

## Embedment of cultural competence in foreign language classrooms

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### Abstract

Contemporary classrooms are portrayed by the use of many languages as they are influenced by many cultures. This fact is the plain and imminent outcome of globalization. This situation boosts the importance of integrating compatible and relevant elements of culture as a teaching pedagogy. Hence, teachers should recognize students' differences and commonalities. In other terms, the instructors need to form themselves in a way that serves their students' needs and expectations about the cultures handled in their classrooms. Hitherto, this paper's significance can be embodied in the relevance of integrating culture in teaching to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. The research has relied on three research instruments; classroom observation, questionnaire, and unstructured interview, and the data are analyzed qualitatively. The sample population is represented by teachers and students of Moulay Tahar University (Saida Algeria). The results demonstrated that foreign language teachers should integrate culture in their lectures since it comes up with auspicious results namely communicating interculturally. The paper at hand raises new opportunities to handle another research for further findings with a large size of informants.

**Keywords:** Communication; competence; culture; responsive teacher; student's learning.

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching has been for a long time a debatable activity that deserves to be under investigation due to its primordial role and sacred place in societies. Although there exist variable methods that have proven their efficacy, researchers are trying to look for others for the sake of adapting them to current learning settings and considering the new generation's prospects. Foreign language learners, particularly EFL ones, joined those classes in pursuance of mastering the English language and being able to communicate fluently with English speakers. Teachers from their part find it necessary to look for adequate pedagogy that facilitates their task and meets contemporary demands in foreign language classrooms. At this stage, rethinking foreign languages' syllabi and searching for efficient ways to teach should be a compulsory step. Furthermore, researchers emphasized the integration of culture in foreign language classes due to its several advantageous outcomes (Lee et al., 2023). Therefore, embedding culture is cherished to work on communicative and cultural competencies.

About the above-mentioned issues, the researcher put forward two subsequent questions:

- What are the major advantages of involving culture in foreign language classrooms?
- Are teachers nowadays destined to include the target culture to achieve their goals?

To answer the above-mentioned research questions, we have hypothesized that the primordial aim of integrating culture is that mastering the cultural elements is essential when learning foreign languages since the linguistic elements are not sufficient as they do not guarantee the student a fluent way to communicate through a culture. Moreover, the world is now increasingly becoming little, and many cultures blend (O'Leary et al., 2020). This fact enables people with different cultures to have a close mutual exchange and cooperation and more importantly to communicate cross-culturally. Though it sometimes occurs spontaneously to teach or speak about the target language's culture, teachers are supposed to master and grasp both language and its culture particularly to be considered responsive cultural teachers (Zhang & Lütge 2023).

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

#### 1.1.1. Linguistic, Communicative and Cultural Competences

Teachers of foreign languages work constantly on syllabi that ameliorate their input and at the same time, they expect satisfactory feedback. Yet, the most important mission of foreign language teachers is to lead students to master the language's four skills namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are learned through excessive use of myriads of activities which vary from textbooks, oral exercises, songs, poems, and so on.

*An instructor who proposes to teach something to a student should have a clear grasp of what is to be taught. This means not only having a grasp of what is to be taught in a particular class but also a view of how that part of the subject relates to the whole subject area (Brown et al., 1996).*

Henceforth, the teacher at this level is supposed to work on students' linguistic and communicative competencies simultaneously. As far as the former is concerned, Chomsky (1965) quoted in Brown et al., (1996) distinguished between two dichotomies; namely competence vs. performance, and contended that:

- a) Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows their language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory restrictions, aberrations, attention and interest shifts, and inaccuracies in practicing his language skills in real situations (p. 3).
- b) Significant differences are made to separate competence (the speakers-hearer's knowledge of the language) and performance in the actual use of language in concrete situations (p.4).

The latter, however, was introduced by the sociolinguist Hymes (1972) whose "research typified the shift in the study of language at that time from an interest in the language in isolation to the study

of language in use” (Barron 2003). Hymes (1972) likewise, emphasized the idea of dealing with language about its actual use in daily life regarding of course the sociocultural paradigms to grasp the real meaning behind each utterance’s usage. Hymes Quoted in (Mukherjee 2005) suggested the following four types (abilities) related to its theory of communicative competence:

1. Whether (and to which extent) something is formally achievable.
2. Whether (and to which extent) something is possible by the agency of the present tools of Implementation.
3. Whether (and to which extent) something is adequate, ecstatic, prosperous) about the context in which it is employed and assessed.
4. Whether (and to which extent) an activity is performed and what are its main consequences (Hymes, 1972).

Additionally, the philosopher Habermas (1970) quoted in Rickheit and Strohner (2008) asserted that:

*General semantics cannot be developed sufficiently on the narrow basis of the monolingual linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky (1965) Above all, communicative competence relates to an ideal speech situation in the same way that linguistic competence relates to the abstract system of linguistic rules.*

On that account, communicative competence can be discerned or concretized in actual conversations, as it enables us to have an idea of the speakers’ background and culture. It also paves the way for the levels of formality to take place as we can notice that the same speaker can talk in different ways according to the addressee and the setting where the conversation takes place.

So, we can say that mastering the grammar and language of a foreign language is not enough to achieve advantageous communication. From this point forth, teachers should be aware of the importance of both communicative and cultural competencies especially since the world has become a small spot and people have started doing relationships and business with foreigners (Chen, 2023; Kim & Xing 2019). In the same line of thought Pérez-Llantada (2012) contended that “pedagogically, intercultural competence is now becoming an integrated component of the actual language learning process.” In due course, fluency in communication cannot be achieved without having at least a glimpse of the culture of the language learned. Thus, teachers should integrate cultural elements as an apprenticeship in their classrooms and should work on them earnestly (Comstock et al., 2023; Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020). In this context, Lee McKay & Hornberger (1995) argued that:

*Ultimately, all aspects of culture are relevant to communication, but the ones that have the most immediate importance for those learning communicative forms and processes in a second or foreign language are the social structure of its speech community and the values and attitudes held about language and ways of speaking.*

Language and culture are remarkably interconnected and need to be studied together to understand each one’s function. Additionally, teachers and students should consider both of them for the sake of achieving lucrative communication in a foreign language.

### 1.1.2. Language and Culture

Language is a human particularity that is embodied by linguistic and non-linguistic symbols to get one’s ideas across and accomplish human’s everyday needs. This vehicle of communication can have written or spoken forms to express formal or informal messages, and polite or impolite utterances. In other words, language has several functions including expressiveness, performance, creating relationships, apologizing, and asking for permission (speech acts). When people use language in the way they have acquired it, they also send influential hints about their personalities, belonging, and culture. The latter involves norms of language’s usages which should be respected to avoid eventual conflicts. Daily conversations are sorts of agreements and adjustments that assist the progress of integrating a group or a speech community. Culture and language are intensely tied to the extent that,

dealing with them separately is almost the time impossible. Kramsh & Widdowson (1998) argued that a language is a system of signs that is seen as having a cultural value.

Language is not a culture-free code, different from the various ways people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture. Language is not separate from culture where it is produced and pervaded, as it mirrors the populations' main activities and traditions. On this wise, referring to the culture of the foreign language is considered as a trivial step to grant fruitful intercultural communication, and to be acquainted with adequate circumstances of using certain forms of language or avoid them. Similarly, Gumpers and Levinson (1996) added that culture is capable of influencing people's thinking as they claimed that the essential idea of linguistic relativity is that culture via language influences people's assumptions and ways of viewing the world around us. They also contended that language acquisition occurs simultaneously with thinking manners and habits. However, these ways are unconsciously discerned because they seem natural to them.

All in all, culture is a set of ideas and beliefs generally reflected through the use of language which is itself affected by our thinking. Language in effect, mirrors individuals' lives and experiences as it gives cues about their belonging and norms of conduct. At this level, we can say that culture should be taught in foreign language classrooms to reach linguistic, communicative, and cultural competencies.

#### *1.1.3. The Culturally Responsive Classrooms and Teachers*

A responsive teacher is all the time aware of his student's interests, needs, preferences, and abilities. This kind of teacher does not handle the same kinds of activities in their classrooms all the time as they change their teaching methods and materials constantly. In addition to this, they try to make students learning appealing and impressive. It is a sort of challenge to facilitate students' integration in group work to ameliorate both cultural and linguistic competencies. To validate a student, the instructor has to employ cultural knowledge, and previous experiences in addition to frames of reference that render the process of learning more significant. The professor should consider cultural differences as aids to link the students' daily life away from one of the universities (Tripp and Collier 2019).

Nevertheless, sometimes teachers may consider time as a real constraint so they avoid personal story exchanges which should be deemed as a beneficial learning opportunity for students to interchange ideas when discussing their weekend activities or hobbies. Additionally, teachers at this level should support equality and mutual respect among students and emphasize that no culture is better than another.

#### *1.1.4. The Culture to Teach*

It is assumed that the main elements of culture that need to be included in a foreign language syllabus are those that reflect and view the target culture as a blueprint (Howes 2002). Culture clarifies the major beliefs which are rooted in any society, in addition to the way its people behave since native individuals play an essential role in many life situations that reflect their attitudes and rules. Culture and communication are entwined because culture dictates norms of conduct (who talks to whom, about what and how the communication proceeds), and determines how people encode messages, the meanings behind those messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, used, or interpreted. Culture is the foundation of communication (Szubko-Sitarek 2013).

Henceforth, teachers should give culture much importance in their syllabi. In other terms, they should include activities and assignments that are linked to the culture of the foreign language. These activities can improve both students' accents and knowledge and can also lead to a better understanding of what they are learning and how to deal with different situations if they travel or communicate with foreigners.

#### *1.1.5. The Importance of Authentic Material*

To get a clear image of the target cultures from several angles, teachers should put a myriad of tools in the hands of their students. Authentic materials are deemed to play a crucial role in motivating learners as they stimulate learners' interest and learning in a manner that cannot be done through artificial material such as pictures and exercises found in books. According to Little et al., (1989), "authentic texts approach learners to the target language culture, making learning more enjoyable and therefore more motivating." A big slice of culture is mirrored by proverbs, idioms, songs, short native conversations, and plays since they lead students to be engaged in real cultural experiences. Una (2021), also added that teaching through the use of authentic material and exercises conducts a practical imitation of the natives' real universe. Besides, in literature or oral lectures, proverbs, songs, and poems can be considered efficient ways to transmit cultures. Jordan (1997) lists sources of cultural information as follows:

Newspapers: are deemed as an expedient cultural source that carries a set of daily information about the life of the inhabitants of a given country. These are a good source of cultural information: local papers will give more of a flavor of everyday life in towns.

Talks/discussions: selecting adequate topics for discussions can create favorable debate among students and then lead to the exchange of new knowledge.

Video: culture is transmitted via videos, tapes, and other visual items (CD/DVD).

Role play/dramatizations: these can be used to initiate discussion and introspection examination of thoughts and feelings.

Culture quizzes/tests: an increased cultural awareness about the target culture can often be stimulated by a quiz.

The researcher finds it necessary to mention other cultural items that may help in integrating culture in foreign language classrooms namely; proverbs, songs, and poems. Proverbs are cultural emblems and serve to understand people's way of thinking and conduct especially that they carry with their usage conductive morals. (Dei and McDermott 2019) added that:

*Generally, proverbs, folktales, and cultural stories are crafted in attempts to make sense of the world in which we live and are passed on from elders to the community as a method of guidance for living and thriving in this world.*

Proverbs or oral dictums require to be deciphered since they involve encoding and intended messages. This step cannot be achieved if we are not acquainted with the proverb's culture. Despite their rare employment by individuals, no one can deny the trivial role of this oral tradition in carrying messages to direct and impact people in their life and their ability to reveal their users' way of life.

Similarly, songs and poems are motivating activities for learners thanks to the entertaining atmosphere they usually create. They have numerous benefits in increasing student's learning of new words and mastering their pronunciation. They enable them to distinguish between formal and informal words and expressions in the bargain.

## **1.2. Purpose of study**

This paper's significance can be embodied in the relevance of integrating culture in teaching to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes.

## **2. Material and Methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants of this case study have been selected randomly from the University of Saida Algeria. Dattalo (2008) contended that "Simple random sampling may be the best-known sampling strategy. A commonly used simple random sampling procedure is to assign a number to each element in the sampling frame and use an unbiased process such as a random number generator".

The sample population of this paper consisted of twelve (12) teachers whom we have interviewed and 63 students from different levels (first, second, and third-year LMD) who were given the

questionnaire including the teachers and students of classes where we have attended some lectures for classroom observation.

## **2.2. Tools of Data Collection**

This study primarily used three sources of data, namely, interview, classroom observation, and a questionnaire. Baker & Egbert (2016) asserted that “methodological triangulation facilitated validity checks of hypotheses, anchors findings in more robust interpretations and explanations, and allows the researcher to respond flexibly to unforeseen problems and aspects of the research”.

Data was gathered from three university EFL classes through classroom observation, a questionnaire in addition to an unstructured interview. The main aim of using classroom observation was to approach teachers’ way of teaching, their extent of motivation, the way they engage their students, and how they employ cultural activities. Yet, the purpose of observing classrooms was to define the activities undertaken in EFL classes as field notes were arranged and analyzed qualitatively. In effect, during our observation of classrooms, a preliminary analysis was made but firmly studied later.

On the other hand, the questionnaire which was directed to students aimed at analyzing the cultural components and how they influence students’ identities. The questionnaire included three questions that emphasized the utilization of the target culture in teaching teaching-learning process, the power of culture in inducing students’ reasoning, and finally the role of the target culture in facilitating intercultural communication.

The unstructured interview held with the teachers of the observed classrooms and other colleagues was utilized in this research to approach teachers’ points of view regarding culture and its involvement in EFL Classes. This instrument allows the researcher to achieve flexible contact with the participants and make them feel at ease and hence provide us with realistic data. This triangulation served to provide compulsory clues and data as it promoted the research's tenacity and validity.

## **2.3. Ethical consideration**

The relevant ethical approval was sought from the school authorities and the participants. All participants voluntarily gave their responses. The study ensured the anonymity of all participants.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Interview’s Findings**

*How do teachers of English perceive the concept of culture in an EFL university context? And what is the culture of the target language?*

Three (3) teachers of the classrooms observed in addition to nine (9) others who met out of the class announced that culture is a way of life that comprises numerous directing facets of life. Among the answers of the teachers, we also found some reflective ideas about the notion of culture as a way of life they say that to know how to speak, the way you dress, your social relationships including friends and your family, and how you communicate are generally traditions and conventions that belong to a given culture.

Twelve (12) teachers invoked culture as a unique and original system of behaviors that make people distinct from each other. Correspondingly, each culture has its cultural norms for conversation and these norms differ from one culture to another. Consequently, communication problems may appear among speakers who are not acquainted with some rules. To avoid misunderstandings in the target language teachers emphasized the fact of including the foreign language’s culture as a proliferant medium to achieve learning and teaching goals as they focused on this matter to quench student’s communicative needs and boost learners’ motivation and engagement. They appended that to be a culturally responsive teacher is to orient students and make them aware of different cultures ‘backgrounds via the implementation of a culturally designed syllabus or pedagogy.



### **3.2. Classroom Observation Findings**

Overt distinctions between the use of authentic versus artificial materials were discerned. Though many teachers did not deny the credibility of artificial material in many cases students' motivation was boosted actually during the sessions which encompass the inclusion of authentic components.

Students accorded too much importance to the lectures when teachers gave them opportunities to discuss some topics after watching a video or a program where native speakers communicated or presented something related to their culture. A variety of videos were included about how English people introduce themselves, how they make orders at the restaurant, and how to ask for directions in addition to suitable answers in specific situations to look like a native speaker.

A nice atmosphere was created all the time especially when students tried to repeat dialogues or worked in pairs or groups to perform roles where participants had opportunities to elaborate the meanings behind their cultural practices.

### **3.3. Findings of the Questionnaire**

The findings were analyzed qualitatively and summarized in the following points:

#### *3.3.1. Question 1: how do you consider the target culture in foreign language learning?*

Almost all the participants (59) agreed on the fact that it is difficult to grasp and understand language without a continual reference to its cultural context. Others focus on the crucial role of culture in expanding their vocabulary and then enhancing their communicative competence through proverbs and idioms and even improving their pronunciation when they listen to music and guess lyrics.

Four (4) students said that the target culture makes them more familiarized with the target society.

#### *3.3.2. Question 2: does culture influence your way of thinking and speaking?*

Forty-five (45) students claimed that the target culture is a double-edged sword element, especially for young students or teenagers who can easily be influenced. Some of them also said that this can be apparent through their clothing when they put on t-shirts with UK or US flags and sports shoes or bags.

Eighteen (18) students said that excessive communication with foreigners through social media particularly that they owe the English code to facilitate their conversation makes them eager to know more about their cultures and the way they live. Therefore, according to our informants, students of a foreign language are either consciously or unconsciously seduced or affected by the target culture.

#### *3.3.3. Question 3: What do you think about the importance of the target culture to communicate interculturally?*

Sixty 60 participants said that it leads to diversity in cultures, and helps them to stop thinking in their own culture to avoid misunderstandings with foreigners. It reduces the feeling of anxiety in contact with members of other cultures.

Three 3 participants argued that it helps to better their adaptation to new settings as it leads to tolerance and cooperation.

## **4. Discussion**

The observation in classroom results insinuated that culture is well embodied and reflected through the use of authentic material. The researcher also noticed that integrating activities such as videos, or films whose actors are native has increased student's motivation and interest. The interview's result demonstrates that culture transmits habits, and ways of thinking, and leads foreign language users to start thinking with the target language culture and hence approach a native-like way of communication. It also permits the speakers to avoid taboos and use eloquent expressions to keep

going his business or friendship. The questionnaire's results indicate that the axe of teaching cultural vocabulary promotes students' communicative competence, and lessens their fright from confronting or discussing with foreigners.

In effect, the findings of the present research paper reveal that foreign language classes are recommended to a certain extent to include culture in their syllabi to prepare their students for complementary learning which joins language and the culture where it is practiced. This step according to the results found, can improve the learning of the language with its norms of usage. Along with this, it creates an amusing atmosphere especially if the teacher works on his student's communicative competence through the use of authentic material.

Regarding students' communicative and cultural competencies, the insertion of culture with other activities of learning foreign languages i.e., grammar, vocabulary, phonetics, and phonology proves its efficacy in communicating interculturally notably that the new generation tends to use social media and communicate with people from all over the world. All in all, teachers who follow this pedagogy may join the learning activity with students' prospects and ambitions.

## 5. Conclusion

The study proves that integrating culture in EFL classrooms within the context of globalization is useful and constructive as it enhances students' cultural awareness and linguistic/communicative competence. Indeed, approaching culture via the use of authentic materials chiefly songs, poems, videos and plays of native speakers leads students to learn natives' language and styles in addition to new words that are not found in academic books. Thus, students can become culturally cognizant and able to differentiate between multiple concerns and situations thanks to this cultural pedagogy. The latter also enables them to pay attention to foreigners' traditions, values, and their thinking i.e., how they view the world.

The culture of the foreign language may affect their real identities. Culture does influence people's way of speaking and thinking. In other terms, when people acquire language, they acquire new ways of thinking. Consequently, teachers and students should be aware and more careful about the culture of the other side so as not to lose their identities. They are required to benefit from the positive side of this pedagogy of embedding culture in favor of improving their learning capacities as a pertinent doctrine to advance in their future life.

The research paper at hand has dealt with the contemporary topic of involving culture in foreign language classrooms with a limited number of informants and the data was analyzed qualitatively. Nevertheless, the same topic can be dealt with through the use of a quantitative approach which permits future researchers to achieve a larger population and miscellaneous opinions that can be easily generalized. Investigating the same topic in new settings such as private schools or centers of teaching foreign languages may also give new insights into this study.

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