

A Comparative Perspective of Intercultural Attitudes between Students of English and Students of Arabic: Does English as a Foreign Language Matter?

منظور مقارن لمواقف الاختلاف الثقافي بين طلبة اللغة الانجليزية وطلبة اللغة العربية: هل للغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية دور في ذلك؟

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Abstract:

Foreign language education became very fascinating and gained more interest than in the past decades. It drives students to learn and think in miscellaneous ways, as it deepens their understanding and appreciation to this rich and many-sided world. The objective of learning foreign languages in view of that is no longer fully recognized in terms of mastering the linguistic part of the language, but getting to grips with intercultural affairs including intercultural attitudes. This paper, therefore, reports an investigation about how much learning English as a foreign language may contribute in shaping the students' intercultural attitudes. A questionnaire was distributed to students of English and students of Arabic, accordingly. Based on the students' responses, the results revealed that the students of English were found to have more positive intercultural attitudes compared with the students of Arabic.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; Intercultural attitudes; Intercultural sensitivity scale; Language and culture; Students of English vs students of Arabic

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, the world witnessed an immense advance in the way of living, as it witnessed an increasing speed of technological diffusion across borders. Hence, learning more than one language is consequential for any individual to be able to easily communicate with foreigners and to act properly when coping with emergent configuration of people. It turned to be a requirement for most educational settings, because the world became increasingly globalized and multilingual. Likewise, learning foreign languages helps to develop a sense of awareness, acceptance and love towards the existing cultural differences between the individual's culture and the other cultures.

Given this situation, the English language is taught as a foreign language at the Department of Letters and English at Constantine 1, Mentouri Brothers University, and the students are expected to attain the objectives set to master this language. Further, the teachers are expecting the students, as an alternative objective, to broaden their intercultural perspectives relying on their learning of this lingua-franca knowing that there is no specific course pertinent to promoting intercultural learning in the department. Based on this, this paper aims to investigate whether English as a foreign language has a starring role in broadening the students' intercultural attitudes. Having set such an aim, this research stood on the hypothesis that learning English as a foreign language has the potential to positively lead the students to increase their intercultural attitudes in comparison to other students who were not exposed to this language to an adequate degree: the case of students of Arabic.

2. The Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Significance of English as a Foreign Language

Language plays a great role in the process of learning, and it is the medium through which the cultural meanings and representations are displayed. According to Foncha,

Sivasubramaniam, Adamson, and Nunn (2016, p. 1) “languages are learnt as a means of communication and interaction. Communication in its deep conceptualization is never used out of context, and because culture is a part of context, communication is never neutral or culture free”. Language, on that account is no longer a linguistic code to its full extent, but it is either a social practice having several functions including, as explained by Haliday, the instrumental, regulatory, representational, interactive, personal, heuristic, and imaginative function. (Abidin, 2021, p. 167)

In recent times, learning a supplementary language has become the concern of many individuals around the world due to the speedup of movements and exchanges which stressed the need to learn more than one language to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately in the target speech community, as well as to exchange ideas and communicate information effortlessly. Block and Cameron (2002, pp. 1-2) upheld that “the intensification of worldwide social relations also intensifies the need for members of global networks to develop competence in one or more additional languages, and/or to master new ways of using languages they know already.”

Nowadays, English is the dynamic language all over the world, where it is predominantly taught as the first foreign language in many countries. Byram (2008, p. 14) stated that governments paid particular attention to foreign language learning, stressing English as a language which is required in several countries. He considered it as synonymous with foreign language learning due to the British colonialism carried on later by the American supremacy in all the fields. Accordingly, many countries ended up with assenting to consider English as their foreign language adhering to the British and American norms of language use. Currently, the English language became a universal language which is used by different people all over the world for different purposes in different domains like education, trade, occupation, sports events and so forth.

Specifically, the incorporation of the English language in the educational systems all over the world turned out to be significant. In Algeria, the English language is notwithstanding considered as a foreign language after the standard Arabic and the French language which are respectively categorized as the official language and the second language. Teaching the English language used to commence in the middle school in the Algerian educational system; the students receive it at least seven years: four years at the middle school phase and three years in the secondary school. Actually, in the academic year 2022-2023, the English language in Algeria is gaining its credit and turning to be taught officially in the primary school phase along with the French language. At university, English is taught in formal classrooms to achieve educational purposes, while it is hardly ever used outside the classrooms to realize the communicative target. The students who have their hearts set on studying this foreign language satisfactorily have to opt for it as a field of study at university. Regarding the latest language policy, Algeria is witnessing a rapid language reform to implement English in a bid to replace French in all domains.

2.2 Intercultural Attitudes

The interconnection between language and culture necessitated the integration of the cultural aspects within the foreign language teaching and learning process. Many scholars and linguists stressed the idea that language reflects culture and cultures are influenced and shaped by language. Learning a foreign language in this case will be incomplete and cannot be achieved without the study of its cultural aspects; one cannot separate them (Brown, 1994, p. 165). Fishman (1991, cited in Schecter, 2014, p. 2014) assumed also that language and culture identity are indexically linked because a language that is firmly connected with culture is best supplied to display the cultural values and issues, in addition to reveal and place in context the cultural features and artifacts.

Scholarly research over the last decades has explored extensively the concept of

intercultural competence in foreign language education. Byram's intercultural competence model is the most exhaustive and the agreed-upon model, for it had an impact on educational programmes and teaching materials in many parts of the world (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2015). It consists of five components, Parmenter (2003, p. 109) explained. These components include attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Intercultural attitudes, accordingly, are considered as an essential requirement for being interculturally competent. They are different from the other components in that they refer to "either positive or negative responses a person has to another person with different cultural identity" (Yang, 2020, p. 39). Developing a positive intercultural attitude can make it possible for individuals to ward off troublesome intercultural encounters. In this regard, Chen and Starosta (1997, p. 5) pointed out that promoting appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural settings entails the development of a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural diversity.

In matters of cultural differences, a more positive attitude is essentially significant because it echoes the individuals' positive opinions, beliefs, feelings and tendencies; besides, it impacts their ability to react appropriately in culturally different situations. Huber and Reynolds (2014, p. 19) summarized a comprehensive set of attitudes to be adopted when dealing with intercultural experiences; these attitudes are related to

- attaching importance to cultural diversity and appreciating different views and practices;
- showing consideration for people who belong to culturally different groups;
- listening with open minded and seeking more information from people who have different cultural orientations and perspectives;
- empathizing with people who do not share with us similar cultural backgrounds;

- performing exploratory questions;
- tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty and
- looking for opportunities and being involved in intercultural interactions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research is descriptive as it is principally concerned with investigating the students' intercultural attitude; that is, to find out how much students of English are interculturally competent in comparison to students of Arabic. As far as the research approach is concerned, the quantitative approach appeared to be more suitable to the nature of the research and the collection data instrument. The researcher went through a quantitative research design mainly the survey design non-experimental as the following sections will demonstrate.

3.2 Research Participants

In the current research, students of English and students of Arabic at the University of Mentouri Brothers, Constantine 1 were chosen as participants for this research. A sample composed of 180 students was selected. Ninety (90) students were selected from third year students of English where all of them have English as their field of study. The other ninety (90) students were selected from third year students of Arabic, and the researcher ensured that they studied English only as a subject matter in the different educational levels; in other words, the selected participants of Arabic did not receive any regular or extensive courses in English. Random sampling was used due to reasons related to the easiness to conduct this type of sampling, in addition to the fact that it removes all hints of bias. The reason behind selecting some students from the Department of English and some other students from the Department of Arabic is to make a kind of comparison between the two groups' intercultural attitudes. Third year students of English were selected because they studied English for three

years; they are likely to develop a sense of familiarity and acceptance towards the target culture. Students of Arabic are selected for the comparison target.

3.3 Research Instrument

A Likertscale questionnaire was used as a research tool to pursue this inquiry. It was adopted from Chen & Starosta (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. It is composed of one section, involving twenty four statements (24). The students were asked to point out the degree to which they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statements. Through the use of the Likertscale, it was looked up mainly to know about the students' different attitudes regarding interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The Likertscale questionnaire was distributed at Mentouri Brothers, Constantine 1 University to ninety students of Arabic and ninety students of English. As for the students of Arabic, the scale was given in English language accompanied with the appropriate translation of the twenty four statements in Arabic in order to make the task possible for the participants. The two versions of the scale were administrated to the participants in their ordinary studying sessions. The participants were given some explanation regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and freedom of thought before they completed the scale.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Comparison of the Two Groups Participants Result

4.1.1 Comparison of the Two Groups Participants' Overall Results

Table 1. The Two Groups Participants’ Overall Results

	Scores of the Participants of English	Scores of the Participants of Arabic
N= 90	8367	7428
Mean	$\bar{X} = 92.97$ (77.48%)	$\bar{X} = 82.53$ (68.78%)
Mode	93 and 100	85
Low score	77	73
High score	103	94

Source: made by the researcher

When observing the results displayed in table (1), one can see that the mean score achieved by the participants of Arabic (82.53) is lower than that achieved by the participants of English (92.97). Similarly, the mode of the participants of English (93 and 100) is elevated than that of the participants of Arabic (85). The dispersion aspects also demonstrate that the lowest score displayed by the participants of Arabic (73) is lower than that displayed by the students of English (77). On the other hand, the best score displayed by the participants of English (103) is higher than that obtained by the participants of Arabic (94). So far, comparisons of the means, central tendency, and dispersion aspects are in favor of a general indication that the participants of English are better in having positive intercultural attitudes than the participants of Arabic, which may imply that the research findings move in the direction of our stated hypothesis. However, it will be only through using a statistical test that this apparent difference must be justified.

4.1.1.1 T-test for the Scores of the Participants of English and Participants of Arabic

Table 2. Comparison of the Overall Results between Participants of English and Participants of Arabic

Intercultural	Participants	Mean	SS	df	t	p
Effectiveness Scale	Students of English	92.97	4196.9	88	10.65	<.00001
	Students of Arabic	82.53	3496.4			

p < 0.05, one-tailed

Source: made by the researcher

For degrees of freedom (88) related to 0.05 level of significance and for one tailed hypothesis, the p value is < .00001. The results can be proved as statistically significant, because the computed t of 10.64592/ (10.65) is higher than the p value at p < .05. Therefore, the students of English are better than the students of Arabic in adopting intercultural attitudes.

4.1.2 Comparison of the Two Groups Participants' Results of Individual Subscales

■ Interaction Engagement

Table 3. Comparison of the Students Means in Interaction Engagement

Groups	Mean/ 35
Students of English	27.5
Students of Arabic	25.83

Source: made by the researcher

As revealed in the table above, both groups of students show readiness to interact with people from different cultures, though the mean score of the students of English (27.5)

is slightly higher than that of the students of Arabic (25.83) in relation to interaction engagement. This can be explained by the fact that students of English and Arabic gained currently more chances in interacting with people who are interculturally different in comparison to the past. The advancement of technology in the modern days, including the immediacy of communication, is enabling the students around the globe connect to the outside world and keep in regular touch over vast distances. Most importantly, mastering the English language, the case of the participants of English, is also a salient element in any intercultural interaction considering that it is a global language which has the power of connecting individuals from many different cultures.

▪ **Respect for Cultural Differences**

Table 4. Comparison of the Students Means in Respect for Cultural Differences

Groups	Mean /30
Students of English	24.57
Students of Arabic	19.90

Source: made by the researcher

As displayed in the table above, the mean score of the students of English (24.57) is elevated than that of the students of Arabic (19.90) regarding respect for cultural differences. This indicates that the students of English show more respect and understanding to individuals of all cultures. This could be justified by the fact that the students of English had studied English for over three years, and throughout this period they unconsciously develop a sense of respect towards the differences that exist at least between their culture and the western culture. The students of English got to know deeply the English cultural aspects through the act of reading in the target language, speaking to native speakers, watching English movies and documentaries, listening to English music etc. The students of Arabic

seem to appreciate the cultural differences as well but not to a high extent, and this is maybe because they are restricted to one atmosphere. They develop a strong feeling of love towards their culture due to the extensive exposure to the Arabic cultural and identity aspects to the extent that some of the students consider that their own culture is better than any other culture.

■ Interaction Confidence

Table 5. Comparison of the Students Means in Interaction Confidence

Groups	Mean/ 25
Students of English	18.30
Students of Arabic	14.90

Source: made by the researcher

Table (5) demonstrates that the mean score of the students of Arabic (14.90), with reference to interaction confidence, is lower than that of the students of English (18.30). Conceivably, the students of English have more confidence in themselves when they get in touch with people from different cultures, knowing that they have the required linguistic knowledge, as well as they are prepared academically to face those situations where they have to deal with people who are culturally different. One of the basic requirements for a successful intercultural communication is mastering the language skills; otherwise, the individuals will seem linguistically insecure in view of the feeling of tension and apprehension related to using a language which is not theirs or not spoken by the other. The students of Arabic may experience these insecure linguistic situations when they have to deal with people from different cultures.

■ **Interaction Enjoyment**

Table 6. Comparison of the Students Means in Interaction Enjoyment

Groups	Mean/ 15
Students of English	11.37
Students of Arabic	10.50

Source: made by the researcher

As demonstrated in table (6), the mean score of the students of English (11.37) appeared to be very slightly higher than that of the students of Arabic (10.50). This is an indication that both students of English and Arabic are viewing life from different perspectives as they have positive attitudes towards foreign cultures. Yet again, this can be attributed to the emergence of technology and the blinded use of social media which lead cultures to survive together closely. One can notice that the students of English and Arabic, in comparison to the past, are establishing different ways of thinking and approaching cultural diversity with appreciation, the reason why they show joy in intercultural encounters.

■ **Interaction Attentiveness**

Table 7. Comparison of the Students Means in Interaction Attentiveness

Groups	Mean /15
Students of English	11.50
Students of Arabic	11.20

Source: made by the researcher

Regarding the interaction attentiveness, from table (7), one can observe that the mean score of the students of Arabic (11.20) is a little bit lower than that of the students of English (11.50), though they can be taken similar. This subscale indicates that both of the groups of the students tend to wait before engaging themselves in interaction with people

from different cultures, because either they do not own the required level to communicate effectively or they are afraid to commit mistakes and be exposed to laughter; this can be the case of some students of Arabic who do not have the necessary linguistic repertoire to engage in intercultural interactions. Thus, taking the time, stepping back and observing the intercultural situations is indispensable so that the individuals know how to gauge responses specifically if they lack a specific and sufficient knowledge about the target culture.

5. CONCLUSION

Due to the scientific, industrial and technical development in the recent years and the growing interdependence of the world's cultures and populations, the need to know more than one language became an important issue to communicate ideas and exchange different perspectives, information, and interests. Therefore, the successful learning of a foreign language does not require mostly the linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and so on. In fact, it requires the students to develop intercultural competence. The inseparable relationship between language and culture has been the subject matter of many researchers and almost most of them stated that learning a foreign language will be unserviceable if the cultural aspect is not taught and totally marginalized.

This research sheds light on the specific dialectical relationship between the foreign language learning and the students' intercultural attitudes. This relationship has been the major concern of English language educators that persistently sought to develop and change the students' attitudes towards the other cultures, and therefore to improve and develop their intercultural communicative competence. The findings have proved the validity of the hypothesis set for this research that foreign language learning has the potential to positively affect the students' intercultural attitudes, as it has been found that the students of English are better than the students of Arabic in terms of interaction engagement, confidence,

attentiveness, enjoyment, and respect for cultural differences. The findings correspondingly were enough to confirm that learning an additional language is basically an intercultural practice that takes the learners beyond their cultural ordinary environment and communicative practices. Because learning English is only one of the factors of boosting the students' intercultural competence, future research can investigate the effectiveness of other factors: other foreign languages as an example.

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6. Appendix

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

Please, put (X) corresponding to your answer in the appropriate box.

5 = strongly agree 4 = agree 3 = uncertain 2 = disagree 1 = strongly disagree

N	Statements	5	4	3	2	1
1	I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.					
2	I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.					
3	I am pretty sure of myself when interacting with people from different cultures.					
4	I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.					
5	I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.					
6	I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.					

7	I don't like to be with people from different cultures.					
8	I respect the values of people from different cultures.					
9	I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.					
10	I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.					
11	I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.					
12	I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.					
13	I am open-minded to people from different cultures.					
14	I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.					
15	I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.					
16	I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.					
17	I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.					
18	I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.					
19	I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.					
20	I think my culture is better than other cultures.					
21	I often give positive responses to my culturally-different counterpart during our interaction.					

22	I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.					
23	I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.					
24	I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.					

Note

- Items 2, 4, 7,9,12, 15, 18, 20 and 22 are reverse coded before summing the 24 items.
- Items of interaction engagement are 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, and 24.
- Items of respect for cultural differences are 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, and 20.
- Items of interaction confidence are 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10.
- Items of interaction enjoyment are 9, 12, and 15.
- Items of interaction attentiveness are 14, 17, and 19.