

New Vistas on Cultural Awareness among English Foreign Language Teachers at the Algerian Primary Education

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Abstract: A recent initiative in the Algerian education sector suggests integrating English as a compulsory subject starting from the third grade of primary level. However, it was noticed that the conditions in which the initiative has been undertaken might require much more time because the interval between the decision of English incorporation and coursebook design was too short for a well-thought teaching material. Additionally, many researchers have disclosed the rationale and need for integrating the notion of culture in combination with foreign language teaching. However, questions remain as to the forms of work, content selection, strategies employed and technologies that provide pupils with active interactions, and complete immersion. The present study explores the degree of cultural awareness among ten English Foreign Language teachers working at the Department of Letters and English Language, University of Ain-Temouchent. It points out to the various strategies they use while incorporating culture in teaching English. The study relies on a structured interview held with the selected participants. The results revealed that despite the paucity of cultural awareness among the teachers, they exert much effort to help their young pupils build on communicative competencies of the target and local cultures without overlooking their national identity. The results of this study suggest that English foreign language classes should be equipped with trained teachers and manageable resources to help improve the quality of English teaching. Teachers also need to integrate cultural aspects adequately to help young learners enhance their capacities to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In the aftermath, the study ends with a conclusion and provides some recommendations.

Keywords: Culture, cultural awareness, English as a foreign language, learners, teachers, primary education

Introduction

To enhance the nation's position in the world's economy and business, the Algerian government has recently placed great value on the status of English in the national educational system. Starting from the school year (2022-2023) and, more particularly, from third grade of primary education, English has become a compulsory subject as it helps learners enhance their future educational standards, which is especially important considering the impact of technology and globalization.

Therefore, it seems essential to test the effectiveness of this political initiative and check whether it meets all the appropriate criteria to teach English as a foreign language (EFL). The present study explores EFL teachers' awareness on the importance of implementing the target culture in class without neglecting the local culture, identity, and national values with consideration given to the young age of pupils. In order to do so, this study draws upon the following question: How do teachers include the aspects of English culture inside the EFL classroom without neglecting their pupils' local culture and national values?

To answer this question, we have considered the following hypothesis: Teachers may use several techniques to integrate the target culture without falling into the trap of losing connection with the national values that represent the local culture. As such, this study draws on a structured interview held with ten EFL primary school teachers to test their cultural awareness and cultural competencies while teaching English, taking into account their cultural background. The analysis of data relies on a qualitative approach.

The Relationship between Language and Culture

To state the strong relationship between language and culture, Henry Brown stipulates that "Language is part of the culture and culture is a part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (Brown 1994, 165). Despite the complexity of these two concepts, the historical study of their relationship can be traced back to the eighteenth century, with the remarkable interpretations provided by scholars like Franz Boas (1858–1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941). These scholars emphasized the importance of the relationship between language, thought, and culture (qtd. in Sharifian 2015).

Studies of language and culture in Europe, at that time, were represented under the term “ethnolinguistics” (Duranti 2009, 33), relating two interdisciplinary fields of study. Ethnology, which is the systematic attempt to acquire and compare information on those non-European populations, which did not possess written records of their history and cultural heritage (Welz 2001) and linguistics. In the structural studies of this relationship, many determinations were taken from Sapir’s (1964), Whorf’s (1956), and Boas’ (1966) interpretations of linguistic relativity, which considers the differences between languages, and how speakers use them in different settings while contributing to any analysis of social and cultural life.

Teaching Culture

“Teaching culture in parallel with teaching a foreign language is a very important element that cannot be neglected; the reason is that language is the means by which culture is clearly expressed” (Boudjelal 2023, 381). The fact that culture is a learned rather than an inherited concept leads us to talk about how one thinks of culture in the sense that its teaching helps humans to adapt to their environment and improve their understanding of foreign cultures.

Culture also helps develop and increase mutually useful relationships with international and intercultural audiences. Sydel Sokuvitz and George Amiso say in this respect,

students should also focus on key public relations campaign strategies. These include an understanding of the communication challenges in the host country, such as the audience, the message, and media market” (Sokuvitz and Amiso, 2003 102).

As culture plays a crucial role in language teaching (Nguyen 2017), recent teaching methodologies tend to consider the target culture as a tool for teaching the foreign language rather than a subject taught separately, or as an additional fifth skill. Claire Kramersch affirms:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and

writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (Kramch 2013, as cited in Kizi 2020, 591)

Interestingly enough, during the process of language teaching, the cultural aspects should be included and tackled in every step. That is why, providing learners with more knowledge about socio-cultural backgrounds than they expect, will certainly help them acquire new terms easily and use the language effectively in different interactions and contexts to be able to interact with the target language speakers.

Additionally, the recent contributions to the goal of teaching foreign language culture identify the process of mastering foreign language communicative activity as intercultural communicative competence (Sun 2013). This process refers to the ability “to see relationships between different cultures-both external and internal to a society – and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people” (Byram 1997, 10).

The intercultural communicative competence highlights the importance of teaching culture, for it contributes to an understanding of our cultural values and developing knowledge about other cultures to facilitate communication and create better social relationships. Thus, teachers should teach this skill to the learners in a way that enables them to communicate effectively in intercultural settings.

Integrating Culture in Teaching EFL

Teaching EFL considers teaching the linguistic properties of the English language alongside how these properties are used to express the social and cultural characteristics of the interlocutors. Following these words, Arif Nugroho points out the following:

As language teachers, we must be interested in the teaching of culture not because we necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country, but because we have to teach it. If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates,

we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning. (Nugroho 2016, 1)

This interpretation shows the importance of integrating culture in language teaching to raise learners' awareness on how symbols of the language convey specific meaning in a particular context with a specific community having a specific culture. Interestingly enough, the Standards for Foreign Language Learning state, "the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language" (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project 1999, 43).

Teaching culture helps learners to develop an understanding on peoples' behaviours – be they verbal or nonverbal – which are manipulated by their cultural values and social variables (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993). This idea will foster learners' awareness about how to use the target language with the target people properly, avoid any kind of misunderstanding or ambiguities, and respect the target culture.

However, when teaching English and its culture, teachers and learners alike must consider their own culture by preserving their local social, and cultural values and beliefs. In this vein, Tavares and Cavalcanti claim that the ultimate goal of integrating culture into language teaching should be "to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, to make comparisons among cultures" (Tavares and Cavalcanti 1996, 19). In other words, being aware of both the local and the target culture will not only broaden learners' cultural knowledge, but it will also foster their critical thinking.

Cultural Awareness in EFL Teaching

Teaching EFL or any other foreign language requires transmitting knowledge about the target language's properties and its cultural aspects. Michael Englebert says in this respect, "to teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture" (Englebert 2004, 37). Consequently, teaching a new culture in a foreign language requires teachers to choose the exemplary cultural aspects to teach, and to be fully aware of the culture they are teaching.

There are various studies on the importance of cultural awareness and cross-cultural awareness enhancement in teaching EFL to succeed in EFL learning. Hans Stern states the following: "One of the most important aims of culture teaching is to help the learner gain an understanding of native speaker's perspective" (Stern

1992, 216). Brian Tomlison believes that cultural awareness includes “a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people’s cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ” (Tomlison, 2001)¹. Accordingly, teachers need to, always, seek to develop their understanding and awareness of the target and source culture. After accomplishing such a task, EFL teachers must transmit this cultural knowledge to develop student’s awareness of the culture under study.

Kincheloe and Staley (1985) focus on the significance of cultural awareness since they believe that perceiving different cultures provides learners with an awareness about other people and places. They also think that learners develop increased tolerance of the opposing elements of various cultures, which reduces the feelings of ethnocentrism and self-righteousness. Moreover, in a comparative study conducted by Farzad Rostami (2016), which explores the Iranian teachers’ and learners’ attitudes towards the role of culture in EFL teaching, the results revealed that teachers and learners display positive attitudes towards teaching culture, and the learners recognised the importance of culture in language teaching.

Methodological Concerns

a- Research Design

The research design refers to the overall strategy used to conduct research. It represents the appropriate plan to investigate the established research questions through data collection, analysis, and interpretation. According to William Trochim, a research design

provides the glue that holds the research project together. A design is used to structure the research and show how all of the major parts of the research project work together to address the central research questions. (Trochim 2006, 1).

This study uses a qualitative approach to scrutinize teachers’ awareness of integrating the cultural aspects in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners.

¹ Quoted in Tomlison and Masuhara 2004, 3.

b-Sampling

The sample population consists of ten English primary-level teachers who were selected for this study to answer the structured interview questions. These teachers are in charge of pupils studying in the third grade of primary education.

c-Research Tools

We conducted a structured interview with ten primary-level English teachers who teach at different primary schools in Tlemcen located in the northwest of Algeria. We considered the miscellaneous strategies they use while incorporating culture in teaching EFL following the teaching English starting from third-grade of primary school level.

d-Methods of Data Analysis

The current study relies on an interpretive analysis to detect teachers' experiences and cultural awareness via a structured interview. As its name suggests, interpretative analysis is an experiential qualitative research approach, which provides detailed interpretations of the account to understand people's existential experiences (Finlay 2011; Smith et al. 2009). This study aims to examine the teachers' experience of teaching EFL for third-grade primary school pupils, and explores their awareness of integrating cultural aspects in the EFL lessons.

e- The Interview Sections

The interview contains ten questions divided into three sections: teachers' experience, cultural integration, and teachers' awareness and recommendations. The interview questions start with an introductory paragraph, where we ask the teachers to answer the questions accordingly.

Teachers' Experience

This first section aims to gather information about the teachers' profiles and experiences.

Q1. The first question relates to the EFL teachers' teaching experience.

Q2. The second question aims to find out whether the teachers have ever experienced teaching in private or public schools.

Q3. The third question determines how the teachers perceive this experience.

Cultural Integration

The second section investigates the teachers' perceptions of cultural integration in language teaching.

Q1. The first question aims to examine how the teachers understand the meaning of culture.

Q2. The second question seeks to analyse how teachers perceive the relationship between language and culture.

Q3. The third question intends to examine the extent to which the integration of cultural aspects in EFL is important for the teachers.

Q4. The last question scrutinizes the teachers' perspectives about cultural integration at primary school.

Teachers' Awareness and Recommendations

The last section examines the teachers' attentiveness towards integrating culture in their EFL classes and the suggestions they can provide to enhance the quality of education.

Q1. The first question considers the teachers' experience, opinion and justification about the integration of target and local culture in the textbook.

Q2. The second question demonstrates how teachers integrate cultural aspects in class in light of the pupils' young age.

Q3. The last question tries to gather some recommendations from some of the teachers to facilitate the quality of the current textbook.

Analysis of the Teachers' Interview

This section analyses the structured interview held with the respondents. The data are analyzed qualitatively. The aim is to evaluate the teachers' experience, perspective, and awareness on cultural integration.

Teachers' Experience

Q1. For how long have you been teaching English?

All the teachers under investigation have been teaching English for six months even though they graduated long ago.

Q2. Where was your first experience? Was it in private or public school?

All the interviewed teachers claimed that this is their first experience in a public school, as they never had the chance to teach English. This is due to the lack of job positions in the past few years.

Q3. How do you describe this new teaching experience?

The respondents reported that this new teaching experience is sudden, strenuous and tough since they must consider their pupils' young age, needs and requirements. However, they also viewed this teaching experience as enjoyable, interactive, and insightful.

Cultural Integration

Q.1 Do you have an idea about what culture means?

Though each teacher had a different way of expressing the meaning of culture, their ideas of what culture means fall under one perspective: culture represents the values, beliefs, and lifestyles of a particular group who share the same geographic territory and national identity, including social habits and religious behaviours passed down from one generation to another.

Q2. How could you describe the language/culture relationship?

The teachers under investigation agreed on the interrelatedness of language and culture. They all perceive that language is a symbolic expression of a culture, as individuals cannot interact with a particular language unless they know what this language's culture entails.

Q3. To what extent do you feel the importance of cultural integration into English teaching?

Once again, all the respondents agreed on the importance and need of integrating culture into teaching English as a foreign language. However, only two of the ten interviewed teachers explained the reason for its integration relevance. They highlighted that cultural integration helps to not only enhance the pupils' motivation and engagement to learn the target language, but also to raise their awareness about its importance, display positive attitudes towards other

cultures, and understand their local cultural aspects to end up with successful interactions and intercultural communications.

Q4. What is your opinion about cultural integration in your teaching strategies?

The teachers admitted the lack of cultural integration into their lessons, and that culture is not fully covered. According to three respondents, learning a foreign language involves more than memorizing words. The teachers also need to acquaint the learners with foreign and local cultural values effectively.

Teachers' Awareness and Recommendations

Q1. Based on your teaching experience, is it suitable to integrate target and local culture within the curriculum? Why?

Four respondents claimed the significance of incorporating the target and local cultures simultaneously in the curriculum to help young learners understand their own culture along with other cultures to open them to the world. However, one teacher said that it is inappropriate to include both cultures within the curriculum, for this may confuse the learners. To avoid any confusion, he recommended the integration of the target culture only so that the learners can express thoughts and emotions through the language they are currently learning.

Q2. As a teacher of English, how do you integrate cultural aspects in class taking into account the young age of your pupils?

All the teachers agreed on practicing the language in real situations where young pupils can be able to see and hear what they are learning. Two teachers focused on using role-plays, pictures, and videos. They also focused on providing their pupils with the opportunity to see and listen to how foreign language speakers interact, as they believed that this would enable them to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

Q3. What would you suggest to improve the quality of EFL teaching following the government's new initiative?

The teachers provided some suggestions. First, they focused on teaching more vocabulary related to cultural aspects, particularly national identity, through simplified story texts with relevant topics. Second, they stated that relying on visual aids, such as pictures and videos, helps young learners focus and stay motivated to learn the target culture. They also stressed the necessity of simplifying the lessons, and providing activities that are more

practical to help them use English in real-life situations. Another important suggestion was to improve the teachers' training.

General Interpretation and Integration of the Main Results

The respondents are conscious enough about the importance of integrating target and local cultural aspects in their lessons, and they are constantly making effort to meet their pupils' intercultural needs. Unfortunately, the respondents lack effective training, necessary knowledge and materials to incorporate cultural components in their EFL classes. The results revealed that they still struggle and exert strenuous efforts to transmit the right amount of information needed for their young pupils to interact in real-life situations, and make up for the shortfalls of the current initiative.

Moreover, there is a controversy on which culture should receive more consideration when teaching English. Some respondents agreed that incorporating the local and the target culture simultaneously might create confusion and an overwhelming need to balance both cultural aspects. Other respondents insisted on integrating both cultures to build on the pupils' cultural awareness by focusing more on the local culture, as they believed that these pupils will express and spread our national values and identity in other countries.

We must not forget that the recent contributions to the goal of teaching foreign language culture identify the process of mastering foreign language communicative activity as intercultural communicative competence (Nguyen 2017). Nugroho believes that teachers must be interested in the teaching of culture not because they necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country, but because they have to teach it (Nugroho 2016). Following all the respondents' claims, the current situation of EFL teaching at primary level in the Algerian educational sector needs to be completely revised and considered without setting aside the significance of cultural incorporation.

Recommendations: Teaching Culture in EFL Classes

As teaching EFL is not fully achieved without teaching cultural aspects of the language, EFL classes should be a place where culture is taught straightforwardly, and in an explicit atmosphere. This should permit pupils to express

cultural elements freely and help them step out of their comfort zone by getting the chance to discuss and distinguish cultural similarities and differences. Therefore, EFL teachers need to adequately monitor their learners, familiarize them with cultural aspects and create a suitable atmosphere for teaching culture. To this end, the following techniques can be used:

a-Teaching Culture Explicitly

EFL teachers must create an appropriate atmosphere for teaching cultural aspects in their classes. This requires offering specific courses that tackle cultural aspects only. In these specific courses, learners acquire knowledge about particular cultural components and get the opportunity to observe, talk and discuss these components, and eventually use them through real-life interaction activities.

Moreover, teachers can present songs, poems, games, and dialogues about special occasions, family and history, via authentic material such as audio-visual materials. Audio-visual aids play a crucial role in creating an exciting and motivating atmosphere that helps young pupils excel in learning by using the language items in cultural interactions.

b- Teaching Culture Using Crawford-Lange and Lange Methodology

Various scholars suggested a set of techniques and methodologies to teach culture adequately. The methodology suggested by Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) implies that for the culture learning process to be successful, it should consider the learners' perception of their local culture and recognize its significant elements, norms, and boundaries. It also entails understanding the language/culture relationship, and then being able to distinguish differences and similarities between cultures concerning how to interact adequately with each culture.

Consequently, this methodology passes through the three following steps: (1) the learners' exploration of their own culture, (2) the discovery of the relationship between language and culture, and (3) the learning of the heuristics for analyzing and comparing cultures (Paige et al. 2003, 8). This methodology provides a valuable way to contribute to the pupils' awareness and understanding of both cultures.

Teaching Culture via Cultural Dimensions

The EFL teaching and learning process should not only be concerned with abstract language teaching but also with raising awareness and providing knowledge of how to use that language in daily interactions mindful of what characteristics the language culture entails (Dufva 1994). Additionally, as soon as culture seems to be a dynamic system of symbols and meanings related to dimensions (Robinson 1988), teaching culture in EFL classes via cultural dimensions would be helpful. Therefore, EFL teachers can make use of the four cultural dimensions outlined by Adaskou et al. (1990) as follows:

Aesthetic dimensions: They look at culture through songs, literature, and media appropriate to the pupils' age and needs.

Sociological dimensions: They consider knowledge about nature and family organizations, which refer to interpersonal relationships and some basic cultural representations including customs.

Semantic dimensions: these dimensions reflect on the use of semantic features encompassing the conceptualization system, and we can provide learners with different perceptions of different cultural aspects by highlighting the conditions and mindsets that control their use.

Pragmatic dimensions: these dimensions consider the sociolinguistic patterns used regarding background knowledge, and social and paralinguistic skills. We can put it into use by providing learners with the necessary linguistic codes to succeed in establishing communication and intercultural competencies (Adaskou et al. 1990, 3-4).

Exposure to culture in EFL classes from the first day of instruction creates a sort of interculturality to local and target cultural awareness and understanding.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Teaching English as a foreign language in Algerian educational settings has always been a subject of hot debate due to globalization and technological progress. Today, the English language occupies a central role in different domains like economy and business. The Algerian authorities have always valued teaching English at different levels in the educational system, such as middle and high schools.

Moreover, more recently, the Algerian educational sector has witnessed the implementation of English at the third grade of primary education as a complementary step to its previous integration at middle and secondary levels. However, teaching English as a foreign language at any level does not only require teaching the linguistic aspects, but also the cultural components that may help in intensifying learners' cultural awareness and linguistic proficiency because of the inseparability of language and culture.

This study investigated the usefulness of integrating local and target cultures when teaching English as a foreign language at the primary level taking into consideration third grade pupils. The results revealed that the respondents lack the necessary knowledge and materials to incorporate cultural aspects in their lessons and that much effort is exerted in familiarizing their learners with target and local cultural aspects. This study tackled the issue on how EFL teachers include the aspects of English culture inside the EFL classroom without neglecting their pupils' local culture and national values. EFL teachers used several techniques to integrate the target culture without losing the national values that represent the local culture.

The Algerian educational authorities should provide EFL teachers, especially those teaching at primary level, with intensive training and suitable resources to help them improve the quality of their teaching. Additionally, the importance of cultural integration in EFL teaching should be more explicit in the designed syllabi, so that the learners can be aware of the strong relationship between language and culture. Finally, this paper lets the door open for further research regarding the impact of cultural integration on learners' educational attainment at primary education.

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