

## Exploring students' intercultural awareness with an intercultural approach to ELT in Algeria

**Amina Guerriche\***, University of Mentouri Brothers, Department of English, Constantine, Algeria,  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1164-961X>

### Suggested Citation:

Guerriche, A. (2023). Exploring students' intercultural awareness with an intercultural approach to ELT in Algeria. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 13(1), 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gift.v13i1.7919>

Received from September 11, 2022; revised from November 29, 2022; accepted from January 31, 2023.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc Prof. Dr. Jesus Garcia Laborda, Alcala University, Spain.

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### Abstract

The recent trends in foreign language teaching influenced widely by the process of globalisation, interculturalism, and global flows are leaning towards adopting an intercultural perspective to help in developing students who are global citizens able to effectively function across diverse boundaries. Researchers call for an intercultural learning and teaching perspective that would foster and increase intercultural awareness and understanding. The present research aims to unfold whether including the cultural dimension in foreign language instruction can help in developing students' intercultural awareness. In doing so, a cultural pedagogical experiment was designed and conducted for the period of 1 year at the level of the university. Data were collected qualitatively and analysed thematically. Results help in drawing important implications for educational institutions, foreign language teachers, and syllabus designers about the importance and effectiveness of perceiving foreign language instruction as a social activity that can nurture interculturally aware and competent individuals.

Keywords: ELT, intercultural awareness, knowledge, pedagogy, intercultural understanding

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\* \*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Guerriche Amina, University of Mentouri Brothers, Department of English, Constantine, Algeria.

E-mail address: [amina.guerriche@umc.edu.dz](mailto:amina.guerriche@umc.edu.dz) /Tel.: +213.555.970.157

## 1. Introduction

Castles and Miller (1993) assert that we are in the midst of the greatest mass movement of populations of any time in history. On the worldwide level, mass mobility affects all strata of society. This mobility is a consequence of a wide variety of reasons such as the globalisation of industry, seeking better life quality, or expansion of educational exchanges. Hence, the world nowadays is characterised by blurred boundaries and people find themselves in constant contact with others from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, sometimes without even crossing their geographical borderlines (Leung et al., 2020).

At this time of growing interconnectedness, inevitably, in the educational sphere, debates around the importance of nurturing students who are culturally equipped to function appropriately across sociocultural and group boundaries have arisen. Educationalists and scholars have been discussing how the teaching of language and culture contributes to cultural harmony and which competencies are required for today's world (Koskela et al., 2022). Today, interculturality became a trait of our globalised world.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has been an important factor in the construction of our globalised society (Peng & Gao, 2019). This is mainly given the status of English as a 'lingua Franca' and its role as a global means of communication (across cultures) and research. In Algeria, the teaching of English as a foreign language is closely related to political interests and socio-economic developmental goals. Stakeholders and educational and governmental institutions recently acknowledged that TEFL is an important factor contributing to the opening of new markets and allowing us to keep abreast of globalisation. This is illustrated by several initiatives taken recently.

In 2022, the Algerian government initiated several projects reflecting the value given to English as one of the vehicles of globalisation. For example, one of the projects aims at replacing French with English in higher education institutions starting with the different labels and front displays of universities and public institutions all over the country. The Algerian government seems to be fully committed to the process of internationalisation (Belaref & Mhamdia, 2022). This aspiration is being materialised through several other projects linking the government to other foreign institutions and international educationalists and experts. Amongst these projects are the multiple international cooperation within the educational sphere with various universities and research labs to benefit from student and staff exchange and collaboration.

Another example of the government's commitment to globalisation is the cooperation between the US embassy and the Algerian government to incorporate English as a foreign language in higher education for all majors. That is, all students in higher education have to study the subject of English (Aizawa & Rose, 2019). Studying, writing, and publishing in English has been also recommended for teachers and researchers. Universities on the national level are offering English language courses via both online and physical classes.

In October 2020, the Algerian government and the US Embassy launched the Research Hub which is a 3-year project managed by Notre Dame University of Indiana State to create a network of research institutions inside and outside of Algeria (US Embassy in Algeria Website, 2020). The aim is to encourage greater cooperation between Algerian universities and researchers and the private sector. It further aims at increasing the capacity of universities to undertake innovative research and especially academic research that has an impact on improving the Algerian economy.

All of these projects and the efforts put into internationalisation reflect the importance that foreign language teaching (English language teaching [ELT] in particular) holds in developing intercultural and globalised societies. This reflects the need for teachers to be constantly aware of the wide influence that language teaching has on nurturing students who are part of this globalised world and who will effectively function in diverse contexts and societies.

### *1.1. Conceptual background*

The growing invasion of English as a lingua franca accompanied by mass travel, growing international cooperations, greater exchange, and communication makes it imperative to teach our students not only the language and the way to correctly use the structures and forms but to adopt an intercultural pedagogy in foreign language instruction that would help in developing students' intercultural understanding. The implementation of an intercultural approach in foreign language teaching has the potential to help future language teachers understand the multiple socio-cultural factors that are implied in the teaching of a foreign language as well as the importance of nurturing culturally aware and competent students who will be able to effectively navigate and work within different cultures and with people from diverse backgrounds without losing perspective of their local reality.

Because culture teaching, in TEFL specifically, in Algeria is mainly focused on the surface cultural aspects of native speakers' culture (civilisation, history, literature), I have designed the content of the course 'Language and Culture' and conducted this study to explore how the course as a whole (content, activities, methodology) has affected students' sociocultural views and perspectives about the importance of culture and investigated the development of their intercultural awareness through this pedagogical experience.

### *1.2. Purpose of study*

Following an intercultural approach in ELT has the potential of helping students develop their awareness of cultural differences through constructing intercultural knowledge which will help them in understanding diversity and tolerating it. The present research aims to unfold whether including the cultural dimension in foreign language instruction can help in developing students' intercultural awareness.

### *1.3. Related research*

#### *1.3.1. Intercultural awareness*

Intercultural awareness became an important trait required to live harmoniously with others in today's global society. Accompanied by the growing interest in nurturing culturally aware students able to effectively communicate and function across sociocultural boundaries, a growing body of research is dedicated to exploring and defining the concept of intercultural awareness. Below is a review of some of the common definitions within the relevant literature.

Intercultural awareness conceptualises intercultural knowledge and skills (such as tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation of diversity) needed to communicate effectively and avoid intercultural misunderstandings (Robins et al., 2002). That is, constructing knowledge about cultural and social diversity constitutes a very important element in nurturing individuals' intercultural awareness (Hill, 2006). However, it is worth highlighting that awareness does not entail intercultural knowledge per se, but also positive attitudes towards other cultures such as respect, empathy, and curiosity (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Heyward, 2002; Matveev & Nelson, 2004).

Byram (1997), gives a detailed account of intercultural awareness as part of a framework of intercultural communicative competence. The critical component of his framework is the importance of understanding the nature of cultural norms to reach an ability to evaluate practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Guerriche, 2020). The framework proposes the intercultural speaker as opposed to the native speaker. That is, what is emphasised is the knowledge and skills that the learner constructs and can later use to understand cultural diversity within intercultural communication rather than following the norms set by a native interlocutor.

Perceiving cultures as dynamic and diverse constitutes the essence of the development of intercultural awareness. The development of this latter is by no means a passive process. It is a process that goes beyond mere observation of our environment to being actively engaged in it through constant reflection and comparison between differences (Leung et al., 2020; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2009). Nurturing students who are interculturally aware became the objective of worldwide institutions and the big trend in research nowadays in foreign language teaching which takes into consideration the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic aspects of language.

### 1.3.2. *Intercultural pedagogy*

Intercultural pedagogy is a principle embedded in intercultural education (Gashi, 2021; Nieto, 1992). An intercultural pedagogy engages actively with the interrelatedness of language, culture, and learning and with the multiple languages and cultures that foreign language teaching might entail especially English due to its status as Lingua Franca. This involves giving students the space to reflect upon their own culture and develop an awareness of their situatedness concerning other cultures. In this vein, Ruiz (2004) claims that an intercultural pedagogy is embedded in the assertion of cultural differences and uses intercultural communication as a vehicle to establish a dialogue. Considered an element grounded in intercultural pedagogy, this dialogue emphasises the establishment of exchange between different cultures.

Intercultural pedagogy theorists emphasise the aspect of boundary-crossing between cultures (Buttjes & Byram, 1991, p. 2). That is, in light of the growing constant diverse cultural encounters between people with different cultural backgrounds, foreign language education is primarily tasked with teaching students how to effectively engage in 'boundary-crossing' communication with their counterparts from other cultures (Sevimel-Sahin, 2020). This emphasis was first recognised in multicultural societies where intercultural encounters take place within national geographical boundaries and then became relevant to all societies due to the continuous global flows of people.

According to Aguado (2003, p. 63), an intercultural pedagogy entails 'The reflection about education, understood as a cultural construct, and based on the value of cultural diversity. It promotes the acquisition of intercultural competence for every person from any cultural group.' Fundamentally, the implementation of an intercultural pedagogy entails engaging students in the process of interpreting intercultural communication and understanding and tolerating intercultural diversity.

Another rationale that favours the adoption of an intercultural pedagogy is the fact that when people communicate in another language, they not only utilise language functions, but they perform or communicate within a culturally and socially distinct milieu. Hence, learners require not only linguistic knowledge (mainly grammar and vocabulary) but also cultural knowledge that would enable the socially and culturally correct use of the language.

Quite often native speakers can tolerate problems linked to the linguistic knowledge of the speaker (such as spelling or grammatical mistakes), but a lack of intercultural knowledge can engender cultural misunderstandings which often create significant problems for communication and social relationships, largely because people lack cultural awareness as opposed to linguistic awareness.

#### *1.4. Theoretical framework*

The integration of culture in language teaching is based on the assumption that language and culture are two facets of the same coin and one cannot be explored without the other (Kramsch, 2005; Lessow-Hurley, 2000). However, there have been many practices in foreign language instruction that have not displayed this interconnectedness. In this research, I will be referring to these approaches as the 'separatist approach' and to the approach that integrates the cultural element in language instruction as the 'integrative approach'.

##### *1.4.1. Culture and foreign language teaching: The separatist and the integrative approaches*

The separatist approach is also referred to as the tourist approach (Weil, 1998) as it is based on the assumption that culture is the transmission of cultural trivia that would allow students to function across cultural environments as a tourist. This approach is, however, just 'a simplistic view maintaining that in teaching language we by definition also teach its cultural baggage falls short of credibility' (Sellami, 2000, p. 4). Advocates of the separatist approach generally couch the teaching of culture in the teaching of the surface level of culture (e.g., idiomatic expressions, typical food).

However, teaching the surface level of culture does not necessarily entail that student will learn how different cultural manifestations are connected with the language and the appropriate contextual use of different expressions and behaviours (Abacioglu et al., 2020). Hence, it is important to explore the way students mirror the target language's culture within their own culture and see how the separation of language instruction from the cultural one or the integration of both elements can impact their intercultural awareness and understanding.

As for the integrated approach to language teaching and learning, it advocates for two main dimensions of language instruction. The first dimension is that language learning and culture are fundamentally linked or integrated. This reflects that while developing a language instruction pedagogy, it is necessary to recognise the classroom as a cultural context where teachers' and learners' experiences, backgrounds, and expectations are shaped by the linguistic and cultural backgrounds that each brings to the classroom.

Regarding the second dimension, it is the recognition that there are at least two languages in constant interplay during language teaching and learning; the first language of the students and the target language. Each language represents a different understanding of the world and carries embedded understandings of the nature of that world.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### *2.1. Participants*

This study follows purposeful convenience sampling. It involved students in the researcher's class who were willing to participate, voice opinions and perceptions, and communicate feelings and ideas. Participants were between the ages of 20–23 years. They were all part of the same group from their first year at university (hence taught by the same teachers and exposed to the same learning material). Students were not involved in any extracurricular activity entailing an intercultural aspect and were born

and raised in a relatively homogenous monocultural environment. The recruitment of participants was based on these selection criteria to be able to observe the development of their intercultural awareness and minimise the number of possible extraneous variables that can harm the research's credibility.

The study endeavours to investigate the development of students' intercultural awareness within an academic framework and through the adoption of an intercultural pedagogy that enabled them to engage in reflective practices and navigate through diverse cultural systems of a variety of cultures. 8 Master's students were sampled from a class of 25 students. The class offered students' academic content that revolved around intercultural awareness, communication, competence, and the language and culture nexus. Classes also allowed them to navigate various cultural systems including norms and values.

### *2.2. Data collection instruments*

This research is framed under the constructivist/interpretivism paradigm and followed a qualitative research strategy. A descriptive case study design was used to explore the process that students went through to develop their intercultural awareness and construct their intercultural knowledge. A cultural pedagogical experiment was designed and conducted for the period of 1 year at the level of the university. Data was collected by utilising semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The setting and environment of the interviews were chosen by the interviewees to ensure an atmosphere where they felt comfortable and could behave spontaneously.

The present research sought to explore, document, and describe the students' intercultural development. Following a qualitative research methodology helped in providing rich accounts of the students' intercultural development taking place in their real-time natural and academic contexts. It also helped in unfolding the ways in which the pedagogical experiment influenced students' intercultural awareness development.

The type of observation used was naturalistic (Croll, 1986). As the lecturer and the designer of the 'Language and Culture' course, I was a participant observer in my classroom setting (LeCompte et al., 1993). Collecting data through classroom observation enabled establishing ties with the context and the sample. It allowed the researcher to effectively blend into the researched context, and then step out of it and engage in full immersion in the data to understand what was going on and be able to richly describe it (Bernard, 1994). Observation involved making field notes that were recorded either during the class (times given to students for reflection or group work) or at the end of the session. Classroom observation data were also used to design further questions asked for the participants (during the interview process) to have a better understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny. For example, the sources of their intercultural knowledge, their perceptions, and their interpretations of different intercultural instances.

To keep track of the students' intercultural development, a semi-structured interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) was designed and conducted at the end of the course (end of the academic year). The use of semi-structured interviews helped in evoking students' ideas and opinions about the topics of interest. The interviews of the present study lasted between 15 to 20 minutes and revolved around students' reflections and perceptions about their intercultural pedagogical experience and their intercultural development.

### *2.3. Procedure*

In this section, the researcher describes the academic environment where the present research's teaching experiment took place.

### *2.3.1. The teaching environment*

In 2020, I started teaching a course entitled 'language and culture' dedicated to postgraduate students (Master 1) of the English Didactics stream. The course was considered a discovery unit as it was a new subject introduced in foreign language instruction and entailed formative evaluation only for students, unlike other fundamental units which required both formative and summative assessments.

The course design aimed at introducing students to language use that is not culturally bounded but culturally transferable. Implementing the cultural element in foreign teaching/learning did not entail focusing only on the target language's culture. Hence, the course entailed introducing students to intercultural communication, competence, and awareness. Students engaged in different activities discussing a wide range of intercultural input.

The defining characteristic of the course that I have designed is that it does not seek to prepare students for any particular space of culture that would be framed as the 'national homogenous culture' associated with a specific nation (essentialism). The course aimed to help students construct who they are through continuous reflection on a different material that goes beyond their national identities (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015). The intercultural education principle followed in this course is based on the constructivist approach to teaching which emphasises the appreciation of the social construction of cultural realities and how they are driven by discourses.

### *2.3.2. Tasks and materials used*

The tasks used and the material adopted followed the communicative teaching approach, and the constructivist philosophy and were influenced by the work and suggestions of Holliday (2018) and Byram et al. (2002). The following section details the types of activities used to promote interculturalism and raise students' intercultural awareness and reflects the use of the integrative approach discussed above.

#### *2.3.2.1. Exploring small present or past cultural experiences*

Students were taken back often to their own experiences of encountering what they considered as an intercultural unfamiliarity (academic setting, social setting, travel experience...). This led them to reflect on past experiences that they did not consider intercultural before and raise their awareness about the intercultural elements they might carry. This activity required an analysis of the commonalities of their cultural behaviors and building blocks to the competence that they can carry to further intercultural instances.

#### *2.3.2.2. Recognising prejudice and how to deal with it*

Students were introduced to various held beliefs about specific nations that they were exposed to in their English language learning from high school until university. In this vein, I have represented the ELT material that they were introduced to during middle school to reflect on. Students were also introduced to some narratives from different resources and intercultural misunderstanding incidents and analysed them to reflect on them to see the impact that prejudice and differences between cultural values can have on the way we position ourselves against different nations, cultures, ethnicities, and religions.

The main goal of these activities was to help students understand that differences do not constitute the problem but held prejudice about every group/nation does. That is, their cultural perspective could be the main barrier in the way of intercultural understanding (Holliday, 2018). Students were also introduced to various theories that shed some light on the reasons behind intercultural misunderstandings.

#### *2.3.2.3. Building bridges*

This activity is aimed at building connections with people from various sociocultural backgrounds. Students engaged in a comparing process between their culture and cultural norms and values and any other culture that they perceived at first as different. The aim was not centred only on spotting differences, but most importantly discovering unexpected commonalities. This was done through group work and reflection on anecdotes, diverse cultural rituals, and storytelling.

#### *2.3.2.4. Intercultural awareness*

The development of the learners' intercultural awareness is not based on changing their values to be able to accept others but on making them conscious of their values and aware of their frames of evaluation and responses to others (Byram et al., 2002). To develop students' intercultural awareness, participants were introduced to several intercultural communication instances (written and video scenarios and dialogues) in which a set of intercultural misunderstandings took place or discursive practices that were rich in cultural diversity. These communicative instances were between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This activity aimed to help learners know how intercultural interactions happen and the multiplicity of identities and backgrounds they involve, and how different perceptions can influence the success of their intercultural interaction.

Students were also encouraged to critically analyse and reflect on their intercultural experiences and on different traits they read or heard about other cultures. They were introduced to videos of individuals from different countries talking about Algeria and were given the chance to evaluate and compare different statements with their knowledge and experiences. These types of activities helped in activating the learners' schemata and background knowledge about different cultures and people. It also raised their awareness vis a vis the role that preconceived ideas can have on the success or the failure of their intercultural communicative experiences.

To sum up, while designing this pedagogical experience, I have considered language as a communicative social practice, and hence included the cultural element at the very core of language instruction (Kramsch, 1993). The main goal of opting for an intercultural pedagogy was not lecturing students to speak and behave like a native but developing their intercultural awareness (to accompany their linguistic competence) to become intercultural speakers (Byram, 1997) capable of effectively functioning and communicating in today's globalised world.

#### *2.4. Data analysis*

Framed within the qualitative-interpretive tradition, this research inquiry aimed to generate knowledge grounded in the human experience (Sandelowski, 2004). To analyse data, I followed thematic analysis. This latter involves 'identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data. It minimally 'organises and describes the data set in (rich) detail' (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 6). In this research, data generated qualitatively through recorded observation and transcribed were thematically analysed.



I used thematic analysis because it enabled me to examine patterns in the data that are interesting and important for answering the main research questions. My data analysis involved categorising, synthesising, and searching for patterns in the data collected (Patton, 1990). Similar responses, experiences, and perceptions were grouped to form connections generating a particular code or theme. That is to say that the collected data were thematically coded to form meaningful organised data sets.

### *2.5. Reliability of the study*

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, triangulation was used to establish the credibility of the research and ensure that the generated data is the result of multiple resources and is grounded in the participants' experiences and statements and not the researcher's subjectivities. Credibility was also ensured through prolonged observation and engagement within the field of research. Member checks were also used in this research as a means to collaboratively interpret the data with my participants. Participants were handed their transcribed interviews to read and comment on. I have also proposed that there is a possibility to read field notes if curious.

Generalisation was not the aim of the research as it aimed at exploring deeply students' attitudes and experiences. Transferability is possible in this research through the descriptive account given about the environment, the course material, and the participants. Hence, the task of the reader to make the transferability is easier through the descriptive accounts given, who will be left with the final decision after making a careful comparison between the present research project and his experiences.

As a means to establish the dependability of this qualitative inquiry, a reflexive journal was used to render the tension between the data and the researcher's potential bias. Reflexivity allowed me to ensure the clarity of my voice as opposed to my participants' and thus strengthen the data and go beyond individual views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *2.6. Ethical consideration*

It is worth mentioning that the present research is ethical and kept the participants' interest at best. Before being interviewed and observed, each participant reviewed and signed a consent form that contained a written summary of the research, informed them of the role of the researcher and that the interviews will be audio taped and that data will be taken from their in-class learning process to help in the research project. Participants were informed of all their rights including; the right to withdraw, anonymity, and confidentiality, and the researcher did not put them in any harm's way.

## **3. Results**

Through the thematic data analysis followed in this research, two main themes emerged and are discussed below.

### *3.1. Intercultural awareness development*

Respect for cultural diversity and dialogue across diverse social groups are principles embedded in intercultural education (Byram, 2002). Through this pedagogical experiment, students started to consider the importance of respect for others. Classroom observations confirmed that the activities that students engaged in helped them contemplate other world views and planted the seed for the

development of interculturally aware individuals who can see the world of intercultural differences through a multicolour rather than monochromatic lens. In this vein, Amal and Khaled reported the following:

*Amal: 'To be honest, I would have thought that this unit would make me see things from such a different perspective. I never reflected on differences and just found comfort in believing that as long as I do things my way it is okay. But through all the activities that we have done, I realized that I have been ethnocentric without being aware of it. Now I understand what happens in an intercultural encounter through all the theories we explored' (SSI 3).*

*Khaled: 'This unit had a great impact on my personal life. I am more reflective now; I am more open-minded and in different intercultural interactions I am able to put myself in others' shoes. I am not judgmental on the contrary I am even more curious to know about what is different'. (SSI 6)*

At the beginning of the academic year, when students were doing role play or were exposed to stories about intercultural encounters to reflect on, they were all judging everything from their perspective and cultural frame of interpretation. An example of this was when they were discussing different celebrations. One of the students mentioned that celebrating Halloween is religious and morally wrong (Classroom observation 10/10/2021).

However, by the end of the academic year (and hence the pedagogical experiment), students demonstrated continuous awareness and a developed acceptance of others. For example, they became very curious and motivated to learn about diversity, developed an ethnorelative view, we are constantly bringing different stories about other cultures and communicative instances, and even pointed out to each other whenever someone makes a judgmental statement.

It is worth shedding some light on the fact that students (100%) demonstrated an ethnocentric state of mind at the beginning of the academic year. This was revealed through their displayed judgments, insensitivity, and negative stereotyping (Classroom observation- September/October 2021). Students had a high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011) and regarded their culture as the norm. For example, they perceived their food and traditions to be 'the best'. They regarded Islam and Islamic values as superior and considered debates of race, faith, or gender to be taboo due to their difference from what they judged as 'good and appropriate'.

However, by the end of the academic year, students demonstrated an easiness in discussing various topics, exemplifying anecdotes of minority groups, and demonstrating an unprecedented cultural understanding and sensitivity. Students no longer filtered differences from their rigid mono-cultural frame but could show a great understanding and tolerance of diversities.

### *3.2. Intercultural knowledge construction*

Following the constructivist student-centred type of teaching, experiential education was the core of the course where the learning aligned with students' interests. My role as a teacher entailed including students in the learning process, maintaining a balance between knowledge delivery and guidance, and facilitating students' learning and knowledge construction.

By the end of the course, students displayed intercultural development. For example, during class discussions about intercultural diversities, students tended to be less judgmental and more sensitive to differences (classroom observation, 15/05/2022). While introduced (in the lesson on intercultural

communication) to various cultural theories followed by scenarios of cultural misunderstandings, students could display a very developed empathy and could explain and reflect on the reasons for intercultural conflicts. In this vein, Lina asserted:

*'(...) without the knowledge constructed about intercultural misunderstandings, how do they occur? reasons behind them? I wouldn't understand how we fall in that trap except that because we are different. Now, based on all the research introduced to us and theories read I can scientifically and even culturally and psychologically understand differences and it is great' (SSI, 4)*

It was clear that intercultural knowledge construction through the present pedagogical experiment was influential. Instead of having a rigid frame of interpretation from which students tended to downgrade everything that is culturally different as 'not good, wrong, immoral, culturally incorrect' (classroom observation 03/11/2021), students' perceptions shifted. The experiment helped students to build intercultural knowledge that led them to move beyond group categorisation and prejudices as they started to explain differences through an understanding of having diverse value systems, different cultural dimensions, and societal norms (amongst others)' (classroom observation (27/04/2022).

Data collected revealed that students appreciated and valued four main aspects of the unit. The first was the student-centred type of learning and activities. In this vein, several students reported that the main source of their intercultural knowledge before was mainly the academic content of the academic courses. For example, Ryma expressed that her cultural knowledge came only from formal lectures about British and American civilisation which is not functional in today's world (SSI 01). Similarly, Mayar reported:

*'To be honest I was not a fan of this unit before I found it a bit boring to have tons of information every time about civilizations. But the content and learning of this year made it the most enjoyable for me' (SSI 07).*

Data excerpts display that the source of students' intercultural knowledge was restricted to learning about the British and American civilisations and literature. Notwithstanding the importance of the units and the content offered, the teaching should not be only focused on the target culture's civilisation. This type of content would not be effective in helping students construct intercultural knowledge that would help them develop the adequate skills to effectively function in multicultural environments.

As previously discussed, students need to learn about the concept of diversity and interculturality and develop their intercultural awareness. The present course helped students build a deep and broad intercultural knowledge that fostered their understanding and widened their cultural frames of interpretation and that was the second element appreciated by students.

Students reported that they further valued the privilege that they have of mastering a global language. They reported that English had the advantage of helping them 'have access to not only one but several cultures' (Zakari, SSI 5) and hence can help them communicate and know about several other cultures (English and non-English speakers). Here, students understood well the relation between language and culture and were introduced to various theories that they reflected upon.

The last element that students valued was the understanding they developed about differences and about the importance of being culturally aware to be able to adapt to various cultural environments through being competent both culturally and socially. In this vein, Mayar asserted that taking part in the

unit helped her reflect upon her own past cultural experiences that she took for granted and explained that she realised that she was being judgmental towards others (SSI 7).

Overall, students expressed that the pedagogical experiment helped them feel included in the learning process. Students' thinking and meaning-making changed between the first and the last session of the unit. This development was not only revealed by data. Students became very aware of their development and they even developed a curiosity to discover unfamiliarities beyond the classroom boundaries. Some students developed an interest in doing a study abroad experience while others who teach started including the cultural element in their language classes the way done in this experiment.

#### **4. Discussion**

The present pedagogical experiment followed experiential learning and student-centred teaching (Hedge, 1993). It promoted learner autonomy (Güven & Valais, 2014), cooperative learning (Farouk, 2016), and critical thinking (Beckett & Miller, 2006). The approach followed had potential in terms of social and intercultural skills, intercultural awareness, and understanding.

The present research data illustrated that the pedagogical experiment helped in nurturing students with intercultural skills and intercultural knowledge that helped them have a better understanding of self and sociocultural diversity. This aligns with the reflections of Byram et al. (2002) who claim that developing intercultural competent students would lead to the development of intercultural speakers who would successfully communicate beyond the language barriers and develop a good rapport with speakers of other languages and cultures.

The research findings are consistent with the claims of researchers in the field of intercultural education (Estaji & Savarabadi, 2020; Holliday, 2018; Popescu & Iordachescu, 2015; Porto et al., 2017). Integrating the cultural dimension in the foreign language classroom is of major importance as it enables the construction of an intercultural understanding and awareness that would allow students to develop into intercultural speakers. Notwithstanding the hardships of tackling different types of cultural input, the main focus of this course was introducing students to various types of input, pushing them to constantly reflect and compare, and engaging them in the learning process through the activities previously mentioned.

It is possible to assert through the results that this course enabled both intercultural and personal reflections from students. Students realised that English is a vehicle to discover intercultural diversities and demonstrated great appreciation for the results of the pedagogical experiment. Participants established the language-culture relation and the way to use, as future language teachers, culture as an integral part of teaching the language.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the experiment revealed that students benefited from the integration of the cultural dimension in the foreign language classroom and would appreciate having intercultural elements in the subjects taught across their discipline. Students demonstrated a visible awareness of their development from being ethnocentric to being ethnorelative and culturally conscious. Several students expressed their willingness to adopt the pedagogical experiment as future language teachers and others expressed their growing curiosity about intercultural diversity and willingness to engage in study abroad experiences.

Besides being perceived as a pragmatic and academic activity, language learning and teaching should also be seen as a social activity (Byram, 2008). It is not only about inculcating the grammatical rules and developing the linguistic repertoire but also about developing citizens who are culturally alert and able to cope with contexts of diversity characterised by diverse value systems.

The fruitfulness of the pedagogical experiment design directs me to recommend including the cultural dimension in foreign language instruction. Teachers of different subjects within this field should find appropriate means of introducing intercultural input in their classes to equip students with the needed knowledge and skills to effectively function across geographical or sociocultural contexts. Notwithstanding the importance of physical intercultural immersion and communication experiences in promoting students' intercultural identity and understanding, adopting a cultural dimension in foreign language instruction can be a preparation for intercultural experiences, a motive to engage in intercultural experiences (e.g., study abroad), and a means to develop students' ethnorelativism, critical thinking, and cultural understanding and awareness.

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