

Algerian EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards Embedding Culture to Enhance Learners' Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

Language and culture are strongly linked; therefore, many scholars and language educators highly encourage the incorporation of cultural components in EFL curricula. In this regard, the current study explores teachers' perceptions' on integrating cultural aspects into EFL teaching and its effect on enhancing learners' cultural awareness. To meet the aim of this study, a quantitative descriptive method was employed, through which a questionnaire was administered to forty English instructors from the Department of English at 8 Mai 1945 University-Guelma. The obtained findings indicate that the majority of teachers hold positive attitudes toward the subject matter, as 87.5% agreed that developing learners' cultural awareness would, in turn, foster their communicative competence. Consequently, it is vital to reconsider the role of culture in EFL classrooms and give it much attention in language pedagogy.

Keywords: Language and culture, EFL programs, cultural aspects, learners' cultural awareness, communicative competence.



I. Introduction

Under the widespread influence of globalization, individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds increasingly interact with one another more than ever before. Consequently, there is a heightened demand for acquiring a foreign language to meet both personal and professional requirements. Learning vocabulary and grammar was traditionally the primary focus of language instructions; however, modern learning theories have emphasized that effective language acquisition goes beyond mastering linguistic and grammatical structures; it rather requires comprehending the cultural contexts in which communication occurs, taking into

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account the social norms, beliefs, values. . .etc. Recently, it has been acknowledged that language is a culturally embedded practice that mirrors social reality rather than an isolated system (Kramsch, 1998). Although the field of TEFL has made significant progress in responding to the learners' needs, when it comes to effective communication, greater efforts need to be put on promoting learners' cultural awareness. This is undoubtedly associated with embedding cultural elements into language instruction alongside teaching the language itself. By doing so, educators would foster not only the learners' linguistic proficiency, but also their cultural understanding. Enhancing cultural awareness, in turn, would enable learners to interact in different social situations with tolerance, acceptance, and respect. Therefore, grounded in the view that language and culture are closely related, the present research aims at scrutinizing teachers' perceptions regarding the integration of cultural aspects into their classes and its effects on enhancing learners' cultural awareness.

1. Statement of the Problem

In the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, a major focus was placed on linguistic and grammatical structures. However, achieving a full mastery of the latter is insufficient for effective communication. In this regard, learners need to be exposed to different aspects of the target culture in order to understand different cultural contexts and use the language appropriately. It is important to mention that learners at the department of English at Guelma university are exposed to formal institutional culture; namely literature and civilization, while informal everyday aspects, such as: lifestyle, music, food, traditions . . . etc. are often overlooked. Therefore, this imbalance would hinder the development of learners' cultural awareness which would in turn hinder successful communication.

2. Research Question

This study raises the following question:

What do teachers think regarding the importance of embedding cultural elements in enhancing EFL learners' cultural awareness?

3. Aim of the Study

The present research aims at examining teachers' perceptions regarding the effect of imbedding culture on enhancing learners' cultural awareness. It also attempts to highlight the importance of incorporating the target culture within foreign language instructions.

II. Literature Review

1. Defining Culture

According to Tylor (1871), culture is portrayed as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of a society" (p.1). In other

words, culture is viewed as the entire way of life that a society's member learns, creates, adopts, and shares in terms of practices, capacities, and norms. Furthermore, Robinson (1985) offered a precise description of culture from four different angles. From the behaviorist standpoint, culture is made up of common and observable norms, traditions, habits, and actions. Moving to the functionalist perspective, culture is considered the driving force behind these behaviors. Cognitively speaking, culture is the framework that organizes and interprets the world. Conversely, symbolic anthropologists presented it as a system of symbolic meanings that shape people's perceptions of the world. All in all, culture embodies various social behaviors and values that influence the way individuals live in a given society.

2. Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness represents a fundamental skill in teaching culture. It implies the capacity to perceive, understand, and tolerate cultural differences. Accordingly, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) argued that "cultural awareness is the term we have used to describe sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behavior on language use and communication" (p.5). Therefore, people's interaction and language use is determined by their level of empathy towards others. In other words, cultural awareness is all about comprehending that the way people act and communicate is not universal, but rather it is shaped by their culture.

Along with the changes that occurred in the educational system. A strong emphasis was put on integrating culture within the teaching and learning process. In this regard, Baker (2012) insisted that fostering learners' cultural awareness necessitates approaching culture from different perspectives. He emphasized that learners should be familiarized with not only their cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviors but also with those of the target culture. In other words, it is important to recognize that the major goal of cultural awareness is to foster people's global understanding of other cultures. All in all, it is important to mention that the latter plays a crucial role in cross-cultural interactions, as it minimizes the risk of misunderstandings or inappropriate behaviors.

3. The Relationship between Language and Culture

In 1921, Edward Sapir emphasized the interconnectedness of language and culture, stating that culture is a means through which language is fully understood and that language is the tool used to transmit culture throughout time and from one generation to another. In short, culture shapes language, and language embodies culture. Furthermore, language and culture are interrelated in a way that people use language to convey their cultural knowledge and concepts. In this regard, Kramsch (1993) stated that "culture is often seen as mere information conveyed by the language, not as a feature of language itself" (p. 8). She believed that language is bound to culture in various ways and that it is through language that one can build a

social life. Hence, cultural aspects, beliefs, norms, traditions, thoughts . . . etc., are expressed only through communication.

Moreover, it is important to mention that over decades much emphasis was given to the interconnectedness of language and culture, where researchers have recognized that language use is highly affected by the culture of a given society. Accordingly, Kramsch (1993) asserted that, as a system of signs, language enables communication of experiences, feelings, and thoughts. It also reflects individuals' way of life and plays a crucial role in the preservation of culture. Simply put, language and culture are considered to be two inseparable entities; language cannot exist without culture, and culture cannot be transmitted without language.

4. The Importance of Teaching Culture

Culture is considered as a core element in language learning; a language cannot be fully acquired without learning its culture. In this regard, Thanasoulas (2001) stated that foreign language learning is the same as foreign culture learning. In this respect, Kramsch (1995) viewed culture as a "fifth skill" that should be learnt hand in hand with the other skills. All in all, without culture, language is not fully acquired. The latter is regarded as a key component in foreign language instructions. In the same token, Qu (2010) clarified that culture is an essential element in teaching and learning a particular language. He emphasizes that culture boosts the learners' cultural awareness and develops their global understandings. The latter makes learners more tolerant and accept cultural differences that exist between cultures. Therefore, teaching culture in foreign language instructions is of the same importance as teaching the language.

5. Previous Studies

Taking into consideration the importance of culture in language teaching, several studies have been conducted to investigate the place of culture in EFL classrooms by scrutinizing teachers' and students' attitudes regarding culture integration in EFL instructions. In this regard, Battaci and Tanis (2018) investigated Turkish EFL pre-service and in-service teachers' views of the place of culture in ELT. Throughout the study, it was indicated that both in-service and pre-service teachers share positive attitudes concerning that matter. Similarly, Gonen and Saglam (2012) explored 60 EFL Turkish teachers' attitudes towards the importance of teaching culture. The respondents were from different educational background rather than cultural backgrounds. The gathered data reveals that all teachers are generally aware of the value of incorporating culture into EFL classes.

Within the same context, Rohmani and Andriyanti (2022) explored 144 EFL teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding the topic in question. The study's findings revealed that the majority of the participants believed in the significance of embedding culture in the teaching and learning processes. The researchers further

stated that the culture needs to be taught along with the foreign language in order to minimize the misconceptions of learning. Another study conducted by AlQbailat, Hicham and Abu Qattam (2023) to find out EFL teachers' perspectives regarding culture integration into distance teaching. The respondents were 66 secondary school teachers from Morocco and Jordan. The results revealed that, despite the limited availability of the resources to teach culture, teachers show strong willingness to incorporate cultural content within their instruction.

Similarly, in the Algerian context, various studies were conducted to examine EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding the value of incorporating culture in EFL classes. For instance, a study conducted by Dabou, Hammoudi and Chibani (2021) in order to explore teachers' and students' views vis-à-vis the implementation of foreign culture in the EFL curriculum at the University of Setif02. The participants were six EFL teachers and 53 third-year English students. The data were gathered through a semi-structured interview for teachers and a questionnaire for learners. The analysis demonstrated that all teachers highly support culture integration in their classes, while only few students shared positive views regarding the topic in question. In the same vein, another study was conducted by Ouchene and Baghzou (2022) which explored EFL teachers' and students' perspectives vis-à-vis the value of teaching culture at Khenchela University. The analyzed results demonstrated that both teachers and students have positive attitudes. It was also revealed that culture is still neglected within EFL classes and in the curriculum. Based on the provided literature, it has been noticed that there is a gap in literature on exploring teachers' perspectives towards integrating culture and its effects on learners' cultural awareness. Hence, the present study investigates EFL teachers' perceptions of the value of incorporating culture in EFL instructions and its role in fostering learners' cultural awareness.

III. Research Methodology

1. Research Method

To answer the research question and to prove or reject the hypothesis, to present study followed a quantitative descriptive method. Therefore, a questionnaire has been distributed to English teachers in order to know their perceptions regarding the importance of embedding culture in English classes and its effects on learners' cultural awareness.

2. Population and Sampling

The distributed questionnaire targeted forty teachers at the department of English 08 Mai 1945- Guelma- University. The sampling technique adopted in this study is convenience sampling, as the participants were selected based on their availability to take part in the research.

3. Data Gathering Tool

The questionnaire that has been administered to teachers aims at exploring their perceptions regarding the incorporation of culture. Furthermore, it investigates their attitudes toward the significance of culture integration in developing learners' cultural awareness. It is a semi-structured questionnaire composed of eleven likert-scale statements; 06 targeted the importance culture integration in FL classes and 05 targeted the role of culture in increasing learners' cultural awareness. In addition to that, two other open-ended questions were distributed in which teachers were asked about the obstacles that they may face when teaching culture. They were also asked to give further comments or suggestions regarding the topic in question.

IV. Statistical Analysis of the Data

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Total number of teachers and percentage
1.Culture is a key component in teaching foreign language	40 100%	00 0%	00 0%	40 100%
2. Integrating cultural elements in the English classes helps students interact effectively in different cultural contexts	35 87,5 %	05 12,5%	00 0%	40 100%
3. Teaching a particular language necessitates teaching its culture	38 95%	02 5%	00 0%	40 100%
4. When teaching culture, a major focus is given to big "C" culture (literature and civilization) while aspects of small "c" culture are often overlooked	40 100%	00 0%	00 0%	00 0%
5. Cultural content is represented and adapted with confidence in your classrooms	03 7.5%	25%	67.5%	40 100%
6. The availability and use of authentic materials; such as: music, videos, movies...etc. play a crucial role in incorporating culture and in improving learners' cultural sensitivity.	36 90%	04 10%		40 100%
7.learners show excitement when they are exposed to cultural aspects	36 90%	04 10%	00 0%	40 100%

8. The more learners are exposed to cultural topics, the more they become open-minded and tolerate cultural differences.	40 100%		00 0%	40 100%
9. teaching learners different cultural aspects makes learning more engaging	33 82.5 %	07 17.5%	00 0%	40 100%
10. Giving learners to opportunity to reflect on their own culture and on the target culture would boost their deep understanding of culture.	35 87,5 %	05 12,5%	00 0%	40 100%
11. Developing learners' cultural awareness would in turn foster their communicative competence	35 87.5 %	05 12.5%	00 0%	40 100%

Table

01: Teachers' Perceptions toward Integrating Cultural Elements in Developing EFL Learners' Cultural Awareness

As it is indicated in the table, each statement is analyzed separately. In the teachers' response to the first statement, all the participants (100%) agreed that culture is a key component in teaching a foreign language; while the highest percentage in the second statement (87,5%) indicate that the majority of the teachers agreed that integrating culture in the English classes promotes effective communication; while only few participants (12.5%) were neutral. For the third statement, almost all teachers (95%) agreed that teaching a foreign language necessitates teaching its culture. Moreover, in the fourth statement, all the respondents (100%) agreed on the statement that a major concern of teaching is devoted to big C culture while aspects of small "c" are neglected. However, most of the participants (67.5%) disagreed that they present and adapt cultural content with confidence; only 03 teachers (7.5%) agreed, and (25%) of them were neutral; this indicates that teachers have not enough cultural knowledge to transmit it to learners.

Besides, in the fifth statement, the highest percentage (90%) agreed on that the availability and use of authentic materials play a crucial role in implementing culture and in improving learners' cultural sensitivity.

Moving to the second part of the likert-scale questionnaire. The latter targeted the role of culture on increasing learners' cultural awareness. In the seventh statement, the highest percentage of the participants (90%) agreed that learners show excitement when they are exposed to various cultural aspects. Besides, all participants (100%) agreed that the more learners are exposed to cultural topics the more they become open-minded and tolerate cultural differences. In the ninth statement, the vast majority of the participants (82.5%) agreed that integrating cultural elements in language classes makes learning more engaging. moreover, in the tenth statement, the majority of the participants (87.5%) agreed that giving learners to opportunity to reflect on their own culture and on the target culture would boost their deep understanding of culture. Last but not least, almost all teachers (87.5%) agreed that developing learners' cultural awareness would in turn foster their communicative competence. From the analyzed results, we can deduce that teachers support culture integration and believe that through teaching culture, learners' cultural awareness would be enhanced and thus they will be effective communicators.

Q2. What are the obstacles that you face when embedding culture?

From the results obtained in Q2, teachers were asked about the obstacles that may they face when embedding culture in their EFL instructions. Their answers can be summed up as follows:

- Lack of time,
- Lack of authentic materials
- Teachers do not know what to teach or how
- Lack of cultural knowledge
- Teachers should be restricted to the syllabus

Their answers confirm that integrating culture into foreign language education is a challenging task due to numerous potential hurdles. They asserted that insufficient time prevents the incorporation of culture into their curricula because they have to respect the prescribed syllabus; they also contended that teachers themselves may lack sufficient knowledge of foreign cultures, as they are not locals and hence may struggle to effectively teach it. Another challenge that may emerge is the absence of genuine materials. Overall, educators appear to recognize the limitations associated with the integration of culture-based curriculum

Q3. Further comments or suggestions

In this question, teachers were asked if they have further comments or suggestions. The majority of the participants did not provide an answer mainly

because they already articulated their thoughts in previous questions. Nevertheless, only ten teachers provided some suggestions. 05 of them stated that teachers also need to be aware of the importance of integrating culture and that their awareness could be raised either through a professional training or through self-education. Another 03 teachers advocated for the formal incorporation of culture within the curriculum. They specifically recommended that special time should be dedicated to the teaching of low cultural aspects, such as: everyday cultural routines, gestures, greetings . . . etc. which are often overlooked in the institutional culture. The remaining two respondents emphasized that teachers themselves have to cultivate their cultural knowledge. They further stressed that; as role models, teachers have to demonstrate their cultural understanding and tolerance within the classroom.

V. Data Interpretation

In the light of the collected data in the present study, it is worth mentioning that all teachers have positive attitudes vis-à-vis the significance of integrating culture in developing learners' cultural awareness. A huge majority of the respondents consider teaching culture as a key tool to foster learners' intercultural communication. Undoubtedly, all teachers emphasize the interconnectedness of language and culture. Hence, embedding cultural aspects to attain the learning objectives is highly recommended. Despite the fact that nearly all the respondents perceive culture as a fundamental skill, they claimed that aspects of small "c" culture are often neglected and a major focus is devoted to teaching literature and civilization. Moreover, most of the participants admitted feeling unconfident when presenting cultural content. This latter is mainly due to the complexity of the little "c" culture and insufficient training. Since culture is often disregarded in the curriculum, teachers are unaware of what to exactly teach, and how to adequately implement culture. Within the same question, only few teachers expressed confidence when teaching culture, mostly because they experienced travelling abroad and used to be exposed to culture nuances. Furthermore, almost all the participants support the idea that the use of authentic materials plays a crucial role in putting learners in real cultural context; therefore, it boosts their sensitivity.

Moreover, the vast majority of the teachers asserted that EFL learners are aware of the importance of learning culture since they show excitement when exposed to culture. They also believed that cultural exposure would develop learners' global understanding; as well as; it makes the learning process more motivating and engaging. By the same token, the respondents strongly support idea that giving learners the opportunity to reflect, discuss, and compare different cultures would help them boost their cultural awareness and in turn help students preserve their identity. In this regard, teachers emphasized the strong relationship between developing learners' cultural awareness and promoting effective communication.

Since the FLT main aim is to help learners be effective communicators, teachers are highly urged to adequately implement cultural elements to enhance learners' awareness which in turn would foster their intercultural communication.

Despite the fact that all teachers share positive attitudes regarding the topic in question, they identified several constraints that may hinder such exposure; including teachers' limited cultural knowledge, time limitations within the classroom, and strict adherence to the provided syllabi. They further recommended that teachers need to receive serious training on how to effectively integrate cultural components into their classes. They further recommended that teachers need to receive serious training on how to effectively integrate cultural components into their classes. Furthermore, they emphasized that teachers should be provided with authentic cultural exposure to deepen their awareness and knowledge of both native and target cultures.

As far as culture and language are concerned, teachers affirmed the strong interconnectedness that governs the two. They consider the incorporation of cultural elements in the language classes a vital technique to foster learners' cultural sensitivity. Accordingly, teachers are highly recommended to adequately implement culture in order to increase learners' awareness.

VI. Conclusion

Nowadays, teaching culture seems to be the primary focus in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. In this regard, the present research explores teachers' views and perceptions regarding the significance of integrating cultural components into EFL classes in order to promote learners' cultural awareness. Based on the gathered data, it is revealed that teachers have positive attitudes towards the topic in question. On the one hand, they believe that adequate cultural incorporation would produce communicators who are sensitive to cultural differences. On the other hand, it is revealed that teachers encounter difficulties when attempting to teach culture. Accordingly, the current study highly urges the development of both teachers and learners understanding of the cultural diversity between their mother culture and the target culture. More importantly, the research recommended that teachers need to receive training on what cultural elements should be taught and how to adequately integrate culture. The latter would provide the trainees with maximum chance to be exposed to the smallest details of daily-life. Furthermore, the study suggests that policymakers and have to include a module in the curriculum which is entirely devoted to teach different facets of culture with clear learning objectives. Moreover, in order to facilitate the teachers' job, teachers need to be provided with the necessary pedagogical aids to easily put learners in real-life cultural contexts. Lastly, to produce competent communicators, teaching

culture should be the primary focus of English instruction, as the former could not be fully achieved without cultural understanding.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Teachers of English -Department of English- University of 8 Mai 1945- Guelma-

Dear Teachers,

The current study aims at scrutinizing teachers' **attitudes towards embedding culture to enhance learners' cultural awareness** Hence, I would be grateful if you could sincerely answer the following questions. The results will help the researcher in gathering reliable data about the importance of integrating culture in EFL classes.

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- Please tick (✓) the appropriate answer, and or give a full statement whenever necessary.

Section one: Teachers' Attitudes towards the importance of embedding culture to enhance learners' cultural awareness

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Statements	Agree	Ne
1. Culture is a key component in teaching foreign language		
2. Integrating cultural elements in the English classes helps students interact effectively in different cultural contexts		
3. Teaching a particular language necessitates teaching its culture		
4. When teaching culture, a major focus is given to big "C" culture (literature and civilization) while aspects of small "c" culture are often overlooked		
5. Cultural content is represented and adapted with confidence in your classrooms		
6. The availability and use of authentic materials; such as: music, videos, movies...etc. play a crucial role in incorporating culture and in improving learners' cultural sensitivity.		
7. Learners show excitement when they are exposed to cultural aspects		
8. The more learners are exposed to cultural topics, the more they become open-minded and tolerate cultural differences.		
9. Teaching learners different cultural aspects makes learning more engaging.		

2. What are the obstacles that you face when embedding culture?

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3. If you have any further comments or suggestions, please add them

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