

Integrating Culture in EFL: High Stakes and Thorny Issues

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ABSTRACT: *The starting point of the present paper is the strong conviction that the cultural dimension should be encompassed in EFL education. Indeed, cultural competence is a key factor in enhancing the learning of English and the comprehension of the bolts and nuts of the target culture so as to provide an environment of respect and reciprocity of ideas. At the same time, cultural dimension is a salient issue in our education as one should know whether the practitioners have the skill, the knowledge, and the attitude to incorporate this dimension. To answer this question, a research has been carried out at six secondary school at sig (Mascara) involving 23 teachers. A questionnaire, an interview and sessions of observation have been used to collect data. Results show that teachers do not follow a systematic process in introducing the cultural insight in their lesson planning. Nor do they devote a consistent amount of time to teach the cultural dimension.*

KEYWORDS: Cultural Dimension; Cultural Competence; Attitude; Elf Education; Target Culture- Reciprocity of Ideas.

RESUME : *Le point de départ de cet article est la conviction que la dimension culturelle devrait être introduite dans l'éducation de l'Anglais langue étrangère (ALE). En effet, la compétence culturelle est un facteur clé pour améliorer l'apprentissage de l'ALE pour favoriser le respect de l'Autre et la réciprocité d'idées. En même temps, la dimension culturelle est un enjeu important dans notre éducation car, la question qui se pose est ce que les praticiens possèdent la compétence, la connaissance et l'attitude d'incorporer cette dimension. Pour répondre à cette question, une recherche a été réalisée dans six lycées à Sig*

(Mascara) impliquant 23 enseignants. Un questionnaire, une entrevue et des sessions d'observation ont été utilisés pour collecter des données. Les résultats montrent que les enseignants ne suivent pas un processus systématique pour introduire l'information culturelle dans leur planification de la leçon. Ils ne consacrent que peu de temps pour l'enseignement de la dimension culturelle.

MOTS-CLES : Dimension Culturelle; Compétence Culturelle; Attitude; Éducation De Ale; Culture Ciblée - Réciprocité D'idées.

1. Introduction: Culture Vs. Language

To many cross-culturalists, culture is depicted as an iceberg with an apparent tip and a colossal emerged part. What we seem to know of culture and what is apparent in our way of behaving of socialising is but the tip of the iceberg. The emerged part is a system of integrated patterns which is far beyond the individual consciousness (Condon, cited in Brown, 1994:123). This invisible, emerged entity constitutes all that govern our external behaviour. Ignoring or neglecting this part which is huge both in size and in importance often leads to cultural misunderstanding, bigotry, hatred and even to political clashes.

Following the same kind of analogy, Condon (cited in Brown, 1994:123) views human beings as puppets manipulated in their inner movements by cultural patterns that are embedded in their unconsciousness. This idea enacts how effectively strong is the culture on our inner behaviour in our daily routines.

We see culture as a tree with the apparent part constituted by the log, branches and leaves and the hidden part made by the stump and the roots. As the previous analogy of the iceberg, the leaves their size, the colours their shapes, their density represent all the differences that exist between and within the cultures. The roots as the emerged part of the iceberg guide our inner behaviour and tie individuals up to an entity.

There are certain a great number of definitions to the concept of culture but for the sake of narrowing down the scope of research of this paper, the concept of culture will mean that complex whole that encompasses the aesthetic, semantic, sociological, and sociolinguistic or pragmatic senses of culture (Peck, 1998). The aesthetic sense comprises literature, music,

cinema, and media while the semantic refers to the system of conceptualisation governing thoughts and understanding. The individual's co-existence, their interactions as well as the relation to other societies surrounding them is embedded in the sociological sense. In The sociolinguistic or pragmatic sense, we find what fulfil the task of communication namely the background knowledge of the language and to social skills.

Culture as a component of language teaching was by no means neglected nor underestimated. The whole situation of this component lies on either the status or interpretations the term culture was attributed along the history of foreign language teaching. For instance, in the early years, when Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was considered as the state of the art in the teaching business, culture was highly viewed and therefore was confined to the elites, to those who would contribute to the advancement of literature, history, music and art.

With the gradual decline of GTM and the nascence of new approaches like Direct approach , the audio-lingual approach, the communicative approach the competency based approach...to cite but a few, culture began to gain ground. People's life styles and behavioural patterns were incorporated in the teaching process of FL. In other terms, it was regarded as a plus that foreign language learners know about the target culture they are studying. Kramersch (1993:8) confesses that culture was viewed as mere information about the target language not an entire component of the language itself. Nowadays, and to facilitate the task of understanding between nations at the time of skyrocketing speed of mass communication develop this idea vulnerability of our world, culture insights have been upgraded to a rank of major attribute of the foreign language teaching. This new stake requires the EFL practitioners to master both the linguistic and cultural competencies.

Today and better than any other time, with globalisation and all that it entails as threats towards one's own culture and the culture of the "Other", it is pressing to introduce the teaching of culture as a major component of EFT. The sole intent of this enterprise is to inoculate in the learners' mind

the idea of open-mindedness and predominately the sense of respect for the “Other”.

This gigantic but by no means unattainable aim can be achieved provided that the learners are taught how to comprehend the relationship between the different cultures.

The present paper sets out to investigate the issue of teachers’ willingness to incorporate culture in their daily teaching. This willingness can be influenced by many variables among which stand in the first position the teachers’ understanding of the objectives of both FL and culture teaching, the importance they assign to the cultural component of language and last but certainly not the least the time they allot to teaching it.

Over the past years or so, there has been a considerable debate among practitioners and researchers over culture integration in FL teaching. With specific regard to EFL, there has often been confusion over what is actually being debated. Within the broader context of teaching, this paper addresses the outstanding role culture plays in the teaching of FL in general and EFL in particular.

It is commonly acknowledged that language and culture are complementary to each other and that each affects the other directly or indirectly. The present paper purposes to shed light on the actual status of cultural integration in the Algerian classes. Whether ignoring or neglecting the cultural dimension of teaching ELT in our classes has become a debatable thorny issue. Most –if not all- teachers have not had a consistent, formal training in introducing cultural insights in their lessons. Nor is there a universally consensus on the criteria that practitioners could use to guide them in their novel enterprise.

There could be many reasons for this deficiency of promoting an intercultural understanding accompanying our students’ linguistic competence. However, this paper main focus is the teachers’ degree of willingness to incorporate culture as a major part in their daily teaching practices.

Because teachers’ willingness in itself is not freelance but very often governed and influenced and geared by a myriad of factors, we propose to raise the following questioning:

What are the factors that influence the secondary school EFL teachers' readiness in integrating the cultural insights in their classes?

There could be many answers to the above mentioned research questions; however, this article puts forward the following hypothesis. The main EFL teachers' concern in this particular context – secondary schools at Sig- is to develop their learners' linguistic competence and henceforth introducing culture does not obey a systematic process and so it is not taught regularly. Time constraint and unawareness of the value of cultural dimension real value greatly influence teachers' inclination to imbed culture as a major part of the teaching of ELT.

2. Research Methodology

The research upon which this article is based involved data collected through a questionnaire and an interview. The two instruments were selected for the sake of collecting a sufficient amount of data to answer our research questions. Both instruments are highly practical since they not only provide anonymity but also save a huge amount of time and money. The four-section questionnaire probes into the idea of whether incorporating culture into the ELT teaching practice is influenced by such factors as time or teaching experience. The first two sections that are composed of three open-ended questions aim at eliciting data with regard to factors affecting teachers' willingness to teach culture. This section, therefore, includes teachers' qualifications, their teaching experiences and above all the exact time they allot to teaching FLT per week.

The third section comprises five questions that seek to provide information about teachers' perceptions of the objectives of FLT and culture teaching. The participants are required to rank the objectives and state how much time they devote to culture teaching in contrast with language teaching. This section also asks the teachers whether they ever thought of devoting much more time to culture teaching, and if they did what were the reasons of doing so.

The last section of the questionnaire consists of questions probing at the teachers' perceptions of intercultural FLT.

When piloting the questionnaire, we noticed that some teachers repeated the same number to different questions although the instructions inform not to do so. Therefore, to elucidate more reliable responses, an interview was incorporated.

Most of the items in the questionnaire were similar to that of the questionnaire with slight differences that are meant for further exploration of topic related issues such as the reasons for teaching culture and what techniques teachers use to facilitate its incorporation in FL classroom.

Most of the interview questions were open-ended questions that require free responses as opposed to the questionnaire very limited range of answer options. This type of questions were meant to generate an accurate and complete interpretations of the interviewees' perspectives and proficiencies.

3. Selection of Research Subjects

The population we choose for our investigation comprises the teachers in the area of Sig. However, we have opted for the secondary school because we have a strong assumption that it is at this level and not earlier or even later that the learners should begin acquiring certain cultural competence that would enable them to acknowledge, and comprehend and therefore tolerate the peculiar differences of the target culture. Earlier, that is at the middle school, the learners are beginners utterly absorbed by the process of discovering this novel language.

Likewise, the teachers' main focus is to develop the command of the EFL that is the linguistic competence. Later, that is at the level of the university, the cultural dimension of the language receives its fair share of attention as whole modules are allotted to teaching civilization literature, cultural studies and so forth. However, judging from our own experience, some modules like British civilization or American civilization are solely devoted to historical events.

Knowing the linguistic part of any language does not automatically allow the speaker to communicate appropriately. The cultural component that is the "know-how" allows him not only to communicate suitably but also to behave in such a manner that would enable him to be accepted. The

absence of the “know-how” will render the speaker offensive, ignorant and even rude. The conviction is that language and culture are two untying entities. Teaching an FL implies wontedly teaching the culture in which it functions.

However, with the recent reforms and the introduction of the second-generation books at the middle school, and at the end of each sequence the pupils are introduced to Core Values. At this step, the learners’ attention is geared towards basic values such as being proud of belonging to a nation, openness to the world (sharing information and respecting people of other cultures). There is a sharp shift towards focusing on one’s own culture. The learners are introduced to the target culture and at the same time they are made aware that their own culture by highlighting the differences. All is done in the respect of the Other.

For the sake of a more reliable representation of the entire population of the area of Sig, in this paper we have adopted a random sampling procedure wherein every single member of the entire population has an equal chance of being selected. More specifically and for much more reliable representativeness, we opted for the cluster type of random sampling. The main motivation is that though the members of the population share a common feature that of being teachers of English as FL, they are otherwise heterogeneous in characteristics such as their academic qualifications and their teaching experiences to name but the most apparent.

The next step in our research was to decide upon the size of the sample .albeit there is no clear cut answer to this problem , we decided to include twenty (20) instructors in our sample. We believe that this number will help answer fairly our research questions. As for the size of the sample, some claim that the larger the sample is and the more approximate the statics are. Furthermore, conclusions drawn from larger smaller tend to more convincing than those drawn from smaller ones (Mackay,2006:35). Yet, in such researches one is advised to balance the preference of large samples against the practicalities of the research sources like cost, time, and effort to cite but a few.

| | Number | percentage |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| qualifications | | |
| PES | 12 | 60 |
| LICENCE | 4 | 20 |
| MASTER | 4 | 20 |
| Magister | 0 | 00 |
| Teaching experience | | |
| 1-5 years | 8 | 40 |
| 5-10 years | 6 | 30 |
| More than 10 Years | 6 | 30 |

The twenty teachers that constitute the sample belong to the six secondary schools that are inside the town of sig and also in the villages surrounding the town. They graduated from “l’ecole normale superieure” (ENS) or held university degrees. Their teaching experiences are fair since all the respondents have been teaching at least for more than two years.

4. Results

The first result of the study makes it clear that the teachers’ qualifications influence greatly the choice of teaching culture in EFL classrooms or not. Indeed, the vast majority of the teachers are university degree holders and that 60 percent are well-experienced practitioners who have been teaching for 5 to 10 years. The remaining 40 percent, that is, nine teachers are novice teachers who have experienced teaching for less than five years. During our investigation, most of the subjects indicated that they believed in the importance of incorporating culture in their daily teaching. Both of the questionnaire and the interview show that novice teachers (40%) do incorporate some culture items in their teaching because they follow the requirements of the syllabus.

The more experienced teachers hardly introduce the cultural insights because they strongly believe that linguistic competence is what the learners are going to be assessed in the baccalaureate exam. Viewed this way, we may conclude the latter are more pragmatic than the former.

This goes to the contrary to our prediction. The more experienced the teachers are and the less culture “defenders” they are knowing the importance of the culture issue in TEFL does not automatically lead to its practice in one’s classes because there are more demanding things to be prioritized and a gigantic exam to prepare.

The interview shows that the respondents have grasped the meaning of culture teaching in EFL education. In most answers, culture teaching is related to civilization, daily life routines, norms, beliefs as well as behaviors of native people. In other words, they do acknowledge the dimension of Intercultural communication (IC) while they pay no attention to the skills and attitudes of IC. The knowledge dimension of IC involves not only the foreign culture but also the students’.

The informants believe that culture is as a significant ingredient in TEFL that notably contributes in establishing successful communication, and most predominantly, prevents misunderstanding or misinterpretations. They also assert that culture motivates their pupils learn English in general. All this contributes in building the learners ‘cultural competence but not the linguistic one.

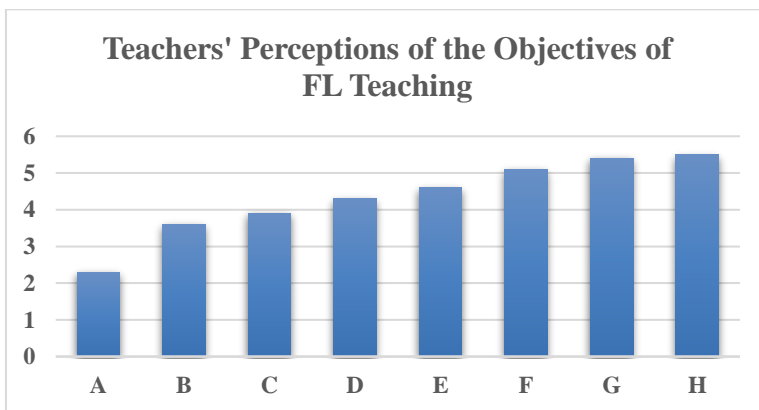


Figure1

- A. Help the learners understand their own culture and identity;
- B. Promote openness towards the culture of the “Others”;

- C. Enable the learners to acquire a level proficiency to read literary works in FL
- D. Develop the acquisition of the language skills;
- E. Promote the acquisition of skills that help in real life situations;
- F. Familiarize the learners with the culture and civilization of English speaking countries;
- G. Enable the learners to use English for practical purposes;
- H. Motivate the learners to foreign languages

The cluster analysis of the knowledge dimension of intercultural competency, the skill dimension, and the attitudinal dimension (Sercu et al, 2005:26) of the research provides clear evidence that the teachers clearly favour the knowledge dimension of intercultural competence. There is a high tendency towards providing the learners with information about daily life and routines and a low tendency towards introducing information about the history, geography and political condition of the foreign culture. With the use of music in their classes, the respondents hint at a variety of cultural expressions.

The analysis also shows that the attitudinal of intercultural competence receives little -if at all- support. In fact, teachers view culture less in terms of developing attitudes and openness or tolerance towards other peoples' cultures. This is emphasized by the amount of time devoted to the teaching of culture. A total of 75 % dedicate less than 20% of the time to teaching culture or even hinting at the cultural points. Moreover, the analysis reveals that the respondents have no will whatsoever to devote time to teach culture. They argue that time constraints, syllabus constraints and pupils' needs force them to stick to their usual way of teaching. Others highlight the pupils' demotivation. Still others state that they consider their pupils' needs their sole priority. This also explain the teachers' frustration because the analysis of how much time is devoted to culture teaching reveals that the teachers are discontented with the amount of time they allocate to this matter. Their willingness to devote time is great but the above mentioned constrained -namely, time inadequacy, syllabus demands and the will to develop the pupils' linguistic competence before all- make

this intended purpose unattainable. This is but a proof that confirm our hypothesis that culture does not follow a systematic process and is not taught regularly.

Promoting reflection on cultural differences constitutes one of -if the not – the major component of teachers’ understanding of cultural teaching in FL education. The skill dimension of intercultural competence engenders spurring the ability to empathise with people of the target culture and even the ability to manage intercultural contact situation. In the long run, this will foster an thorough understanding of students’ own culture. Despite the colossal value of the skill dimension of intercultural competence, the results display that this component is ranked last.

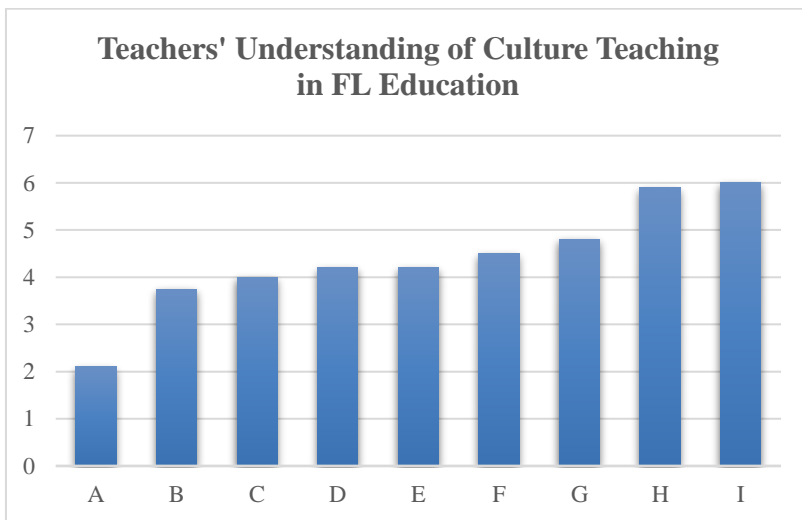


Figure2

- A. Promote increased understanding of students’ own culture;
- B. Develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures;
- C. Promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations;
- D. Promote the ability to empathise with people living in other cultures:

- E. Provide information about the history, geography and political conditions of the foreign culture;
- F. Promote reflection on cultural differences;
- G. Provide experiences with a rich variety of cultural expressions (literature, music...);
- H. Provide information about shared values and beliefs;
- I. Provide information about daily life and routines

The most apparent finding is that the respondents have a rather simplistic limited view of what the concept of culture really means. There is no doubt that even the term culture can be problematic since it can mean different things to different people in different contexts. However, it can by no means be reduced to holidays, foods, parades and so forth as in the case of the context of the study. It is much more complex than this. Tomalin and Stempleski(1993) define culture as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion”. This definition shows how complex and intricate culture is. It encompasses the what, the how and the who. The what is the product while the how is the manner of creation and transformation. The who includes all those involved in the how.

Another finding is that the teachers that participated in the research state that they received no formation of how to teach culture. They even find hard to assess the teaching of culture. They also stress the idea that since their learners have no mobility and the world especially Europe is tightening the noose around its borders why bother teaching culture.

5. Conclusion

In theory, the respondents acknowledge the real value of teaching culture in EFL education. They are utterly aware that it contributes significantly to the establishment of successful communication and the prevention of any misunderstanding or misinterpretation. They also share the view that when teaching cultural insights their learners are highly motivated and actively engaged in the activities.

In practice, they confess that the time they devote to culture is insufficient for they have other fish to fry and more important things to deal with. They have to stick to the great lines of the syllabus that has to be completed in due time. Sometimes, they have to teach extra hours to catch up the time lost in strikes or even in national and religious holidays. Besides this, the teachers find the textbooks much so demanding that no time can be “wasted” in extra activities like cultural hints.

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