

Using Story Circles to Promote Intercultural Sensitivity among University Students in Algeria and Turkey

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Abstract:

The present study investigates the efficacy of story circles—a structured narrative-sharing method—in enhancing intercultural sensitivity among final-year students in Algeria and Turkey. Addressing the issue of learners' lack of intercultural sensitivity, crucial for intercultural competence, the research integrates story circles into the curriculum and uses focus group interviews at Jijel University in Algeria and Fırat University in Turkey. Thematic analysis reveals significant potential for improvement in students' engagement with and appreciation for cultural diversity. The findings highlight the potential of Story Circles as an effective tool in EFL contexts, especially in speaking classes. This research contributes to the discourse on innovative educational practices aimed at fostering intercultural understanding among university students. As intercultural sensitivity is essential for global readiness, future applications of story circles in similar settings are recommended to enhance intercultural communicative competencies globally. Such development is essential for students' holistic growth—academically, professionally, and socio-emotionally—in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, story circles, cultural knowledge, intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence

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1. Introduction

This research underscores the importance of language educators and learners consistently engaging in cultural exploration, both within and beyond the classroom. Success in cross-cultural interactions, whether personal or professional, necessitates a fundamental understanding of diverse cultures. Cultural awareness fosters mutual respect, reconciles differences, and promotes appreciation—key competencies in our globalised era.

By integrating theoretical insights from renowned scholars with practical applications for lesson planning and classroom dynamics, this study seeks to illuminate the transformative potential of intercultural sensitivity in English language education. In particular, it examines the impact of Deardorff's (2020) Story Circles activity, implemented as a core component of a speaking session, in fostering both language proficiency and meaningful cross-cultural communication.

Intercultural sensitivity, focusing on personal growth and attitudes rather than situation-specific skills, is particularly relevant in EFL contexts where students often lack opportunities for authentic intercultural engagement. This investigation was informed by interviews with 12 EFL instructors—six from Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia University in Jijel, Algeria, and six from Firat University in Elazığ, Turkey—which revealed a pervasive lack of intercultural communication (IC) among learners and limited understanding of intercultural sensitivity (ICS). These findings underscore the necessity of exploring pedagogical activities and methodologies that can enhance learners' IC capabilities.

As a logical extension, this study aims to cultivate intercultural sensitivity among students through the Story Circles activity. To achieve this, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What impact does the Story Circles activity have on the intercultural sensitivity of learners in Algeria and Turkey?
2. To what extent do students in these contexts discern intercultural nuances through this activity?

2. Intercultural sensitivity (ICS)

Intercultural sensitivity, defined as the ability and willingness to engage respectfully and effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, is fundamental to fostering dialogue, promoting social cohesion, and navigating an increasingly interconnected world (Kriaučiūnienė, 2015; El Sayed et al., 2020). This multifaceted competence encompasses essential attributes such as self-esteem, empathy, open-mindedness, active engagement in interactions, and the capacity to suspend judgment (Song, 2015). Research indicates that individuals with high levels of intercultural sensitivity are better equipped to navigate cultural complexities, adapt to new environments, and thrive in intercultural settings (Dan-gu, 2015).

Given its significance, the cultivation of intercultural sensitivity has become a critical priority in the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Scholars such as

Karapetyan (2020) and Madani (2020) underscore the need to embed cultural dimensions within EFL curricula, fostering learning environments where students not only develop linguistic proficiency but also cultivate an appreciation for cultural diversity. Furthermore, researchers such as Koch and Takashima (2021) and Ghasemi Mighani and Yazdani Moghadam (2019) have proposed practical pedagogical strategies for fostering intercultural sensitivity in the EFL classroom. These strategies include incorporating reflective activities, such as critical incident analysis, and culturally oriented speaking tasks, like simulated intercultural encounters, which have proven effective in enhancing intercultural awareness among both learners and educators.

Algerian higher education is demonstrating a growing recognition of the pivotal role of intercultural competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programmes, a trend mirrored in recent scholarly contributions that examine various dimensions of intercultural integration within the national educational framework. Fedj (2019) and Guerriche (2023), for instance, underscore the necessity of explicitly incorporating intercultural communication and awareness into EFL curricula, proposing actionable strategies for implementation. In the realm of pedagogy, Boudouaia (2022) delves into the intercultural sensitivity of EFL instructors, revealing gender-based differences in Algerian teachers' perceptions of classroom interactional dynamics. From the perspective of instructional materials, Hairech (2022) critically evaluates the representation of interculturality in EFL textbooks used in Algerian middle schools, highlighting the imperative for more nuanced and comprehensive depictions of diverse cultures. Together, these studies illuminate the multidimensional nature of intercultural integration in Algerian EFL education, spanning curricular innovation, pedagogical practices, and instructional resources. However, further empirical research is essential to assess the impact of these intercultural initiatives on students' learning outcomes and to develop robust frameworks for cultivating intercultural competence in the Algerian EFL context.

Notwithstanding the progress made in integrating intercultural sensitivity into EFL pedagogy, significant challenges persist. A prevailing emphasis on linguistic proficiency often overshadows the cultivation of cultural competence, thereby limiting the potential for holistic learning outcomes (Kriaučiūnienė, 2015). This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in foreign language education, prioritising the development of supportive learning environments that foster both intercultural understanding and language acquisition. Such environments should be designed to equip learners not only with the linguistic tools but also the intercultural communicative competence necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

2.1. Developing Intercultural Sensitivity in Foreign Language Education

In the realm of foreign language education, scholars have underscored the critical importance of integrating intercultural communicative competence into language learning and teaching through clear instructional approaches (Byram et al., 2013). Baker (2012) further argues that the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom serves as a pivotal environment where both learners and educators naturally engage in intercultural practices, thereby enhancing their intercultural sensitivity.

Achieving effective integration of intercultural sensitivity in ELT necessitates a well-designed syllabus, appropriate materials, and a pedagogical approach that promotes cultural

understanding. Numerous scholars have highlighted the pivotal role of syllabi and instructional materials in fostering learners' intercultural sensitivity (Aleptekin, 2002; McKay, 2002; Nault, 2006; Xiong & Qian, 2012). Kramsch (2006) contends that intercultural teaching should emphasize an educational approach that not only imparts factual knowledge but also encourages learners to reflect on and appreciate the connections between diverse cultural perspectives.

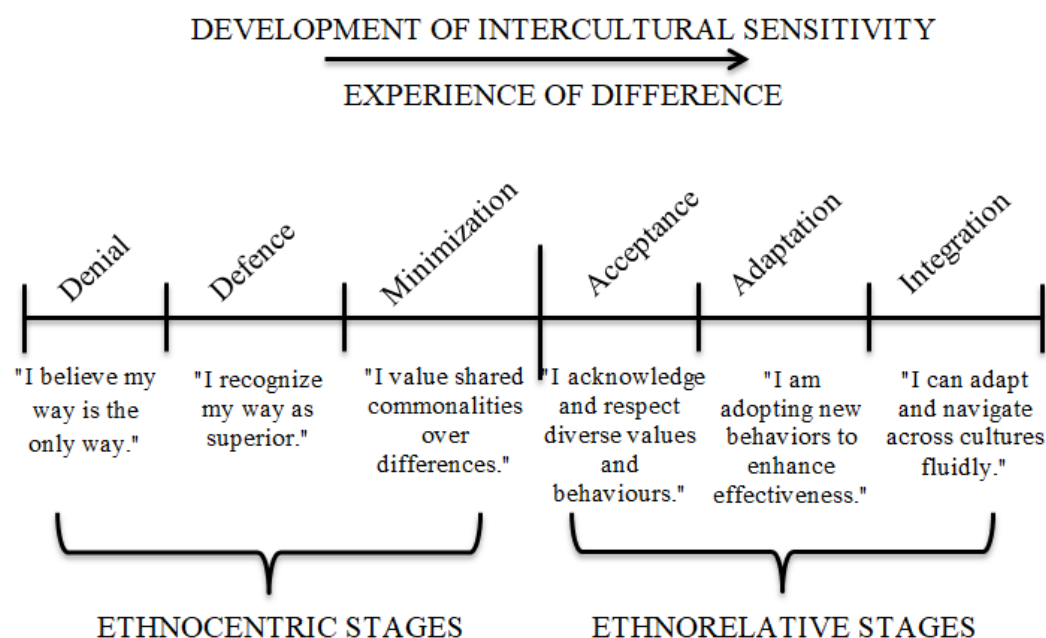
Scholars and professionals emphasize the profound link between communication and culture, advocating for a broader approach beyond mere language proficiency and its cultural context. Byram (1997) discusses the apprehension towards Western values manifested in English as a foreign language education, promoting an educational approach that integrates critical cultural awareness and fosters collaboration between educators and learners (p. 46).

Chen and Starosta (1996) introduce a comprehensive framework for intercultural communication competence, encompassing cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions. These elements collectively underpin intercultural communication competence (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 4). The cognitive dimension emphasizes intercultural awareness and understanding cultures through interpersonal interactions. The behavioral dimension, known as intercultural adroitness, focuses on appropriate behaviors in diverse cultural contexts. The affective dimension, characterized by intercultural sensitivity, cultivates non-judgmental attitudes, open-mindedness, and acceptance of cultural diversity (Chen and Starosta, 1996, 2000).

Bennett (1984) proposed that intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process that facilitates emotional, cognitive, and behavioral transformations. This concept, foundational in both global and domestic diversity contexts, divides the progression into two main stages: ethnocentric and ethnorelative, each with three phases. The ethnocentric stages involve perceiving other cultures through one's own cultural lens as the "reality" and consist of (1) denial – where individuals fail to acknowledge cultural differences; (2) defense – where cultural differences are perceived as a threat, prompting defensive reactions; and (3) minimization – where differences are downplayed in favor of commonalities. In the ethnorelative stage, which recognize other cultures as distinct "realities", individuals move through (4) acceptance – recognizing and becoming open to cultural differences; (5) adaptation – developing empathy and adopting a bicultural or multicultural perspective; and (6) integration – where diversity is fully embraced as a valuable and integral part of one's identity and worldview (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) offers a valuable constructivist framework for addressing this need, as shown in Figure 1. The model outlines a progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative worldviews in intercultural interactions (Bennett, 2017). It identifies six stages—Denial, Defence, Minimisation, Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration—representing increasing complexity in perceiving and engaging with cultural differences (Bennett, 2017). Research has demonstrated that the development of intercultural sensitivity is often non-linear, with individuals moving back and forth between stages (Bourjolly et al., 2005). Empirical studies applying DMIS highlight its relevance in diverse educational contexts. For instance, expatriate English teachers in Saudi Arabia exhibited a spectrum of behaviours ranging from ethnocentric to ethnorelative tendencies (Etri, 2022). Similarly, research in a UK university context revealed that international students often advanced towards ethnorelative stages, whereas home students tended to remain within ethnocentric orientations (Barron & Dasli, 2010).

Figure1: The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity



The source: Produced by the author (based on: Bennett, 2004, p.153)

These findings underscore the complexity of intercultural sensitivity development and its implications for EFL education. Integrating Bennett's model into EFL curricula could provide a structured pathway for fostering more comprehensive and impactful learning experiences. By embracing diversity as a pedagogical asset and equipping learners with the skills to navigate the complexities of intercultural interactions, educators can enrich the educational experience and prepare students for the demands of global citizenship. Ultimately, prioritising intercultural communicative competence alongside linguistic proficiency enables EFL education to empower learners to become effective communicators and responsible global citizens in an increasingly interconnected world.

In conclusion, integrating intercultural sensitivity into foreign language education is crucial for equipping learners to navigate an increasingly interconnected and diverse world. By incorporating culturally relevant materials, encouraging open dialogue, and addressing the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence, educators can empower students to develop both strong language skills and a nuanced understanding of diverse cultures. Utilizing comprehensive frameworks, such as those developed by Chen and Starosta and Bennett, provides a solid pedagogical foundation for cultivating intercultural sensitivity, ultimately enriching the foreign language learning experience and fostering global citizenship.

3. Story Circles

Story Circles are a flexible and accessible tool for building intercultural competencies across diverse settings. Drawing on the universal tradition of storytelling, they allow individuals from different cultural backgrounds to engage meaningfully, promoting mutual understanding and respect without requiring extensive resources or prior expertise. Based on principles from UNESCO's 2013 publication on Intercultural Competencies, Story Circles emphasize empathetic listening and shared experiences to bridge cultural divides. Widely used in both educational and community contexts, they foster cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioural aspects of intercultural competence, contributing to community development and conflict resolution (Deardorff, 2020).

Deardorff's Story Circles have emerged as a valuable tool for developing intercultural competence and sensitivity. Deardorff (2020) provides an overview of intercultural competence definitions, development contexts, and assessment principles. Story Circles, as described by Vekić (2020), offer a structured approach to fostering intercultural skills. Flynn (2024) demonstrates how Story Circles in preschool settings encourage diverse storytelling patterns, reflecting interdependent self-conceptions and promoting linguistic and cultural dexterity. This aligns with the developmental progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative worldviews outlined in Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Mahoney & Schamber, 2005). The application of this model in general education courses on diversity has shown significant potential for advancing intercultural sensitivity skills (Mahoney & Schamber, 2005). Together, these studies highlight the effectiveness of Story Circles and related approaches in cultivating intercultural competence across various educational contexts, from early childhood to higher education.

Story Circles have also proven to be a flexible and impactful approach in a variety of settings, enhancing both social interaction and learning. Sweeder et al. (2019) examined their use among older adults, discovering that participants appreciated the opportunity to share personal stories about cognitive challenges, which helped foster a sense of community and normalize their experiences. In preschool environments, particularly for boys of colour, Flynn (2019) found that Story Circles offered a valuable platform for discussing important ideas and relationships, thereby promoting emotional and social development. In a different context, Herbst and Milewski (2018) explored the use of Story Circles in mathematics education, where they served as a professional development tool, allowing teachers to draw on their practical experiences to make gradual improvements in their teaching methods. Flynn (2024) further expanded on this by exploring the cultural dimensions of storytelling in multilingual preschool classrooms, showing that Story Circles not only encourage diverse narrative expressions but also promote linguistic and cultural adaptability in young learners. Taken together, these studies highlight the wide-ranging potential of Story Circles to build community, foster inclusivity, and support professional growth.

3.1. Story Circles in EFL Settings

Several researchers suggest that Story Circles can be an effective approach for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Hà (2022) proposes integrating playful approaches and Story Circles to help children develop ICC in early childhood education. Nevertheless, Deardorff (2020) stated that the activity is more suitable for adults and would require modifications to cater to kids if needed. Imamyartha et al. (2020) found that engaging students in literature circles with culturally-laden readings significantly improved their ICC, particularly intercultural knowledge. Madden and Ashby (2021) report on a telecollaborative project that used Story Circles to develop ICC, showing that students

demonstrated and developed various aspects of ICC such as openness, cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. Overall, previous studies highlight the potential of Story Circles as a pedagogical intervention for fostering intercultural communicative competence in general and intercultural sensitivity in particular.

Nevertheless, the lack of cultural diversity in Algerian universities (specifically the one in Jijel) constitutes a significant challenge. Opportunities to enhance the intercultural communication competence of Algerian students may be limited in Algerian EFL classrooms due to the relatively homogeneous cultural environment. Students who have had extended exposure to other cultures, such as through studying abroad, may demonstrate higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, but for most, the development of such skills remains constrained. By the time students complete their university education and transition to the workforce, their intercultural sensitivity might still be insufficiently developed. Incorporating additional perspectives, such as those of Turkish university students, offers a valuable comparative context and compensates for the lack of cultural diversity within the local classroom environment.

To address these gaps, a lesson plan (Appendix 1) was devised to foster students' intercultural communicative competence, with particular emphasis on intercultural sensitivity as framed by Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993, 2017) and the frameworks of Chen and Starosta (1996, 2000). This approach seeks to evaluate the potential of Story Circles to enhance students' intercultural sensitivity and their appreciation of non-verbal elements, such as cultural norms and attitudes, in effective communication. By leveraging Story Circles, this study aims to contribute practical insights into fostering intercultural competence in EFL settings with limited cultural diversity, offering a replicable model for similar contexts.

4. Method

Since one of our teaching objectives with this lesson was to facilitate discussions and reflections, enabling students to examine cultural perspectives and possibilities without feeling restricted by cultural aspects associated with the target language, we opted for an entertaining and thought provoking material as our basis for the story circle activity. That material is a series of advertisements by HSBC, an international bank, under the theme of cultural knowledge and cultural differences.

HSBC, known for its slogan "The World's Local Bank," emphasizes its global reach and understanding of local markets. In several advertisements, HSBC highlights its commitment to local knowledge by showcasing cultural nuances specific to various regions, using imagery and narratives that resonate with local audiences (Koller, 2007; UNESCO, 2013). These ads aim to present HSBC not only as a global banking giant but also as a bank that values and comprehends the local context, building trust with customers and demonstrating its deep connection to the diverse communities it serves.

The selected advertisements feature recurring themes of miscommunication or misunderstanding due to a character's lack of cultural awareness. The characters; whether a tourist, a businessman, an immigrant, or a local; face perplexing situations involving unfamiliar behaviours and attitudes, encountering the concept of "otherness." These short, largely non-verbal stories depict characters navigating cross-cultural interactions, with brief narration providing context on the countries or cultures involved and highlighting the

misunderstandings. This material was particularly useful in our study, as it helped expose students to cultural differences and emphasized the importance of cultural knowledge in effective cross-cultural communication.

For the final step, the students partook in a focus group interview, which was recorded. It should be mentioned that they were allowed to use some words from their native language since translation may have ruined the meaning. For the Turkish context, an assistant teacher provided translation support. Conversely, the researcher is Algerian, so there was no issue with comprehension in that context.

The researcher in the current study carried the lessons in person, which indicates that the data from Algeria and those from Turkey were not collected simultaneously, but rather consecutively. Nevertheless, for data collection, the researcher used the assistance of other teachers in order to minimise bias.

Although conducted in two distinct contexts (Algeria and Turkey), this study does not seek to compare the outcomes from the two universities. Instead, its primary goal is to broaden the scope by including learners from diverse backgrounds, knowledge bases, and experiences to achieve more comprehensive results. It is also important to note that, despite the many differences between the two cultures, they share several similarities, making the data collection and analysis phases of the study particularly insightful and enriching. Furthermore, given the inseparable connection between language and culture, emphasizing the significance of the EFL classroom context is essential when addressing complex and abstract concepts like intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity.

4.1. Research Sample

Sampling plays a pivotal role in qualitative and interview-based research; hence, a four-step approach recommended by Robinson (2014) was followed: defining the sample universe, determining the sample size, selecting an appropriate sampling strategy, and addressing sample sourcing.

This research was conducted in two different contexts with EFL students from both universities: Jijel University, Algeria and Fırat University, Turkey, which made it impractical to study individuals randomly across the entire population. Henceforth, the researcher opted for one-stage cluster sampling based on pre-existing groups from accessible yet randomly-selected classes. That was proposed as an operationally efficient and unbiased method, avoiding the overrepresentation of a certain type of learners, though it may pose its own drawbacks.

The current study took place over 90-minute sessions across 6 groups of EFL students (making up a total of 80 participants), 40 of whom were from Jijel University, Algeria, and the other 40 were from Fırat University, Elâzığ, Turkey. This results from the evident lack of cultural diversity in the University of Jijel, given that the latter is a relatively small town with a tight community that shares a great deal of values, principles, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs. Whereas in Fırat University, students were from various cultural backgrounds with different nationalities, religions, and mother tongues.

4.2. The Lesson

Throughout the first half of the lesson (Appendix1), visual prompts and questions were displayed on a large screen and a hand-out (Appendix3) was used for more clarity, and

the ideas generated were noted on the board. The lesson commenced with a warm-up and discussion session. Working in pairs or groups, students freely discussed various aspects of communicating and interacting with people from other cultures, exploring the definition and components of culture and how those are related to language, and vice versa. The purpose of these prompts and discussions was to introduce students to the themes and activities related to the content of the HSBC video ads as well as the story circles activity thereafter.

The next part of the lesson introduced the visuals of the video ads without any audio so as to allow students to rely on the story telling of the visuals without any hints from the narrator. After a short discussion, the sound was introduced as they watched the video again. The students were asked to answer questions after each story focusing on the what, the who, the where, and the why. Afterward, there was a comprehensive feedback session in which various instances of misunderstanding were openly discussed, exploring the reasons behind them and considering different perspectives. The sentence is mostly clear, but it would benefit from being broken up to improve clarity and flow. During this session, the researcher deliberately avoided providing commentary on the answers, aiming to create an environment where students could freely share their ideas without external influence on their thinking or judgment. The students were encouraged to reflect on and discuss the potential reasons for the cultural misunderstandings, as well as how they could have been avoided or rectified.

For the next activity, the students are introduced to the steps and rules of story circles through the video (UNESCO, 2017) and the handout (appendix2). They are asked to form a circle and think of personal stories similar to the ones seen in the videos and to share those stories in a circle.

The students participated in story circles in groups of 6 or 7 participants at a time. In the activity, they were asked to share the following: an introduction about themselves, a personal story about a cross cultural incident, and a comment on the previous participant's story highlighting the most memorable part of it and why. Table 1 showcases the steps more clearly.

Table1: Overview of the lesson

Step	Activity Description
Step 1	Students were introduced to the concepts of culture, communicative competence, and intercultural communicative competence.
Step 2	Students watched HSBC commercials about cultural misunderstandings and were asked to analyse and discuss them.
Step 3	Students watched a video of Darla Deardoff's Story Circles to understand the activity, which was further explained along with its principles.
Step 4	Students formed a circle and participated in the Story Circles activity, sharing memorable experiences with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and reflecting on those experiences.
Step 5	Students shared their opinions and perceptions about the Story Circles activity.

The source: produced by the author

Following the story circles activity, a focus group interview was conducted with each group. The participants were asked some questions about their impressions on the story

circles activity as well as the experience as a whole and what they had learnt from it. Both parts were recorded by the researcher for further analysis.

4.3. Post- lesson focus group interview

To assess the effectiveness of these activities in enhancing our understanding of students' intercultural sensitivity, we examined their feedback from a post-lesson focus group interview. It is important to note that the primary intent of the interview was to facilitate a reflective discussion on the students' learning experience, rather than to function as an independent measurement tool within a specific research framework.

Focus group interviews are a qualitative research method that involves structured discussions with a small group of participants, guided by a moderator. The primary goal of focus groups is to explore participants' perspectives on specific issues, revealing a diverse range of views within a given population (Bojlén & Lunde, 1995). By capitalizing on group dynamics, focus groups can uncover insights that may not emerge in one-on-one interviews (Jackson, 1998).

To gauge the effectiveness of this lesson and the story circle activity in enhancing our insight into students' intercultural sensitivity, we examined their feedback through a post-lesson interview (the questions are listed in table1). It's crucial to note that the primary intent of the interview was to function as a tool for students to reflect on and openly discuss their learning process, rather than being designed specifically for research purposes or to conform to a particular research framework. Nevertheless, the interview questions were adapted from Tirnaz and Narafshan (2020).

Using the responses provided by the interviewees, we employed relevant probes to extract additional information with account of Deardorff's Story Circle Feedback questionnaire (2020) as a general guideline. The qualitative data underwent an open, thematic coding process, wherein the content was analysed and categorised based on recurring themes.

To achieve the aforementioned goal, which is to gain a general understanding of the progression of students' intercultural sensitivity, the analysis concentrated on associated attributes. These included observations regarding cultural distinctions, the capacity to adopt a non-judgmental and open-minded stance, and whether students demonstrated success in acknowledging, comprehending, and accepting differences. In simpler terms, based on the responses, our aim was to determine whether this approach would prompt language use (such as descriptions, comparisons, and students' personal ideas and opinions) that could be interpreted as indicative of either ethnocentric or ethnorelative attitudes. Bennett's (1993, 2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Figure1) served as a guide, with specific attention given to elements linked to non-verbal communication.

Table2: Post-lesson Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What did you think of the videos?
2. How would you describe your experience of being exposed to cultural knowledge?
3. How was your experience with the story circle activity?
4. Before this lesson/ activity, had you ever thought about cultural diversities?
5. What is your opinion about the effect of this intercultural exposure on your thinking and attitude?
6. What do you think about the change of classroom climate after this experience?

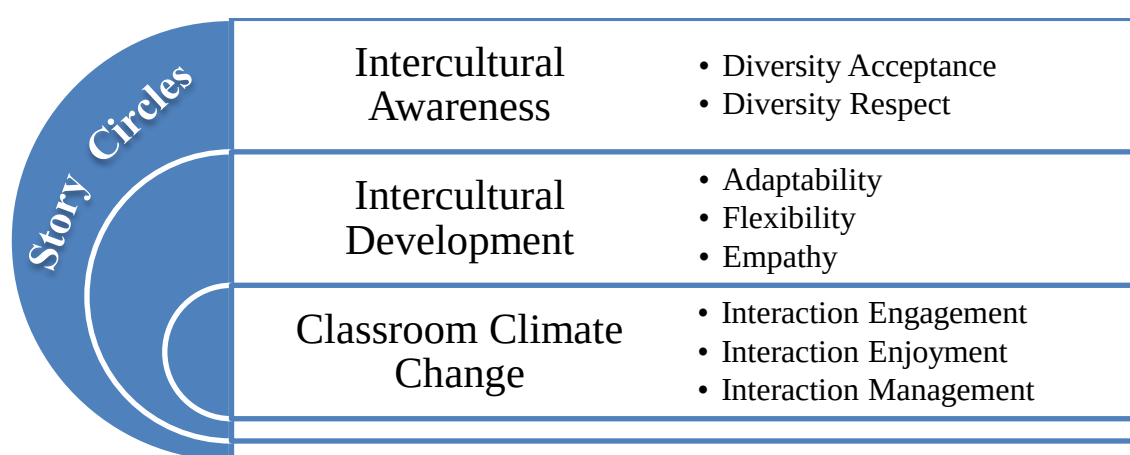
The source: produced by the author

5. Results

The examination of the interview transcripts from students delved into their understanding of Intercultural Sensitivity (ICS) from three perspectives: (1) whether they had prior awareness of cultural diversity between their home culture and others before the study, (2) the impact of intercultural sensitivity on the classroom climate as observed in this study, and (3) their reflections on potential personal changes. Through thematic analysis of the interviews, we identified and categorised the information into three main groups as follows:

1.Intercultural awareness 2.Intercultural development 3.Classroom climate change

Figure2: Intercultural Process: Categories and Subcategories



The source: produced by the author (Based on Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020, p.7)

5.1. Intercultural awareness

The initial category centres on students' recognition of cultural differences between their home culture and other cultures both before and after engaging in the study. In the subcategory of diversity acceptance, some interviewed students were previously unaware of certain forms of diversity between their home culture and the cultures under study before their participation in the research even though they may have thought otherwise.

One interviewee stated: “I felt like I definitely overestimated my cultural knowledge of the world, but after this lesson, it became clear to me that what I considered normal is not necessarily the norm somewhere else, and that is okay, I guess.”

Another added: “You know, with the internet and everything we have access to, we think we know stuff, but it was brought to our attention, if I may talk on behalf of my friends, that our perspectives could be quite narrow. Cognitive bias could lead to ignorance when dealing with the ‘other’ either directly or indirectly.”

Conversely, a couple participants stated that having been exposed to a plethora of content in English through films, shows, and other forms of media, had made it easier for them to expect those differences and have enough of an understanding that one should be respectful and accepting.

The subtheme of diversity respect emerged in both contexts. While the responses from Turkish students were quite similar to those of the Algerian students, many Turkish participants expressed a sense of surprise. They discovered that their own culture was more eclectic than they initially realized and shares similarities with other cultures they were previously unaware of. One student remarked, "I found it amusing that we have the same tradition here as in some European countries, even though we tend to associate ourselves more with South Asian countries and cultures." An Algerian student uttered: "Understanding why others act or speak a certain way gives you a sense of where they come from and it makes you less offended or judgmental or whatever, so basically, you can respect and keep boundaries if needed or you can just jump right in and converse or interact. It's honestly amazing what some extra cultural knowledge can do."

5.2. Intercultural development

This category highlights the students' cultural growth. Several participants mentioned that they learned new things about their classmates and gained a newfound respect for their cultural backgrounds. One student reflected on how they may have unknowingly offended others in the past, but after the session and discussions with peers, they were able to view situations from a different perspective. This realization, in turn, left them with a greater sense of self-awareness and personal improvement.

The inclusion of participants from various nationalities and native language backgrounds in the Turkish classes resulted in more varied responses. In contrast, the Jijelian interviewees provided minimal commentary on each other's cultures, instead concentrating on shared stories about their interactions with people from different countries, whether through tourism or online exchanges.

Regarding adaptability, most participants admitted they initially struggled to accept cultural differences. Some even confessed that they once believed their own culture was superior. However, this experience opened their eyes to the fact that all people are interesting, and it can be exciting to learn about and connect with others.

Several students who relocated to Turkey shared that, at first, they struggled with flexibility, feeling out of place due to the language barrier and the perceived "arrogance" of some individuals from the host country. They also acknowledged that activities like this can help them develop a more open perspective, realizing they can adjust to different situations as needed.

Many students expressed that, while challenging, they are beginning to cultivate empathy for other cultures through stories and direct experiences. They recognized that understanding and appreciating both the differences and similarities between their own culture and others enriches their empathy and improves their responses in social interactions. This cultural awareness also highlights that many prejudices stem from stereotypes based on oversimplified and generalized perceptions of different groups. By becoming more informed about cultural differences and similarities, students can work to reduce these biases.

5.3. Classroom climate change

The final category focuses on classroom climate change, which happened as a consequence of students' personal development. This was reflected on interaction engagement, interaction enjoyment, and interaction management.

Interaction engagement and enjoyment were intertwined, across all groups. Most students were eager to take part in the discussion, attempting to guess the cultural

misunderstandings, and wanting to share personal stories and experiences; however, they were instructed not to get carried away for the sake of the “story circle” activity to come. Someone mentioned that it gave them a chance for interpersonal interaction rather than just talking about the lesson content as usual. Another uttered: “I loved listening to how others shared their personal stories, and the fact that we all managed to learn something from one another is totally incredible.”

In both Algerian and Turkish contexts, learners expressed significant interest in the lesson and the story circles specifically. Although initial hesitations due to shyness or anxiety were noted, participants eventually eagerly engaged in sharing and discussing stories. They explored similarities and differences, delved into their meanings, and considered how to address them.

As for interaction management, the inclusion of intercultural advertisements fostered a more adaptable classroom atmosphere, as it led students to embrace and appreciate differences. They also learned to collaborate with and support classmates who held diverse perspectives through the story circle activity. A number of participants shared a feeling of belonging regardless of differences. Some stated that that experience and the exposure to cultural knowledge made them willing to participate more and share their thoughts and ideas, especially because they felt heard and respected by their peers.

In summary, the analysis of student interviews revealed that most participants were initially unaware of the diverse aspects between their own and the target cultures prior to the study. Many students found that gaining insight into other cultures greatly enhanced their understanding of their own culture and their role in the world. The intercultural exposure provided in this lesson allowed students to observe, accept, and appreciate cultural differences. Additionally, the story circle activities positively impacted the classroom environment, fostering a more adaptable atmosphere where students learned to appreciate and value differences, and to collaborate and support peers with diverse viewpoints.

6. Discussion

As referenced earlier in the paper, this study examined the effectiveness of incorporating the story circle activity into EFL classes for the purpose of promoting intercultural sensitivity development. Qualitative data were collected through conducting a post lesson focus group interview. The findings highlighted that integrating this activity can significantly promote the intercultural sensitivity of EFL learners and encourage them to explore more cultural knowledge. As they achieve that, students would be able to understand, accept, and integrate diverse cultural perspectives into their own.

Moreover, the study, in line with Bennett's (1993) DMIS model, demonstrated how students transitioned from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective. As depicted in Fig. 1, the intercultural process facilitated by the story circle activity allowed students to move from the denial stage to an awareness of cultural diversity. This awareness fostered acceptance and respect for cultural similarities and differences, while also promoting the development of adaptability, flexibility, and empathy—transforming the classroom climate. Over time, learners were ready to become more open-minded, adaptable, and flexible in their interactions.

This process aligns with the findings of Chen and Starosta (2000), which emphasize that providing opportunities for students to explore diverse communities deepens their understanding of their own culture. Similarly, Alsamani (2014) stresses the importance of

exposing learners to target cultures, helping them recognize that differences in viewpoints and cultures should be valued and appreciated, rather than judged or feared. Presenting factual evidence about diverse cultures allowed students to see that individuals who may not resemble them are, in fact, fundamentally similar.

As demonstrated by this study, story circles have the potential to provide a rich learning experience that contributed to the personal development of EFL learners. Engaging with intercultural diversity led to positive changes in students' attitudes, helping them become more effective and flexible in their interactions. The use of this activity allowed students to recognize cultural differences, understand diverse worldviews, and express greater empathy toward others. Integrating intercultural sensitivity into the classroom climate promoted both unity and diversity, fostering respect for different attitudes, norms, and preferences. This dynamic, flexible environment encouraged students to listen to and appreciate varying perspectives.

It is clear that language courses must extend beyond the mere teaching of linguistic skills to actively foster intercultural competence, mutual respect, and sensitivity. These elements are crucial for cultivating meaningful relationships, both inside and outside the classroom. This holds true in both the Algerian and Turkish contexts where the study was conducted, despite the differences in language, culture, and education systems. Regardless of these variations, the development of intercultural understanding is essential in creating an inclusive learning environment that encourages students to appreciate diverse perspectives and collaborate effectively.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study, with its primary focus on pedagogical application, presents several limitations that merit consideration. The lesson was specifically designed for classroom implementation to draw students' attention to the importance cultural knowledge. Hence, it was not particularly meant for rigorous research, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the diverse linguistic backgrounds, varied experiences, and the inherent challenge of responding to interview questions in English may have influenced the students' ability to fully articulate their perspectives.

Additionally, the impact of a single intercultural training session is often limited in developing comprehensive intercultural competencies. Effective training programs ideally require multiple iterations over time to foster substantial growth (Deardorff, 2020). The study's scope was further constrained by the author's brief two-week visit to Turkey, which limited the duration and depth of the training.

The interpretation of student comments also presents challenges. Although the activities were designed to enhance intercultural sensitivity, differentiating between negative feedback arising from ethnocentric views and critiques of ethnocentric characters in the stories requires further investigation. Without additional research, pinpointing the underlying causes of such responses remains challenging.

Lastly, while telecollaboration between Algerian and Turkish students was proposed for better results, the effectiveness of such interactions may be compromised when conducted online compared to face-to-face engagements. This limitation should be taken into account when assessing the potential benefits of virtual collaborative efforts.

These considerations underscore the need for a more nuanced, iterative approach to intercultural training and research, highlighting the importance of addressing language and methodological constraints in future studies.

8. Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the significant impact of incorporating story circles into EFL classrooms, particularly in enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity and improving the classroom climate. Through a qualitative approach, the research revealed that exposure to these multimedia tools facilitated the students' understanding and acceptance of cultural differences. This exposure encouraged learners to move from an ethnocentric worldview toward an ethnorelative perspective, in line with Bennett's DMIS model (1993). As students progressed through the stages of cultural awareness, they developed essential traits such as empathy, adaptability, and respect for diversity, leading to a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment.

Furthermore, this study supports the claims of previous research, such as those by Chen and Starosta (2000) and Alsamani (2014), which emphasize the importance of intercultural exposure in shaping learners' attitudes and broadening their worldviews. The use of authentic materials, such as the "cultural differences" video and the story circle activity, provided learners with a tangible opportunity to reflect on and engage with diverse cultural norms, allowing them to see similarities and differences without judgment. This not only fostered a deeper awareness of their own culture but also prepared them to interact more effectively in multicultural settings.

Despite the limitations related to participant selection and the subjective nature of the lesson choice, the study offers valuable insights into how EFL teaching practices can go beyond linguistic competence. It highlights the need to create culturally enriched environments where students are encouraged to appreciate diverse perspectives and engage in meaningful intercultural interactions. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the development of intercultural competence in language education is crucial for fostering global citizenship, mutual respect, and cooperation, all of which are nothing short of a prerequisite among the 21st century skills.

Ultimately, integrating intercultural sensitivity into EFL curricula is not just a pedagogical necessity but a vital tool for preparing students to navigate a multicultural world. By providing learners with the means to embrace cultural diversity and build inclusive relationships, educators can play a pivotal role in shaping a more empathetic and globally-minded generation.

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Appendices

Appendix 01: Lesson Plan

Topic : Cultural Differences

Cognitive Areas: Intercultural sensitivity, storytelling, active listening

Equipment: Computer/ Screen, board

Sources: a/ HSBC ads video: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xJ_hbD4TQA>
b/ Story circles activity (Darla K Deardorff)

Objectives	Practice storytelling and active listening skills Discuss cultural differences and intercultural misunderstanding Explore and develop the intercultural communicative competence elements: Intercultural sensitivity, awareness, and adroitness.
Materials/ Resources	Computer screen (video), board and handout (guidelines and activity steps)
Warm-up (8 min)	Introducing the topic of the lesson Pre-teaching keywords: culture, intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity
Lesson Structure (30 min)	Video, comprehension questions, discussion of the content
Practice/ Production	Story circles activity

Appendix2 : Video Transcript

- Story 1

In Italy, different flowers have different meanings. Chrysanthemums, for example are associated with funerals and sadness...

At HSBC, we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.

- Story 2

Boss: Our washing machines sales are up in India. Find out why.

Man: India?

If you're going to do business internationally you should be with a bank that knows about international business. HSBC commercial banking spans 64 countries and territories around the globe.

Man: look at this! With your machine, I make 10 times what I used to. Have it!

Your business success is out there, is your bank.

- Story 3

In some Asian cities, it's considered acceptable for a commuter to fall asleep on the shoulder of a stranger. In New York, it's quite a different story. Of course, it could always adapt.

With the global bank that never underestimates the importance of local knowledge; HSBC, the world's local bank.

- Story 4

The English believe it's a slur on your host's food if you don't clear your plate, whereas the Chinese feel you're questioning their generosity if you do.

At HSBC, we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge, which is why we have local banks staffed by local people in over 80 countries across the globe. HSBC, the world's local bank.

- Story 5

In America, if you had a hole-in-one, you're expected to buy everyone a drink; however, in Japan, it's traditional to buy your playing partners expensive gifts.

At HSBC, we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge. HSBC, the world's local bank.

Appendix3: General handout – to be used in small groups

A – Story Circles: building intercultural competencies

You are about to engage in a Story Circle experience for the purpose of developing intercultural competencies. The following is some important information for you. Please read this first before you begin.

Story Circle goals related to intercultural competencies development and communicating across difference:

- Demonstrate respect for others.
- Practice listening for understanding.
- Cultivate curiosity about similarities and differences with others.
- Gain increased cultural self-awareness.
- Develop empathy.
- Engage in critical reflection of one's own intercultural competencies development, as well as on the intercultural experience.
- Develop relationships with culturally different others.

Remember:

- a) Every person has a personal experience that can be shared.
- b) We all have something to learn from others.
- c) Listening for understanding can be transformational.

Story Circle guidelines:

- maintain confidentiality;
- be yourself;
- speak from your own experience only;
- be genuine and authentic;
- keep the sharing simple, clear, and focused;
- uphold positive intent; and
- be comfortable in your own style (i.e., sit, stand, use gestures).

Story Circle instructions

Overview: Sit in a circle, agree on a nonverbal sign to indicate the end of someone's allotted time, and agree together that you will all adhere to the time parameters. The person to the right of the storyteller is the timekeeper. The person who starts is the person whose birthday is closest to today. Now introduce yourselves using the prompt in step #1, which follows. After introductions (#1), take turns sharing your story (using the prompt in #2) – the others need to

listen for understanding and not interrupt, ask questions, or make comments. Simply listen. Then the next person tells his or her story until all persons in the circle have told their stories – without interruption or comment. Be sure to listen carefully since you will be asked to share a “flashback” from each story at the end (#3). A “flashback” is something that was memorable for you in the story. Be prepared to share this in 15 seconds or less for each story (this is meant to go quickly!).

- 1) Sit in a circle, and in two minutes or less, briefly introduce yourself by _____. No interruptions, comments, or questions. Just take turns introducing yourselves.
- 2) In three minutes or less, _____. No interruptions, comments, or questions.
- 3) Once all stories have been shared, then engage in the “flashback” time: Go back to the first story, and each person (other than the storyteller) shares a specific memorable part of the other’s story (in 15 seconds or less). Then go on to the second story, and so on, until “flashbacks” have been shared for all the stories told.
- 4) Once the “flashbacks” have been shared, together discuss some of the following questions in the remaining time. * Please monitor the time so the group can finish at the requested time.

Discussion questions

- 1) What common themes did you hear from the stories?
- 2) What surprised you?
- 3) What challenged you in the stories you heard?
- 4) What did you learn about yourself through this experience?

Excerpted from *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies: Story Circles* by Darla K. Deardorff, UNESCO/Routledge 2020 .