



Avoiding the Use of Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication via the Development of Learners' Cultural Awareness at the Department of Letters and English, University of Frères Mentouri Constantine 1



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Abstract

Due to the tide of globalization, intercultural communication has become an essential link in the onerous chain of evolution. Thus, scholars are increasingly casting light on the concept and significant number of works is carried out in order to find ways that help to achieve efficient intercultural communication as well as to overcome the linguistic and cultural obstacles one may come across in intercultural environments. One of the most discussed topics, in regards to the obstacles, is stereotyping, since it is believed that it has a direct impact on the perceptions and interpretations, and so the effectiveness of intercultural communication. Therefore, the present paper endeavours to investigate the influence of stereotypes on intercultural communication, and how the method of raising learners' cultural awareness enables the weakening of their negative effects. In order to collect data, about the role cultural awareness plays in combating the negative impacts of stereotyping on intercultural communication, a questionnaire is used as a research tool. The questionnaire is administered to a sample of 100 master students that was extracted from a population of 327 master two students at the department of Letters and English, University of Frères Mentouri Constantine 1. The obtained results disclosed that the development of cultural awareness constitute an efficient tool to deal with the process of stereotyping in intercultural communication.

Keywords

Intercultural Communication;
Cultural Awareness;
Stereotypes.

الكلمات المفتاحية

التواصل بين الثقافات ؛
الوعي الثقافي؛
الصور النمطية.

تجنب استخدام الصور النمطية في التواصل بين الثقافات من خلال تنمية الوعي الثقافي لدى المتعلمين في قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية جامعة الأخوة منتوري قسنطينة

ملخص

وبسبب مد العولمة، أصبح التواصل بين الثقافات حلقة أساسية في سلسلة التطور الشاقة. وبالتالي، يلقي الباحثون الضوء بشكل متزايد على المفهوم ويتم تنفيذ عدد كبير من الأعمال من أجل إيجاد طرق تساعد على تحقيق التواصل الفعال بين الثقافات وكذلك التغلب على العقبات اللغوية والثقافية التي قد يواجهها المرء في البيئات متعددة الثقافات. من أكثر المواضيع التي تمت مناقشتها فيما يتعلق بالعوائق هي القوالب النمطية، حيث يُعتقد أن لها تأثيراً مباشراً على التصورات والتفسيرات، وبالتالي على فعالية التواصل بين الثقافات. ولذلك تسعى هذه الورقة إلى دراسة تأثير الصور النمطية على التواصل بين الثقافات، وكيف أن أسلوب رفع الوعي الثقافي لدى المتعلمين يمكن من إضعاف آثارها السلبية. ومن أجل جمع البيانات حول الدور الذي يلعبه الوعي الثقافي في مكافحة الآثار السلبية للقوالب النمطية على التواصل بين الثقافات، تم استخدام استبيان كأداة بحث. تم تطبيق الاستبانة على عينة مكونة من 100 طالب ماستر تم استخراجها من مجتمع يبلغ 327 طالب ماستر بقسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية جامعة الأخوة منتوري قسنطينة 1. وقد كشفت النتائج المتحصل عليها أن تنمية الوعي الثقافي تشكل وسيلة فعالة أداة للتعامل مع عملية الصور النمطية في التواصل بين الثقافات.

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I- Introduction :

In the present time, socio-cultural aspects occupy a notable position in foreign language education, and an important amount of works has been dedicated to exploring the culture-oriented language pedagogy. Nevertheless, little light is casted on the notion of stereotypes, which constitutes a worth-exploring ground for further expansion and research on the matter; i.e. the significant impact stereotypes have on intercultural communication. To explain it more, despite the fact that foreign language teaching classes are increasingly shifting their focus on the coactive relationship of language and culture, as well as the development of learners' cultural awareness, they are putting little emphasis on the role socio-cultural representations serve in influencing learners' perceptions and Interpretations which significantly hinders the quality and efficiency of the learning and communication. With this in mind, for intercultural communication to be successful, learners should be aware of how stereotypes can impact their learning and performance, and that foreign language learning should obey the equation of awareness of socio-cultural aspects in foreign language learning equals successful intercultural communication. Therefore, FLT classes should give due importance to these interpretations that may lead to misinterpretations and communication breakdowns and failure.

On the basis of what has been said so far, and as explained previously, the little attention that has been given to the notion of stereotypes in foreign language education, the following article is undertaken.

The present work aims at investigating the impact stereotypes have on intercultural communication and how the promotion of learners' cultural awareness plays a role to remedy the communication problems it may result in. Thus, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- How can the process of stereotyping hinder Intercultural Communication?
- Does the development of learners' cultural awareness have an impact on the process of stereotyping? Is it positive for intercultural communication?

In the light of the aforementioned questions, it is hypothesized that if foreign language learners developed their level of cultural awareness, it would minimize the obstacles engendered by their use in intercultural communication making this latter more efficient.

I.1. The Process of Stereotyping and Intercultural Communication:

Nowadays, the term stereotype holds the definition of a set of traits and characteristics that are related to a particular social group. In other words, it is the fact that members of a particular group are said to share the same characteristics, such as, being shy, kind, or talkative. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), stereotypes are defined as "attributes that an individual ascribes to a social group" (p. 104). Similarly, Davindo and Gaertner (1999) define stereotypes as an "overgeneralization about a group or its members" (p.101). That is, stereotypes are simplified representations in peoples' head about a specific group of society. They are a set of beliefs that a particular social group holds a number of characteristics. They attribute certain characteristics to a specific group, nationality, or race (Bordalo, Coffman, & Shleifer, 2016).

In addition, the characteristics attributed in the process of stereotyping are shared by members that belong to the same community, and their acquisition is sub-conscious and part of the socialization procedure. That is, the fact that one person belongs to a specific social group can be determined through the sharing of traits and characteristics that draw the distinction between different groups and communities, and these boundaries are drawn in an unconscious manner. Individuals simplify simple and complex information and attribute it via the cognitive process of categorization. According to Krieglmeier and Sherman (2012), this categorization meets the psychological needs of humans and is produced in an automatic way. Therefore, one can say that stereotypes are social phenomena (Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996) which formation and activation is outside of conscious awareness.

Before pursuing with modern definitions of stereotypes, the origin of the term is worth examining. The latter can be traced back to 1992. It was used in early printing methods where pictures and letters were collected together and secured within a frame. The frame was then covered with ink and pressed on a sheet of paper or fabric in order to transfer the product. The frame was called, at that time, a "stereotype" due to its main function of replicating the same image or text multiple times. Building on the frame's function, Lippman (1922) used the term in order to refer to the cognitive phenomena as defined earlier in this section.

In regards to the origin of the concept, it started as early as the star of the western civilization (Chew et al., 2006). It was known as "national character" (ibid.), and was used in order to refer to foreigners in some early descriptions. To explain it more, at that time, people from different countries and nationalities were classified under a number of governmental systems via labelling them with certain characteristics. An important example would be the one of Montesquieu's known climate theory. This theory is called « North-South Model ». It stipulates two main points:

- First, cold climate makes Northern men "vigorous and virtuous, honest and hard-working, rational and reflective",
- Second, warm climate makes Southern men "temperamental, impulsive, highly sensitive and indolent" (Chew et al., 2006, 181).

As the study was carried on, the traditional notion was changed to a more precized one and was replaced by "national stereotype" (Chew et al., 2006, 180). Stereotypes became regarded as "the tendency to characterize individuals

or groups according to an oversimplified standardized image and attribute certain characteristics to all members of the group" (Moore, 2006, cited in Peng, 2010, P. 244), and the first fields of study about stereotypes concerned race, ethnicity, and nationality (Ashmore and Del Boca, 1981, cited in Spencer-Rodgers, 2001).

To the process of stereotyping is often attributed the adjective of invalidity. That is, it is considered as a process of generalization that is based on non-valid data conducted from non-scientifically studied or analysed segments of population; therefore, it often leads to untrue conclusions. On example would be of a person that attributes the traits of being shy and introvert to Japanese people based only on a conversation with one colleague from Japan. In this case, it can be observed that, the person built an idea about a social group without any knowledge at hand about people from that country (Jandt, 2017).

I. 2. The Negative Impacts of Stereotypes:

According to Matusiz (2012), in the process of stereotyping individuals build an idea in which they "know about the category to which he or she feels the others belongs" (p.90). That is, they enter a process of judgement that results in misunderstanding situations with other groups of people. According to Spencer-Rodgers (2001), stereotypes are formed on the basis of a single dimension; such as nationality, and each dimension leads to an attributed characteristics. Thus, people may find themselves with a set of different stereotypes to choose from; as a result, it could be a source of controversy. A relevant example of how a person can be stereotyped differently is the one given by Kunda and Sinclair (1999) about an Asian American woman and her faculties in Maths. The example can be summarized as follows:

On the one hand, due to the fact that she was Asian, she was stereotyped as being highly-skilled at Maths but some people. On the other hand, she was stereotyped as being weak in Maths on accounts of her gender.

Taking into account Kunda and Sinclair's example, one can notice that individuals may attribute partial stereotypes on the basis of their motivation.

The research conducted by Hepburn and Locksley (1983) constitutes an interesting example of the fact that stereotypes cause misunderstandings that hinder effective intercultural communication. They found that Japanese and Chinese people are perceived similarly on accounts of their physical appearance. As a matter of fact, Chinese and Japanese present dissimilarities of national character. Japanese show more interest in flexible relationships and individual contributions (Matsumoto, 2002, cited in Peng, 2010). Thus, misunderstandings are a direct cause of stereotypes, and it may result in communication failure.

In addition of being a source of misunderstandings, stereotypes lead to prejudices. In some cases, stereotypes create a reinforcement of self-esteem making individuals feel as they belong to a superior group. This reinforcement is a cause of intergroup discrimination (Schadev and Bourhis, 1987, cited in matusitz, 2012). For instance, foreign students are usually judged as having "passive and withdrawn interpersonal styles" (Paige, 1990, cited in Pederson, 1991, cited in Spence-Rodgers and Mc Govern, 2002, P. 613). Another example is the one of American students who attributed negative characteristics to Japanese and German after World War 2 (Peng, 2010), which may result in ethnic conflicts and communication breakdowns.

I. 3. Stereotypes and Cultural Awareness:

Cultural awareness refers to the fact of « being aware of members of another cultural group : their expedition, their perspectives and values. It also means attempting to understand their reasons for their actions and beliefs » (Corratzi & Jinn, 1999, p. 217). That is, being culturally aware means having knowledge about members of other cultural communities and groups, and the features that govern their ways of perceiving and interpreting things around them. Therefore, students who develop their cultural sensitivity as a skill become able to understand the aspects and guiding systems of cultural otherness. This understanding equips them with the ability to switch from monocultural to multicultural individuals, this is what Byram (1991) call « a modification of monocultural awareness ». In addition, it promotes learners level of curiosity and tolerance towards what is different, and prepare them to deal with the differences without developing judgmental opinions.

In plain words, cultural awareness prevents from the foundation and application of stereotypes. It works directly on its root which is eliminating rigidity of ideas and beliefs and makes individuals open-minded and and forbearing. Therefore, via promoting cultural awareness learners are believed to unconsciously avoid stereotyping dimensions like mannerism, lifestyles, behaviours, and national appearance. In addition, taking into account the fact that stereotyping is a sub-conscious process, the fact that individuals learn about the divergences that exist between groups and communities makes them more aware of the cognitive nature of the stereotyping process and its working system. Thus, they become more able to avoid overgeneralizations, underperformances, prejudices and discriminations, and non-appreciation of diversity that hinders intercultural communication resulting in breakdowns and failure.

II– Methods and Materials:

II–1. Methodology:

The present study aims at investigating the impact stereotypes have on intercultural communication and how the development of learners' cultural sensitivity helps in overcoming the obstacles created by their use. On this ground, a questionnaire includes 10 questions divided into 03 sections. The three sections are presented as follows:

- Section One: « Participants Background information ». This section encompasses the informants' personal information. That is, their age, gender, and speciality.
- Section two: « Stereotypes and intercultural communication ». This section deals with students' level of knowledge about the notion of stereotypes and their impact on their learning and communication.
- Section Three: « Cultural awareness and stereotypes ». This section aims at collecting data about students' opinion about the influence of the promotion of their cultural awareness on the process of stereotyping in intercultural communication.

The items of the questionnaire include different types of questions. First, open-ended questions are included in order to give more flexibility for the participants to give their opinion freely. Second, closed questions are used for the purpose of gathering more precised data. The precision of the collected information is related to the short number of options related to the questions. Finally, a question table is included in order to detect and evaluate points of convergence and polarization. At the closure of the questionnaire, informants are given the opportunity to add further information that they might find worthwhile mentioning.

II–2. Population and Sampling:

The present experiment was conducted during the academic year 2021-2022 on a randomly selected sample of one hundred (100) master two students. The sample was extracted from a population of three hundred twenty-seven (327) master two students at the department of Letters and English of the University of Frères Mentouri Constantine 1. That is, the sample represents 31% of the population. Master two students are believed to have more experience which gives validity to the experiment. In addition, their advanced language level makes the process of administration and collection of data, and makes them in a better position to provide feedback on stereotypes and cultural awareness. On the basis of these reasons, the sample was selected.

II–3. Data Analysis:

The return rate of the questionnaire was of 100%. The total number of completed questionnaires was 100 questionnaires. The process of administration, completion and return of the questionnaires was in a period of three (03) days.

Concerning the content of the research tool, it included three (03) sections. The first section was concerned with 'Participants' background information'. It includes three (03) questions about age, gender, and study speciality, and seeks at defining participants' profiles. The results revealed that the sample is made of 72% of participants aged between 23 and 24, and 28% of participants aged between 25 and 27. The age of the informants bespeaks the fact that they have more chance to be familiar with the different variables of the study (stereotypes, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication). Moreover, the question related to gender displayed that the majority of the students are females; 66 females and 34 males. That is, a percentage of 66% and 34% respectively. Finally, the speciality question reveals that the highest number of completed questionnaires was held by students of linguistics (41%), followed by students of didactics (30%), and then students of literature and civilization (29%). The collected data of the first section can be detailed in the following figures :

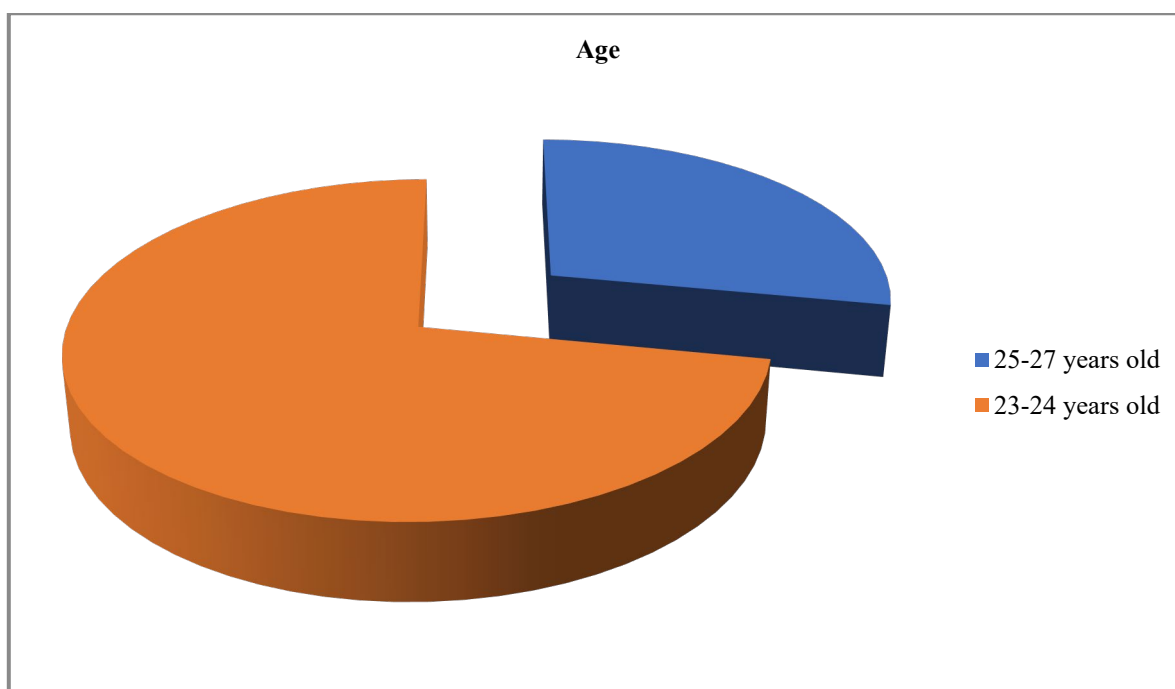


Figure 01: Participants' Age

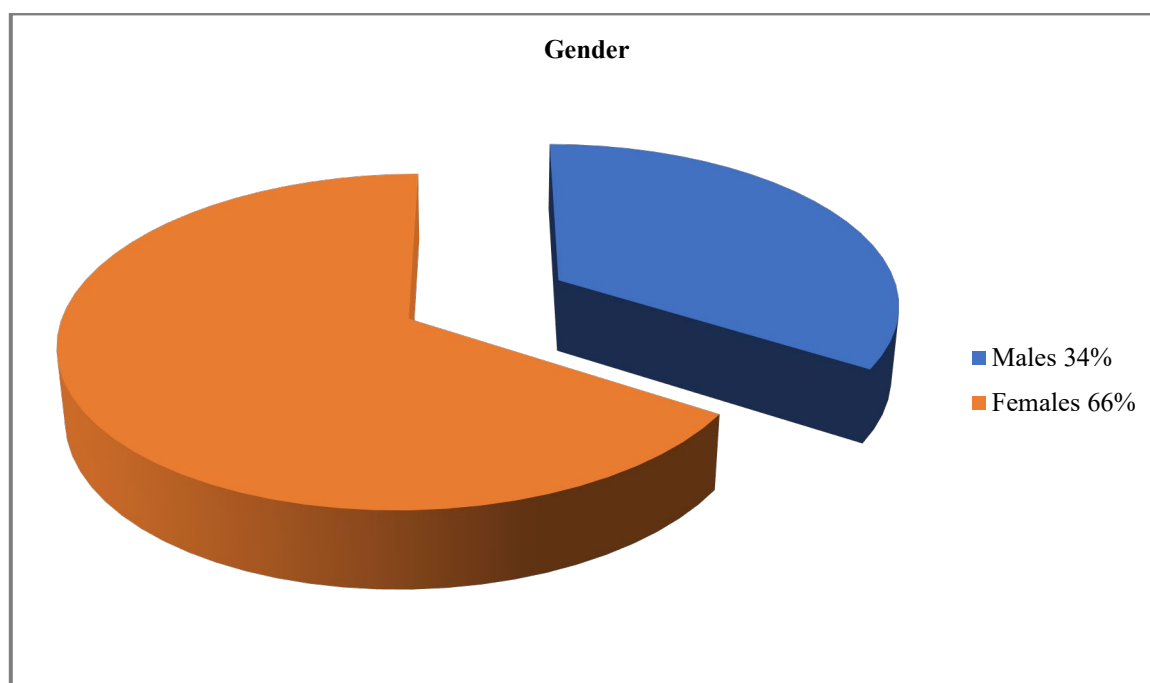


Figure 02: Participants' Gender

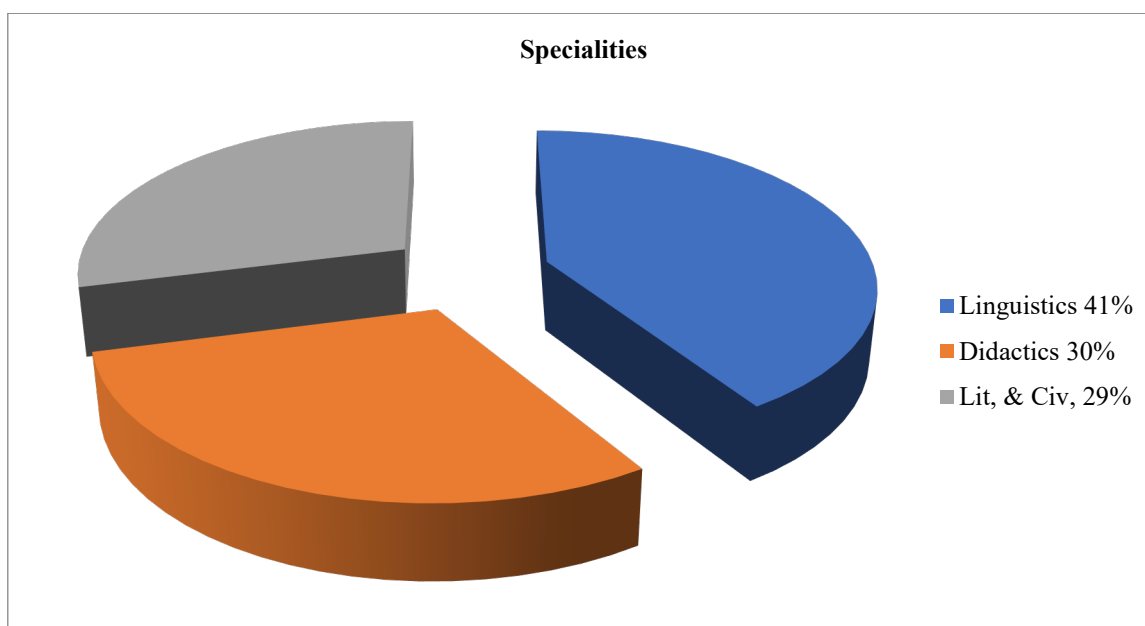


Figure 03: Participants' Study Specialities

Therefore, on the basis of the collected data, one can say that the answers enabled a clear depiction of the sample.

Second is the section called 'Stereotypes and intercultural communication'. This section includes three (03) questions. The first question aims at collecting information about the students' degree of familiarity with the notion of stereotypes and their impact on intercultural communication. The gathered results revealed that 67% of the participants (67 students) are familiar with the concept of stereotyping, and define it as the fact of 'attributing a characteristic to a specific group or nationality'. 21 % of the participants (21 students) defined it as 'an etiquette that a specific group hold in order to be represent its members among other communities'. 12% of the participants (12 students) did not answer the question. The second question aims at collecting data about students' views on the impact the process of stereotyping has on intercultural communication. The participants were asked to tick 'Yes' or 'No', and if 'Yes', to precise whether it was a positive or a negative impact. The answers displayed that there is an equilibrium of rate; 44% of the students answered 'Yes', and 44% of the students answered 'No'. The remaining 12 participants did not answer the question. In addition, 61, 36 % (52 students) of the informants who answered the question think that stereotypes have a positive influence on intercultural communication, whereas the remaining 38.64 of them (17 students) think that they have negative impact on intercultural communication. The third question aims at collecting information about students' degree of knowledge about some existing stereotypes about both their country and foreign countries. The results showed that the students consider themselves more aware of the stereotypes that concern other countries than the ones that concerns their country. The results can be detailed as follows:

Students' Opinion	01	02	03	04	05
Their Country	17%	10%	//	45%	28%
Other Countries	21%	47%	28%	04%	//

Table 01: Students' Degree of Knowledge about Existing Stereotypes

Therefore, the second section of the questionnaire reveals that most of EFL students at the English Department of the University of Frères Mentouri Constantine 1 are familiar with the notion of stereotypes, and have certain knowledge about some stereotypes that exists concerning their country as well as other countries. Nevertheless, most of the students ignore the negative impact stereotypes have on their performance in regards to intercultural communication.

Last is the third section 'Cultural awareness and stereotypes'. It includes four questions. The first question deals with students' degree of knowledge about the cultural awareness. An open-ended question with no limited options to select from. The majority of the participants; 87 % of students (87 students), were able to define the concept, and their answers were centred around the following three points:

- 'Cultural awareness is the fact of being aware of what defines foreign cultures and differentiates them from one's native culture'
- 'The ability to understand and accept what is different from native culture and to seek at understanding it'.
- 'The ability to communicate efficiently with people from other cultures without judging them'

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Concerning the remaining number of participants; 9% (09 students), they provide irrelevant answers, and 4% (04 students), did not provide an answer to the question. Through the second question students' viewpoints about the relationship between cultural awareness and stereotypes is investigated. The participants were provided with two options; yes or no, and the results were as follows:

Yes	No
69%	31%

Table 02: Students' points of view concerning the Relationship between Stereotypes and Cultural Awareness

Then, learners were asked, via an open-ended question, to precise the nature of that relationship. The response rate of this question was of 50.72%. That is, only 35 students answered this question. The provided answers were collected, simplified and surveyed in the following table:

	Number of Answers
- Knowing foreign cultures prevents from stereotypes and negative judgments	12
- Stereotyping is due to the lack of cultural awareness	15
- Cultural awareness is a solution against stereotypes	8

Table 03: Students' viewpoints concerning the nature of the relationship between stereotypes and cultural awareness

In the third question of the section, the students were provided with a number of statements that represents common stereotypes, and were asked to tick the appropriate case; whether the statements were true or untrue for them. The table question included five statements that deal with five different dimensions of stereotypes; race, age, physical appearance, nationality, and gender. The results are shown via the following table:

Statements	True	Untrue
Black people are aggressive	85%	15%
Old people are forgetful	68%	22%
Asian people are small	94%	6%
People from USA are rude	65%	35%
Men are better at Maths than women	70%	30%
Average of stereotyping	76.4%	21.6%

Table 04: Participants' opinions about negative stereotypes

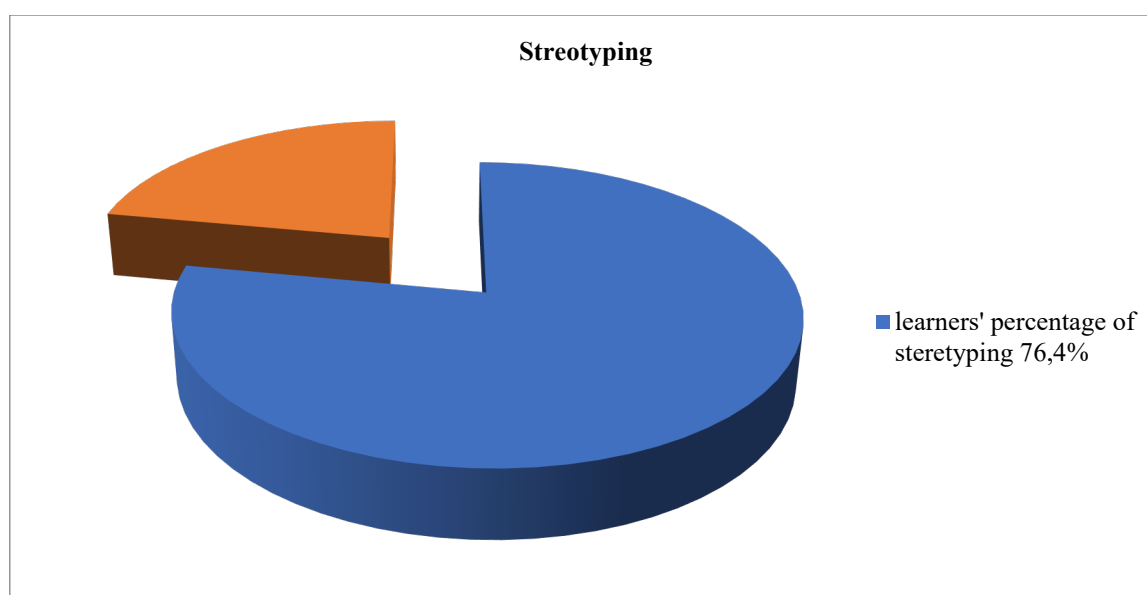


Figure 04: Participants' Degree of Stereotyping- from the table question-

The last question of the section was included as an opportunity for participants to add information that they find important to state at the closure of the questionnaire. The response rate of this question was of 11 %; i.e., only eleven students provided an answer. The answers are presented through the following three suggestions:

- Stereotypes are interesting to learn and to introduce in the curriculum
- Cultural awareness should be introduced as an entire module and notions like stereotypes should be included as lessons
- One needs to know how he/she is stereotyped and how others are stereotyped as well, in order not to fall in the trap of negative judgements.

III-Results and discussion:

The cornerstone of the present study is the influence of stereotypes on intercultural communication and the role of the development of learners' cultural awareness in decreasing the negative consequences engendered by them. The obtained results of this research paper show that the process of stereotyping (dependent variable) has a huge influence on EFL students' intercultural communication, and the promotion of cultural awareness (independent variable) constitutes a mean to lessen the results of this negative influence. In fact, most of the students were able to define the main concepts of the study; stereotypes and cultural awareness, and a number of them were able to define the existent relationship that exists between the two. Moreover, the answers showed that EFL learners at the University of Constantine 1 consider themselves as having knowledge about the stereotypes of foreign countries. In addition to that, most of the participants are aware of the impact the process of stereotyping has on intercultural communication. Nevertheless, the majority of students consider this impact as positive and do not measure its negative consequences on their performances. Besides, the results gathered from the third question of the third section reported that despite the fact that a considering number of students have knowledge of stereotypes, they showed a big percentage of acceptance and use of them. In plain words, most students demonstrated that they obey the rules of stereotyping through agreeing with a number of stereotypes. This abeyance is due to their low level of cultural awareness as well as the fact they believe that stereotypes provide relevant information and have a positive impact on communication (shown via the results obtained from the second question of the second section). Hencefore, it is worth mentioning that the previously stated hypothesis, which is if EFL learners developed their level of cultural awareness, it would avoid using stereotypes in intercultural communication making it smooth and efficient, is confirmed. Accordingly, taking into account the findings of the present research work would be valuable for the sake of promoting EFL learners' cultural awareness.

IV-Conclusion:

The findings of the present article demonstrate the huge influence of stereotyping on intercultural communication, and the pivotal role the promotion of cultural awareness plays in overcoming the various obstacles engendered from them. The theoretical review of this study meets the final results. That is, the fact that the development of cultural awareness is an interesting method to combat stereotyping and to make intercultural communication more efficient, concords with the information collected from the answers of the participants. Therefore, in the light of the obtained results, the questions formulated previously were answered. In a nutshell, the present research calls for the urge and importance of shedding light on the development of learners' cultural sensitivity, and to raising their awareness in regards to the negative impact of stereotyping on intercultural communication.

- Appendices:

Dear students,

The present questionnaire is part of a research work entitled « Avoiding the Use of Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication via the Development of Learners' Cultural Awareness ». Your participation would be of a great help.

When answering, please tick/ circle the appropriate answer/box or use full statements when necessary.

Thank you in advance for your help and valuable time!

a. Section One:

1. Age:

2. Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

3. Speciality:

b. Section Two :

1. We often hear about the notion of « stereotypes ». According to you, what does it refer to?

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. According to you, does the process of stereotyping impact individuals' intercultural communication?

Yes ☐ No ☐

- If yes, in what manner,

Positively ☐ Negatively ☐

3. As an EFL student, how would you evaluate your degree of knowledge about the stereotypes assimilated to both your country, and other countries? Please tick the appropriate answer ; 1 being the lowest degree, and 5 being the highest degree

c.1. In regards to your country :

☐ 01 ☐ 02 ☐ 03 ☐ 04 ☐ 05

c.2. In regards to other countries :

☐ 01 ☐ 02 ☐ 03 ☐ 04 ☐ 05

c. Section Three:

1. As far as you are concerned, what is meant by “cultural awareness”?

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.....
.....
.....

2. Do you think that there exists a relationship between cultural awareness and stereotypes?

Yes ☐ No ☐

- If yes, what could be the nature of this relationship?

.....

.....

.....

4. What do you think of the following statements ? Please tick the appropriate answer

Statements	True	Untrue
-Black people are aggressive		
- Old people are forgetful		
- Asian people are small		
- People from USA are rude		
- Men are better at Maths than women		

5. Do you have any additional information, comments, or suggestions?

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