

## The Intercultural Dimension of EFL in the Algerian Middle School

CHAMI Wahid Hamza Mohamed\* 

National Higher School of Artificial Intelligence, Algeria  
wahid.chami@ensia.edu.dz

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of intercultural competence in English as Foreign Language (EFL) settings in Algeria. The author argues that there is an increasing demand for the integration of culture in EFL and that this integration must encompass both the big "C" and small "c" aspects of culture, as well as the source and target cultures. The article examines the Algerian curriculum and the practices of teachers about intercultural competence trying to find a room for improvement. The article also provides a detailed analysis of the place of culture in Algerian English textbooks, highlighting the importance of incorporating cultural content in language learning materials. Overall, this article makes a compelling case for the integration of intercultural competence in EFL settings in Algeria and provides significant insights into the eventual challenges for culture instruction in EFL context.*

**KEYWORDS:** Culture; Curriculum; EFL; Language; Textbook

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\* Auteur correspondant : CHAMI Wahid Hamza Mohamed, wahid.chami@ensia.edu.dz

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## Introduction

Hudson (1980) claimed that a society's language is an aspect of its culture, which led many scholars to consider learning a language as an inevitable paving procedure to learn its culture. In this respect, the integration of culture in foreign language education has been widely discussed in various fields such as sociology, education, and psycho-pedagogy. This idea emerged again with Peterson's (2011) Iceberg theory about culture, which demonstrates that language is just the tip of the iceberg that represents a culture. However, regardless of the "HOW" to teach culture in language classes, the main concern of educationalists was "WHAT" culture to teach.

Indeed, the teaching of culture in foreign language settings can enhance learners' understanding of non-linguistic behaviours and paralinguistic patterns that play a crucial role in conveying the intended meaning (Purba, 2011). Additionally, it is believed that learners must have a deeper understanding of cultural elements such as values, traditions, and relational patterns to comprehend real-life utterances (Gay, 2002). Culture can also play a role in increasing learners' integrative motivation and self-concept, which can sustain language learning outside of the classroom (Dörnyei, 1994). However, there is not a universal agreement among scholars on the inclusion of culture in language teaching curriculum if the purpose is purely technical. Altan (1995) argues that the teaching of cultural elements, such as values and norms, is only relevant for individuals seeking deep integration into the target language community. Byram (1997) also considers teaching the language target culture as unnecessary for learners who use that language for specific purposes (ESP) or as a means of instruction (EMI).

However, with the increasing interconnectedness of the world through tourism, commerce, and virtual communication, the integration of culture into EFL settings has become inevitable. Furthermore, the field of language teaching has witnessed growing trends towards intercultural competence, which is recognized as a new competency to be developed in foreign language learners, and it is defined as the attitudinal, behavioural, and cognitive reflection of intercultural awareness. Thus, foreign language teachers must prioritize the development of learners' cultural awareness, skills of interactions and instilling positive attitudes towards cultural differences in any intercultural context.

Through this review article, the researcher tries to answer the following research question:

How is intercultural competence incorporated into Algeria's middle school education, based on the roles of teachers, textbook content, and curriculum guidelines?

## 1. Teaching Culture in EFL Settings within an Intercultural Dimension

From a pedagogical perspective, cultural content in language classes are presented along two distinct axes that are referred to as "types" and "categories" of cultures.

### 1.1. Culture Types

Moran (2001) defines culture as: "an evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts" (p, 28)

In this line of thoughts, the cultural content in pedagogy falls into two primary types: the shared practices, denoted as small "c" and the shared products denoted as big "C". The small "c" type is considered as a micro description of cultural manifestations that encompass all aspects of daily life including the visible and invisible elements of culture, such as gestures, clothing style, food, music, popular issues, opinions, preferences, and tastes. The integration of small "c" themes in foreign language classes is widely agreed on to be crucial for the development of cultural awareness among learners (Byram, 1997). The big "C" type, in turn, includes such cultural elements as history, geography, economy, politics, etc. However, it is highly important for teachers to strike a balance between the small "c" and the big "C" to promote, thereby, a successful communication with the target language community.

Based on what has been discussed so far, it seems that both big "C" and small "c" themes are necessary for providing a comprehensive understanding of culture for EFL learners. In other words, while it is important to impart factual knowledge about a culture through big "C" themes, it is also crucial to give learners a deeper insight into that culture by delving into its daily life aspects through small "c" themes. Therefore, by incorporating both types of culture in language instruction, it is argued that learners can achieve effective communication with the target language community.

## **1.2. Culture Categories**

Language instructors should acknowledge the fact that students who are studying a foreign language will be exposed to foreign cultures. With this in mind, to teach cultural topics effectively, teachers have variety cultural themes falling in three categories of the culture of the mother tongue, the culture of the language being learned, and a global culture that transcends geographical borders (Cortazzi, 1999).

First, the source culture refers to the learners' native culture, which is often used in foreign language teaching to encourage self-expression and cultural awareness. Integrating the source culture in foreign language teaching is believed to be a way for learners to understand their own culture and identify patterns that have been implicitly acquired. However, teaching the source culture alone does not lead to mutual understanding with others. Therefore, it is recommended by Byram (as cited in Merrouche, 2010) to teach learners the culture of the target language community, including their routines, rituals, attitudes, and beliefs, to promote successful communication.

Secondly, the target culture pertains to the cultural environment in which the target language serves as the principal means of communication (Ait Aissa, 2018, p. 84). For instance, the target culture(s) of Spanish is the culture of Spain, Mexico, Peru, and any country where Spanish is used as a mother tongue. Similarly, with EFL classes, the target cultures may include British, American, Australian, and Canadian cultures. Valette (1986) emphasized the significance of teaching the target culture in the classroom as it can foster cultural awareness, improve general knowledge, and provide insight into the life etiquette of the target community. Furthermore, Moran (2001) argues that exposure to the target culture enhances critical thinking by broadening cultural horizons. However, some teachers may exhibit negative attitudes towards the teaching of foreign cultures, fearing that it may lead to a loss of identity among learners (Yassine, 2012, p. 5). As such, it is crucial for teachers to approach the integration of the target culture into foreign language classes with sensitivity towards learners' identity. In this sense, an interpretive approach should be adopted in teaching culture, providing students, thus, with an understanding of the differences and similarities among societies (Yassine, 2012, p. 9).

Thirdly, international culture refers to a shared cultural understanding among individuals from different countries and cultural backgrounds. It encompasses cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices that are widely accepted and recognized across the globe such as human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech. In this respect, Kim and Yang (2015) argue that incorporating international culture into EFL classrooms helps learners develop intercultural competence and enhance their cross-cultural understanding which will eventually foster their global citizenship. However, some researchers have criticized the concept of international culture as oversimplifying complex cultural differences and reinforcing cultural hegemony (Liu, 2018).

## **1.3. Intercultural Competence in EFL**

The intercultural theory aims to prepare learners to reflect on cultural differences and similarities and to distinguish what is normal in one culture versus what is different in another one. As far as EFL is concerned, Intercultural Competence is considered as a combination of cognitive, behavioural, and psychological factors. Byram (1997) defines intercultural competence as having three components: intercultural knowledge (savoirs), intercultural skills (savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre/faire, and savoir s'engager), and intercultural attitudes

(savoirs etre). As such, projecting this theory into practice in the field of language teaching, three approaches can be identified to deal with the same cultural topic :

- Teaching Intercultural knowledge where teachers provide the cultural content to enrich learners' understanding of cultural facts about different social groups and, their products;
- Teaching intercultural skills that involve interpreting and relating those cultural products by acquiring new knowledge through interaction and discovery as well as comparing and contrasting cultural differences through critical thinking;
- Finally, teaching intercultural attitudes, which instil in learners open and positive mind-sets towards other cultures and a willingness to embrace and tolerate cultural differences. The objective is to avoid biased conclusions about other cultures and promote intercultural understanding.

## **2. Intercultural Competence in Algerian EFL Settings at the Middle School Level**

After having shed light on the fundamental approaches of teaching culture in general and teaching intercultural competence in particular, the following subtitles explore how intercultural competence is integrated into Algerian EFL settings in the middle school, examining its presence in the English curriculum, the practices of teachers, and the content of textbooks.

### **2.1. Intercultural Competence in Algerian English Curriculum**

The Algerian English curriculum, as outlined in its preface from 2016, prioritizes the development of communicative competence as the central focus of English language instruction. This shift from a traditional approach of linguistic knowledge transmission to a social constructivist view of language acquisition and interaction is emphasized in the curriculum. Beyond the development of communicative competence, the curriculum has five overarching objectives, including fostering linguistic tools for effective communication, promoting national and common values, cultivating critical thinking and tolerance, contributing to the formation of informed and responsible citizens, and providing access to science, technology, and world culture while avoiding cultural homogenization.

Intercultural competence is implicitly woven into the objectives of the curriculum, as evidenced by its emphasis on promoting intercultural knowledge through endorsement of cultural differences, and its aim to develop cultural awareness and tolerance. This is further supported by the fact that the focus of curriculum on communicative competence aligns with current intercultural perspectives in EFL teaching globally. As such, it can be argued that developing intercultural competence is a crucial aspect of English language instruction in Algeria.

This is reflected in the following quote from the Algerian curriculum, which highlights the central importance of communicative competence: "The Learning of English in the middle school aims "at primarily developing communicative competence in English" (Algerian curriculum, 2016). The curriculum further asserts that this objective extends beyond linguistic skills, as it is intended to foster values and methodological skills among learners. "English learning is intended to acquire learners with values, and methodological skills" (Algerian curriculum, 2016)

### **2.2. Intercultural Competence and Teachers' Practices**

Prioritizing learner centeredness, the Algerian curriculum of English at the middle school level outlines the responsibilities of English teachers to plan lessons to meet communicative objectives, designing tasks to promote critical thinking, adapting the textbook to meet learners' needs and abilities, organizing learners based on their learning styles and cognitive abilities, and conducting formative and summative assessments.

As such, while the curriculum positions teachers as facilitators, guides, and language mentors, it does not specify the role of an intercultural teacher. The curriculum also fails to assign responsibilities to teachers to promote cultural understanding and critical thinking about cultural differences. This suggests that, compared to communicative competence, the Algerian English curriculum provides limited room for intercultural competence. This is evident in the following quote from the curriculum, which outlines the responsibilities of English teachers: "The roles that the curriculum assigned to the teacher make the latter a facilitator, guide, and language mentor, but certainly not an intercultural teacher" (Algerian curriculum, 2016, p. 470).

### **2.3. Intercultural Competence in Algerian Textbooks**

English textbooks in Algeria have undergone substantial modifications since the country's independence. These modifications were implemented in succession to cater to the globalization requirements of English as a global language, which was reflected in the pedagogical transformations in language instruction. Additionally, the changes were intended to provide learners with a culturally diverse curriculum, with fewer stereotypical and prejudiced depictions. However, it was until the 2000s that the concept of intercultural competence began to emerge in foreign language education, including English textbooks.

In the 1970s, British textbooks were utilized in Algerian middle and secondary schools. These textbooks lacked cultural diversity, as they were designed for general learners and their focus was solely on improving linguistic competence. Hence, these textbooks were not expected to address different cultures, let alone the home or source culture, and authentic materials were also omitted, leaving room for linguistic support through "imaginary characters and artificial situations" drawn from British culture. For example, English Christmas celebration would introduce Algerian students to a cultural event that may be unfamiliar to them, but it would likely focus on the linguistic aspects of the celebration, such as vocabulary and grammar, rather than exploring the cultural significance or comparing it to Algerian traditions. This situation of English textbooks can be attributed to the instability in the Algerian educational system during the 1960s and 1970s. It should be remembered that the primary objective of Algeria's educational strategy was to establish an autonomous educational system with national identity and values, and thus, English culture was not a top priority in the educational reforms of the 1960s and 1970s.

The first Algerian English textbooks emerged in the 1980s, when radical reforms were implemented in various sectors, including politics and economy. Education was not an exception, and English textbooks underwent pedagogical changes in language teaching, along with incorporating cultural elements drawing from national identity. This change was rooted in the adoption of the functional/notional approach, where foreign language learners were expected to develop interactional skills and possess cultural knowledge of both the source and target cultures.

Yet, the cultural elements presented in textbooks from the 1980s were primarily centered around basic interactions between British culture, the target culture, and Algerian culture i.e. the source culture. Hamada (2011) noted that these textbooks did not prioritize any specific cultural values but instead highlighted interpersonal communication as essential for effective social interaction with foreigners. In this regard, it is worth remembering that what Hamada noted is reflected in the titles of textbooks in this era such as the famous textbook "Madjid in England and Andy in Algeria". Their aim was not to promote multiculturalism but rather to cultivate Algerian learners who could positively engage with the international community

In the 1990s, English textbooks were modified to align with the purposes of the famous communicative approach and cater to the cognitive capacities of younger primary school pupils. A set of nine English textbooks named "My Book of English 1, 2, 3, ..., 9" was introduced, comprising three books for each educational stage: primary, middle, and secondary school. However, despite addressing learners' needs with linguistic accuracy by prioritizing grammar and syntax, this series was criticized for its insufficient cultural content, both in terms of quantity and diversity.



By the 2000s, the educational core in Algeria was influenced by the Competency-Based Approach, drawing its philosophy from the learner-centeredness theory in teaching and learning. This influence was concretized in the 2005 reforms, with the collaboration of UNESCO, which agreed to fund the Algerian educational reforms, including the provision of ICTs in Algerian schools and teacher training programs. These reforms affected teaching materials, including English textbooks, but despite the promising reforms, the teaching of English at the primary school level was canceled. English was introduced in the first year of middle school with a broader scope of objectives, aimed at developing learners' knowledge, attitudes, and skills of interaction, interpretation, and production. The cultural content of the textbooks became more diverse, especially with the integration of ICTs, which allowed for a more engaging presentation of lessons.

The 2016 English curriculum came with suggestions for teachers, inspectors, and course designers, which included requirements for textbook writers to take into account certain methodological and linguistic considerations. One such consideration was the need for intercultural competence in the curriculum. To that end, the 2016 English curriculum emphasized that:

- The texts and images in the teaching materials should not exhibit bias and should enable the learner to compare and contrast with their own languages and cultures in order to enrich and empower them intellectually and emotionally;
- The textbook should also convey life skills and social values, including ethical behavior and nationalism, without belittling other cultures;
- The content should provide up-to-date, accurate, and precise information.

As a result of these requirements, a series of "second-generation" textbooks were introduced at the middle school level, including English. The preface of these English textbooks emphasized the universality of values, while also placing a strong emphasis on national identity and the source culture. The textbook designers stated that the cultural context of the books was intended to promote respect for cultural differences and positive attitudes towards others. In contrast to previous textbooks, over 80% of the linguistic support in the second-generation textbooks was contextualized in culture, be it the source or target/international culture (Dehda & Hocine, 2020, p. 2064).

Despite attempts to improve them, the textbooks were observed to favor the source culture, contrary to the English curriculum requirements established in 2016. This partiality risks promoting Algerian norms and values as universal in young learners who are in the stage of developing cultural patterns, as highlighted by Morsli and Riche (2019, p. 16). Furthermore, Merdaci and Baghzou (2021, p. 264) noted not only a preference for the source culture but also a bias towards European cultures, neglecting representation of other global cultures such as those from Asia and Africa. Regarding the development of intercultural skills and attitudes, the textbooks provided limited opportunities to nurture learners' curiosity, exploration, and positive attitudes towards different cultures (Chami, 2022).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of culture in foreign language education remains a contentious issue among scholars, with some advocating for its significance while others consider it inconsequential. However, there is a growing trend towards the development of intercultural competence in language education as the world becomes increasingly interconnected. The current overview focuses on the place of intercultural competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Algeria. It specifically presents the perspectives of teachers, the textbooks, and the curriculum in the Algerian middle school.

As far as culture is concerned, cultural topics are divided into two types: big "C" culture, representing a society's major achievements, and small "c" culture, which covers daily life. Both are essential for a complete cultural understanding. Additionally, culture can be grouped into the source culture, the culture where the

language is learned, and a global/target culture. Incorporating these aspects helps learners communicate effectively with the target language community.

The Algerian English curriculum prioritizes the development of communicative competence as its central focus and has five overarching objectives, including promoting national and common values, fostering linguistic tools for effective communication, cultivating critical thinking and tolerance, providing access to science, technology, and world culture, and forming informed and responsible citizens. Intercultural competence is implicit within the curriculum, with its emphasis on promoting intercultural knowledge and cultural awareness aligned with intercultural perspectives in EFL teaching.

While the curriculum outlines the responsibilities of English teachers, positioning them as facilitators, guides, and language mentors, it does not explicitly specify the role of an intercultural teacher. English textbooks in Algeria have undergone transformations since the country's independence to cater to globalization and provide a culturally diverse curriculum. Nonetheless, the cultural content remains limited in both quantity and diversity, particularly in earlier textbook series. The most recent textbook series adopts a Competency-Based Approach, yet still lacks sufficient cultural materials to fully encompass the important aspect of intercultural competence.

Last but not least, the development of intercultural competence in EFL education in Algeria is implicitly included in the curriculum and is reflected in the objectives of the English curriculum. However, further efforts are necessary to ensure the full integration of intercultural competence into EFL education, including explicitly specifying the role of intercultural teachers and incorporating a more diverse and comprehensive range of cultural materials in English textbooks. The advancement of intercultural competence in language education is imperative for promoting intercultural understanding, linguistic proficiency, and effective communication in today's globalized world.

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### Author's Biography

**Wahid Hamza Mohamed CHAMI** is an assistant professor at the National Higher School of Artificial Intelligence in Algiers where he teaches such modules as ESP, professional writing, and academic communication. He has a Ph.D. in didactics of English. Currently, he is interested in the cultural limitations of artificial intelligence in EFL context as well as Prompt Engineering with Large Language Models (LLMs).