the students thence agreeing to the statement. These results was later confirmed with the teacher's interview who asserted "my students showed more openness when we talked about cultural differences, an openness that I didn't perceive in the beginning of this course", they even become more aware of their own culture, they started to understand what differentiated them from others, this is supported by Seiki (2010, p 202) who believed that *"part of understanding another culture is to know your own culture to compare and understand the mechanisms that form this belief or action. This means looking within yourself for credibility, or asking why you act in certain ways. Knowing your own distinct culture characteristics and values is the first step in achieving CCC"*. This perceived impact from both students and teacher is supported by views of researchers who believe that cross cultural communication, and intercultural dimension in the foreign language classroom affect positively the students, Nakamura (1998) working with Japanese students, asserted that allowing students to engage themselves in cross cultural issues results in a deep understanding of other cultures; being aware of the cultural difference will help students gain cross cultural competence.

Findings from teacher's interview:

➤ Teacher's Aspirations:

The objectives of the course were clearly set in the very beginning, and shared with students "by the end of this course, I wanted my students to become more aware of the cultural differences, to make them more interculturally aware and sensitive". The teacher was very positive regarding the impact of the "cross cultural communication", and even was enthusiastic aiming at making the students better in facing intercultural encounters, "I believe in the power intercultural competence can add to a good English of an EFL learner, I tried to get my students exposed to cultural differences in the classroom, as it impossible to meet them outside... as an endeavor to create an intercultural dimension in the EFL classroom". The teachers' aspirations is not different from the view of many researchers in the area of EFL learning and teaching, it is supported of Byram (2002) and Byram (1997) who claims that besides teaching learners how to communicate, foreign language courses should also expose them to another culture and make them perceive it in its own community.

➤ Students' Responses and attitudes:

When asked about students' attitudes and responses toward the course, the teacher explained their initial fear from target culture integration; getting students' exposed to hot issues of cross cultural communication

, arguing that student's reactions and negative attitudes are a major source of this fear. The same problem was explained earlier by many scholars. For instance, Toomey (2012) argued that most students can show a slight panic or sometimes severe identity disorientation when the teacher presents target cultural facts that are not similar to their native culture, yet "cultural shock" and "fear of identity loss" are perhaps problematic only when extremely strong target cultural values or "small "c" culture "- are totally different or considered as taboo in the student's native culture- are presented". However, generally, students may be more tolerant and enjoy when teachers present information about other cultures, especially aspects related to "big "C" culture" as exemplified in topics related to "cuisine", "costumes" and "lifestyle". As argued by the teacher: "when I was teaching this course, there was a major inhibiting factor, which is how can I impart something which belongs to a certain society, and it violates our rules, so let us just make an effort in order to convince them that we should respect even the taboos of other culture". Toomey (2012, p. 245) who thinks that when students are introduced to target cultural facts that are different from theirs; they would feel psychologically frustrated and cognitively disorientated; the current case is no difference.

➤ **Lack of Culturally Relevant Designed Activities**

When asked about some of the challenges the teacher met in preparing the course's content, teachers argued that target culture integration becomes problematic when appropriate materials cannot be found to account for cultural objectives. This view is supported by Deardorff (2009, p. 69), she insisted on "the use of culturally- based curricula to integrate culture by saying that the latter can be done "through curriculum and co-curricular activities", the teacher claimed that they could not easily find such ready-made materials for cultural purposes, the teacher explained further that the ready-made materials can be found, yet they may not be effectively used in the Algerian context i.e. they may communicate culturally offensive information. Besides, they may not be appropriate to the student's level of language the thing that obliges teachers to adapt them to fit in their classrooms as explained by Gay (1954, p. 106) "culturally responsive teachers know how to determine the multicultural strengths and weaknesses of curriculum designs and instructional materials and make the changes necessary to improve their overall quality". Moreover, the available activities online are more language-based and do not offer an in-depth presentation of the cultural differences, and lack an intercultural perspective. In addition to this, even if teachers succeeded in finding such a kind of cultural curricula; it would be time and effort consuming to adopt them to the course's objectives.

➤ **Perceived Impact of the Course:**

Despite the negative attitudes in the beginning of the course, and despite the challenges of designing materials and activities in this

course, the teacher shared a positive stand as to the impact of this course on students. The teacher asserts "my students showed more openness when we talked about cultural differences, an openness that I didn't perceive in the beginning of this course"; this is strongly supported by students' answer on item 13, 14, and 15 regarding the impact of this course, it was confirmed by the majority of the students (Graph 4 and 5). This is clearly what Byram(2002) claimed, that getting students' exposed by the cultural differences between their own culture and the target culture make them more interculturally aware and sensitive. The teachers went further to say that "my students are more motivated to learn now about other cultures, despite the differences", we reached to a satisfactory extent the point of making our students "accept" others and respect these differences". The teachers elaborated "when seeing my students' projects on cultural differences, cultural shock, immigration, body language across different cultures, it was very clear that my students are more open, more tolerant than before.

8. Implications And Recommendations

The outcomes of the present study launched the need for some pedagogical implications to be taken into consideration by students, teachers, and policy makers. Interculturality in the EFL classroom should be addressed seriously by both teachers and policy makers. More courses should be provided to tackle this issue, not only for language students, why not for business students, for medical staff, for tourism specialities.

Cross cultural communication syllabus design is a challenge for teachers. There are many choices and paths to explore and analyze. Analyzing students' needs and goals will help design a course that will not only motivate them, but also teach them life skills of understanding, respect, cooperation, and acceptance of different cultures. More efforts should be fulfilled to design cultural curricula that are appropriate for Algerian students, and the Algerian context with its particularities, as an aim to diminish the negative attitudes of students when getting students exposed to different cultural facets.

It is the teacher's role to convince their students that there is no harm in learning about other cultures, and seek to raise their curiosity, the use of audio visual materials in presenting other cultures can help in making students more interested, the use of online technologies, blogs for instance can help in raising students' engagement in the course. Cross cultural communication contribute in raising their awareness toward otherness, and making them more open to accepting and respecting other cultures, and this will eventually make them better intercultural communicators; to promote this dimension in classroom means to contribute in producing an open-minded society and a tolerant one.

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