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The Intercultural Competence in EFL Classroom: Perspectives, Practices and Challenges

الكفاءة بين الثقافات في دروس اللغة الإنجليزية الأجنبية : وجهات النظر- الممارسات والتحديات

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Abstract

No one is living in isolation anymore, as intercultural encounters are inevitable in our present multicultural world. Efforts were made by policy makers to integrate culture into EFL textbooks and classrooms for the purpose to raise learners' intercultural communicative competence. Teachers are now required to prepare students to be world citizens. This paper presents the findings from a questionnaire inspired from Sercu and Bandura (2005) international investigation on teachers and intercultural competence. It aims at providing answers to the following aspects: EFL teachers' perception of culture integration in the classroom, their tendencies in selecting cultural materials and the challenges they encounter in doing so. Results gathered have yielded that teachers are generally aware of the importance of teaching and integrating culture in the EFL classroom. Furthermore, it revealed that teachers are knowledgeable about the aspects of the target culture to some extent, but the way they deal with the target culture is affected highly by the curricular considerations and limitations.

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:

لم يعد أحد يعيش في عزلة ، حيث أن اللقاءات بين الثقافات أمر لا مفر منه في عالمنا الحالي المتعدد الثقافات. بذل صانعو السياسات جهوداً لدمج الثقافة في الكتب المدرسية والفصول الدراسية للغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية بهدف رفع كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات للمتعلمين. يُطلب من المعلمين الآن إعداد الطلاب ليكونوا مواطنين عالميين. تقدم هذه الورقة نتائج استبيان مستوحى من التحقيق الدولي لـ Sercu و Bandura (2005) حول المعلمين والكفاءة بين الثقافات. ويهدف إلى تقديم إجابات للجوانب التالية : وجهات نظر معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية لتكامل الثقافة في الفصل الدراسي ، واتجاهاتهم في اختيار المواد الثقافية والتحديات التي يواجهونها في القيام بذلك. أظهرت النتائج التي تم جمعها أن المعلمين يدركون بشكل عام أهمية التدريس ودمج الثقافة في الفصل الدراسي للغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية. علاوة على ذلك ، كشفت النتائج أن المعلمين على دراية بجوانب الثقافة المستهدفة إلى حد ما ، ولكن الطريقة التي يتعاملون بها مع الثقافة المستهدفة تتأثر بشدة بالاعتبارات والقيود المنهجية.

الكفاءة بين الثقافات
وجهات نظر
التحديات
دمج الثقافة
معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية.

1. Introduction

The upheavals engendered by the new means of communication have entangled worldviews and have multiplied the opportunities for misunderstanding between people. Teaching / learning a foreign language goes beyond speaking and writing correctly in that language. It is more than ever necessary to be able to respond to the challenges imposed by the world today. The language teacher plays a crucial role. Its mission is not limited to transmitting any knowledge: linguistic or cultural. He must now assume other responsibilities. Byram et al. (2002) pointed out that among the important functions that the language teacher must assume is that of engendering abilities, perspectives and awareness as well as the mere transmission of knowledge on a given culture or country. The discovery of the culture of the country of the foreign language makes it possible to think deeply about one's own culture and identity with those of others (Barthélémy, 2007). All of this is actually part of an intercultural mediation perspective. Therefore, the teacher is seen by the learner as the necessary relay, the privileged mediator towards this other culture, and the bridge between that foreign language and his own (Gohard- Radenkovic , 2004). This is how the teacher is considered the intercultural mediator par excellence.

2. Literature Review

Language and culture cannot be disassociated. Indeed any language transmits through its lexicons and syntaxes its cultural idiomatic schemes. For this purpose, the teaching / learning of languages and foreign cultures are closely linked because language is the reflection of the culture of a given society. Therefore, to ensure a better quality of learning, it is important to know the learner's engagement goals as well as the contexts that influence its values. The selection of teaching and learning strategies will be better adapted and the impact will be for the student as well as for the teacher.

2.1. Defining Culture

Defining culture is not an easy task for its complex and broad nature. Kramsch and Widdowson (1998) described culture as being "membership in a discourse

community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" (p. 10). While Brooks (1975, p. 20) referred to culture as "everything in human life and the best of everything in human life". Other scholars have classified culture into two common types: big 'C' culture and little 'c' culture (Lee 2009; Peterson, 2011). Lee (2009) named big 'C' culture "the culture which represents a set of facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals and customs of a target speech society"(p.78). On the other hand the small 'c' culture is "the invisible and deeper sense of a target culture" (ibid). It gathers theme such as opinions, views, body posture, gestures, clothing styles, food, hobbies, popular music, and popular issues etc...

2.2. The Importance of Incorporating Culture in Language Teaching

Although the importance of integrating culture into language teaching and learning may seem to be evident, not everyone in the didactics field acknowledges its importance. In reality, only one third of language teaching training programs offer a course in culture (Önalán, 2005). Traditionally, one justification for this oversight has been that language teachers are more concerned in the practical aspects of communication. Language teachers often indulge culture as insignificant and secondary to "the real task" (Fantini & Richards, 1997). Within the past decade, these problems resulting from not teaching culture with language have started to be considered. A large number of international and national foreign language associations started to address this issue by incorporating culture in their standards.

Considering the rare opportunities learners have to be in contact with the target culture and its speaker, they cannot understand the importance of learning its cultural aspects of communication unless they visit a foreign country and experience the difficulties (Kachru, 1992). Learners tend to acquire the nonverbal aspects of the target culture from movies and TV serials, which are not beneficial for communicative purposes or may sometimes develop misconceptions or stereotypes. McKay (2003) claimed that culture influences language

teaching in two significant manners: linguistically and pedagogically. Linguistically, it is noteworthy in the linguistic dimension of the language itself, touching the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it has an impact on the choice of language materials. He added that in order to master a language students have to acquaint themselves with both, its linguistic and cultural norms. The Common European Framework called for cultural awareness and intercultural learning to be part of its policies in order to support international understanding and world peace. Similarly, Kitao (2000) considered international understanding as a benefit of culture learning and advanced other reasons for the importance to incorporate culture in foreign language curriculum. Kitao claimed that studying culture “gives students liking for the people of that culture” (2000, p.18), helps avoid the stereotypes and misunderstanding, and is part of general education.

2.3. Teaching Culture in an Intercultural Approach

In the old methods of general didactics, the cultural aspect in foreign languages was banned. However, since the appearance of the communicative and interactionist approach, which aimed at enhancing learners' communicative competence, the cultural aspect of the language taught was taken into consideration. In an intercultural perspective, teaching a foreign language requires consideration of historical, geographical and ethnic elements. It is no longer possible for learners to think about ‘living together’ in a ‘mono-cultural’ way. We can suppose that they are open to others, to otherness, to dialogue; that they are interested in cultural cross-fertilization and that they understand that the world in which they live is a world to be shared. A learner can be helped to progress by involving him in motivating tasks, mobilizing to his means all these actions allow learners to open up to the other through the encounter with their language and culture to discover explicit and implicit differences in the language and its behaviors. In contact with the other, learners can acquire certain attitudes to situate themselves in this communicational situation. This mutual understanding is one of the fundamental principles in intercultural education. It puts the learner in an environment of reconciliation,

openness and tolerance.

To discuss a cultural dimension in the teaching of a language in general and a foreign language in particular is quite a fact since this dimension is behind all language practice. The language-culture relation is so narrow that it constitutes two faces of the same coin, or better, of the same page. Cultural education underlies the daily school practice of the target language. We therefore agree with Zarate (1995) that one cannot learn a language by evacuating culture. Similarly, Abdallah-Preteille and Porcher (2001) questioned the fact that one can teach a foreign language without anchoring it in one's culture. In their view, the intercultural dimension of teaching is self-evident because as soon as the other is summoned, as here through its language, we are from the outset in cultural diversity. It is, therefore, recommended to implement pedagogical approaches to promote awareness.

The teaching of a language is based on the importance of the intrusion of the cultural parameters without which, this language is only ones' speech. So the cultural challenge is to teach the language and its culture. With the introduction of the cultural dimension in teaching / learning of foreign languages, the learner is going to acquire the ability to develop relationships of mutual respect with speakers of other languages while behaving during /within a plurilingual or even pluricultural situation .the learners will be able to see the word in a completely different manner as well as becoming an intercultural speaker who is able to communicate in diverse contexts (Byram, 2009). In other words, this dimension will help the learner in his ability to decentrate insofar as an orientation towards otherness .It occurs while being aware of one's own culture which is more in account and valued because it is the foundation on which is built learning a new culture.

2.4.Challenges in Teaching Culture

The introduction of cultural content into EFL practice is a challenging task. The first problem that could result from the use of the target culture in EFL class is the influence by the foreign culture and the fear of losing their identity. Some authors suggested using

both mother language and target language culture to deal with the restrictions of exclusively using one of the languages/cultures. According to Ariffin (2006), using both mother and target culture encourages students to discover similarities and differences between their own culture and the target language/culture, which could bring about common indulgent and tolerance.

Another issue that EFL teachers face in applying the intercultural approach is evaluating the suitability of the material and topics for their IC teaching. It concerns both the textbook set by official institution and the authentic material the teacher opts for. A study carried out by Sercu (2006) tackled the issue not being able to evaluate teaching material. The study focused on teachers' beliefs about their intercultural teaching and their reported practices in FL classrooms. The study concluded that teachers have difficulties evaluating what material they should include in their IC teaching, which, amongst other things, could be argued to be due to a lack of knowledge regarding this concept.

2.5. Call for an Intercultural Dimension in Algerian Schools

For many decades, In Algeria, the foreign language was a vector of technology and a communication tool whose cultural tracks were too often concealed. The 2005 reform initiated in the education system has called into question the linguistic and pedagogical policy, hence the need to teach a language associated with its cultural foundation so as to try to integrate it into the system of values of the learners' culture. The official instructions since the 2005 reform leave ultimately to consider openness and integrate both socio-cultural and intercultural objectives. Such objectives include: familiarization with the culture of the other, raising mutual understanding between people, and opening up on the world to install attitudes of tolerance and peace.

Official instructions advocate the support of the intercultural dimension in language class not only at the level of higher education but also at the other levels of EFL learning. All educational reform

programs in Algeria, call for openness to the world through languages. Though the call for an intercultural approach, teachers' practices still focus on the linguistic aspect of the English language at the expense of its cultural dimension. The formal structures of the foreign language are foreground while socio-cultural knowledge remains relegated to the second rank. As regards, for example, the assessment is often in the form of text analysis consisting of questions of comprehension and of morpho-syntactic activities more than linking the culture of the learner and the target culture.

The purpose of the present study is to describe the EFL teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the place and importance of culture in an intercultural approach in the EFL classroom their practices in relation, and the obstacles they may face while introducing culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Means of Data Collection

In order to address the research question, I used an exploratory investigation by adopting a quantitative research method in form of a questionnaire. The participants in this research are secondary school teachers all issued from the province of Bousaada (Algeria) . The participants were 28 in total, 6 males and 22 female teachers. 15 teachers had an experience of 1-5 years teaching, 7 teachers have taught between 5 and 10 years, and 6 of them taught for more than 10 years. This exploratory research aims to focus on participants' beliefs, understandings and perceptions.

By using a questionnaire, precise information from large number of subjects can be obtained. Among its purposes are learning about people's attitudes, values, behavior, opinions, habits, desires, ideas, and beliefs. Moreover, questionnaires lend themselves to purposes of revealing demographic facts and policymaking. From a more common perspective, a questionnaire is useful for three fundamental purposes: description, explanation, and exploration (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). In this study, the goal was to describe the EFL teachers' perspectives towards the place of culture in the EFL classroom, their practices

in relation and the challenges they face in introducing cultural content.

The questionnaire is drawn from Sercu & Bandura (2005) international study. It was modified and simplified in some sections to be less confusing and to meet the Algerian context. The questionnaire is divided into four (4) sections: a demographic section, Teachers' Perception of Culture in EFL Classes, Teachers' practices, and the obstacles they face when introducing cultural aspects. The questionnaire comprised of multiple-choice questions employing a Likert scale. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 26). The mean score of each item was calculated, and then compared. The internal reliability analysis of the teachers' questionnaire in this study showed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.702. Values above 0.6 are judged acceptable; but, values above 0.8 are preferable (Pallant, 2011).

3.2. Research Questions

- 1- What are the EFL teachers' attitudes towards incorporating cultural information into their teaching?
- 2- How do EFL teachers perceive the integration of the intercultural components into their teaching?
- 3- What are EFL teachers' practices to integrate cultural content into their teaching?
- 4- What are the challenges faced by EFL teachers in incorporating cultural content into their teaching?

4. Results

4.1. Teachers' Perception of Culture in EFL Classes

As table 1 show bellow (92.90%) of teachers agree on the fact that culture is an important component to be integrated to the language teaching an, that cultural and linguistic aspects are equal in the language classroom. Furthermore, the totality of the teachers believe that cultural content is a source of motivation for learners and that combining both linguistic and cultural aspects help learner improve their language skills. It may be concluded that teachers have a positive perception towards incorporating culture in EFL classes.

Table 1

Teachers' Perception of Culture in EFL Classes

Statement	Teachers' responses			Mean score
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
1. Cultural aspect is as important as the linguistic aspect in language teaching	7,10%	0%	92,90%	2.86
2. Teaching culture motivates students.	0%	0%	100%	3
3. Combining language and culture helps learners to improve their language skills.	0%	0%	100%	3

1=disagree; 2=neutral; 3=agree

As for the teachers' perception of which intercultural components to be integrated in language classroom, they prioritize knowledge (referred to by statement 4), skills of interaction (referred to by statement 7), and critical cultural awareness (referred to by statement 9) as shown in table 2 bellow. They also give importance to the other components namely attitudes (referred to by statement 5) and skills of interpreting and relating (referred to by statement 8). However skills of discovery (referred to by statement 6) is somehow considered not important to be included in the language class by more than half the participants.

It can be deduced that commonly teachers' perceive the integration of intercultural components in language classes as an important factor. It may imply that teachers perceive that all intercultural components are equally important. In other words, providing cultural knowledge to students, developing students' attitudes and promoting students' cultural skills are necessary and essential in order to help them interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures.

Table 2**Teachers' Perception of the Integration of the Intercultural Components**

Statements	Teachers' responses			Mean score
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
4. It is important to provide information about daily life (e.g. social/political conditions) in English speaking countries.	7,10%	7,10%	85,70%	2.79
5. Language classes should promote understanding of different process of individual and social interactions in English and Algerian culture	0%	21,40%	78,60%	2.79
6. Language classes should develop a tolerant, respectful and open attitude towards other cultures and cultural difference.	0%	28,60%	71,40%	2.71
7. Language classes should promote the ability to acquire new cultural knowledge from documents/ events from English cultures.	7,10%	7,10%	85,70%	2.79
8. Language classes should promote the ability to understand and critically interpret documents/events from English speaking culture.	7,10%	14,30%	78,30%	2.71
9. Language classes should promote awareness and understanding of different values, beliefs, and ideologies of both Algerian and English speaking people.	0%	14,30%	85,70%	2.86

1=disagree; 2=neutral; 3=agree

The last part of teachers' perception is about the negative aspects for including cultural content in the classroom. From table 3 it can be noticed that (57.1%) of teachers disagree on the fact that culture teaching can be an obstacle for linguistic performance.

Half of the participants disagree on the fact that language and culture cannot be taught in an integrated way (m=1.64) and or that it should be kept for

advanced levels (m=1.64). The same number of teachers disagrees on the fact that the introduction of culture may contribute to students' loss of cultural identity.

It can be concluded that since they are more in disagreement with the statement above teachers have a positive perception of culture in EFL classes.

Table 3**Teachers' perception of the negative side for the integration of culture**

Statements	Teachers' responses			Mean score
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
10. It is impossible to teach the foreign language and the foreign culture in an integrated way.	50,00%	35,70%	14,30%	1.64
11. The study of culture in language classes can hinder progress in linguistic accuracy.	57,10%	14,30%	28,60%	1.71
12. An emphasis on the study of foreign cultures can contribute to the student's loss of cultural identity.	50,00%	50,00%	0%	1.50
13. The development of cultural awareness should be kept only for the most advanced levels.	57,10%	21,40%	21,40%	1.64

1=disagree; 2=neutral; 3=agree

4.2. Teachers' Practices

Table 4 represents the activities used in the language classroom to promote culture. The first thing we can note is that activities for the purpose of promoting culture are not constantly introduced. What is most used is the introduction of culture-loaded vocabulary, songs, poems, images, and texts. These items are a rich source for authentic materials. Teachers also encourage learners to compare aspects of their own cultures with foreign cultures. On the other hand teachers rarely encourage to do research of different aspects of other cultures and their own, or do role-plays based on intercultural encounters and conflicts.

Table 4
Teachers' Practices Concerning the Integration of Culture

Statements	Teachers' responses				Mean score
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
1. I tell my students what I heard or read about the foreign country or culture.	0%	21,40%	57,10%	21,40%	3
2. I encourage learners to do research of different aspects of other cultures and their own.	7,10%	28,60%	42,90%	21,40%	2.79
3. We do role-plays based on intercultural encounters and conflicts with the aim of solving the problems involved.	7,10%	35,70%	28,60%	28,60%	2.79
4. I introduce and give attention to some culture-loaded new words teaching.	0%	14,30%	57,10%	28,60%	3.14
5. I introduce some English songs / poems to let them familiarize with the different cultures.	7,10%	14,30%	50,00%	28,60%	3
6. I ask my students to describe cultural phenomena which appear in texts/ newspapers / magazines.	0%	35,70%	42,90%	21,40%	2.86
7. I introduce videos and discuss with my students their content.	0%	14,30%	50,00%	35,70%	3.21
8. I bring some pictures or cartoons having cultural images and discuss them.	7,10%	7,10%	50,00%	35,70%	3.14
9. I ask my students to compare their aspects of their own cultures with foreign cultures.	0%	28,60%	42,90%	28,60%	3
10. I ask my students to act out what they learn in terms of culture learning.	7,10%	21,40%	50,00%	21,40%	2.86

1=never; 2=rarely; 3=sometimes; 4=always

4.3. Challenges in Introducing Culture

The largest part of teachers ($m=2.79$) reported that the major barrier when it comes to cultural teaching is the lack of training in intercultural approaches. In addition to it, there is the limited time in each teaching period ($m=2.64$), limited cultural contents in the textbooks and teaching materials ($m=2.43$), and limited teaching resources ($m=2.36$). Surprisingly half of the teachers' reported that they were familiar with cultural topics. In other words, EFL teachers

were moderately familiar with the target language culture, and they were able to address most of cultural topics in their teaching practices.

Table 5
Obstacles in Incorporating Cultural Aspects

Statements	Teachers' responses			Mean score
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
1. Your unfamiliarity with the cultural topics	50,00%	28,60%	21,40%	1.71
2. Limited cultural contents in the textbooks and teaching materials	21,40%	14,30%	64,30%	2.43
3. Limited time in each teaching period	14,30%	7,10%	78,60%	2.64
4. Limited teaching resources	21,40%	21,40%	57,10%	2.36
5. No training in intercultural approaches	7,10%	7,10%	85,70%	2.79
6. Students showing little interest in cultural topics or activities	50,00%	21,40%	28,60%	1.79
7. Not related directly to assessment	42,90%	14,30%	42,90%	2
8. Culture is inappropriate for English classes	78,60%	7,10%	14,30%	1.36

1=disagree; 2=neutral; 3=agree

5. Discussion

Regarding the results above, it appears that there is a general positive disposition towards the integration of EFL culture in EFL classrooms. The majority of the participants expressed a high willingness to include EFL culture in their language teaching. This indicates that there is an awareness of the importance of including the target language's culture in teaching among Algerian EFL teachers.

Moreover, EFL teachers admit devoting their teaching time to culture by introducing activities in the classroom. This finding may be attributed to the fact that EFL teachers are well aware of the importance of integrating culture in language teaching (e.g., Kramsch, 2013; Roberts et al., 2005). They also believe that language and culture are inextricably

interdependent and that linguistic and cultural aspects have to be taught in an integrated way. Furthermore, most teachers consider cultural teaching to be incorporated at any level.

Besides, the findings also disclosed that teachers are not quite aware of their teaching practices as only activities fostering knowledge dimension was incorporated in their lessons though they believed that all three cultural dimensions of knowledge, attitude, and skills were equally important. One possible explanation to it may be due to the issue of time limitation and limited cultural content in textbooks, which affect teachers' choice of culture teaching methodology and hinder them from allotting more of their teaching time to culture (Crookes & Arakaki, 1999). Consequently, teachers only present activities such as showing video clips and pictures, telling stories, and documents to pass on cultural knowledge to students because integrating activities to develop students' cultural attitudes and promote students' cultural skills would take much time.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions and practices of 28 Algerian EFL teachers towards teaching culture in EFL classes and the challenges they face in its integration. The participants were asked to express their attitudes by responding to a Likert scale questionnaire regarding the incorporation of the target culture in their EFL classrooms, their practices and the obstacles. The reactions of the participants were calculated for analysis. The results showed that Algerian EFL teachers are prone to favor the incorporation of the target culture in the classroom. Most of the participants reflected positive reactions towards the inclusion of culture in language teaching. This shows that secondary school EFL teachers are aware of the importance of teaching the target culture. This awareness allows for a practical involvement of culture along with the language since both language and culture are closely linked and affect each other in various ways. The target language cannot be fully mastered if the cultural component of the language is absent. Nevertheless, teachers' practices were not congruent with their beliefs. They convey culture as mere knowledge.

It is noteworthy to mention that the study has limitations. First, the study took place approximately in May 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, all schools were shut down and a limited number of teachers with whom I had personal acquaintance were contacted to be part of the study. Neither the sample size nor the sample profile can be generalized to a wider population. Moreover, teachers' perceptions cannot reflect their actual classroom practices.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct an additional in-depth qualitative study through interviews and/or classroom observations, given that the current study only reflects teachers' perceptions of culture teaching and their practices.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

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