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A review of intercultural competence from language teachers' perspective

Selma Karabinar^a, Cansu Yunuslar Guler^{b*}^aMarmara University, Department of English Language Education, Istanbul, Turkey^bPiri Reis University, School of English Language, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

In foreign language education, the theory of intercultural competence comes to the foreground in the last 20 years. This attributed importance to culture has carried new demands with it for foreign language teachers. It is of importance to determine the place of culture in the curriculum at tertiary level through examining what is taught and what methods and strategies are used in teaching culture in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. This study examines the how's and why's of culture teaching in English language classes at preparatory schools in Turkey. The study suggests that the integration of culture into language teaching is a must; however, because of time constraints and excessive requirements of syllabi, it does not yet have a distinguished position in foreign language (FL) education at tertiary level in Turkey.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have emphasized the significance of culture as a key feature which must go hand in hand with language teaching and have come up with various definitions of culture throughout years. One of the definitions comes from Brislin (1990). He defined culture as “widely shared ideals, values, formation and uses of categories, assumptions about life, and goal-directed activities that become unconsciously or subconsciously accepted as ‘right’ and ‘correct’ by people who identify themselves as members of a society” (p.11). Furthermore, as Clayton (2003) states, culture is the root of our identity which is

* Cansu Yunuslar Güler. Tel.: +9-0535-328-90-31
E-mail address: cyunuslar@yahoo.co.uk

pervasive, shared, learned and dynamic. Similarly, in her definition Nieto (2010) also sees culture as a dynamic entity, and highlights the nature of it as multifaceted, embedded in context, influenced by social, economic and political factors, and socially constructed, learned and dialectical.

On the other hand, Nababan (1974) defines language as “the code of (primarily) vocal symbols by which human beings interact or communicate” (p.20). He also underlines the inalienable position of language within human life and states that “language is the primary means of human communication for the attainment of co-operation not only for the survival of the species but also for the improvement and promotion of the cultural aspects of human existence” (p.20). In other words, language is one of the touchstones of the social system in a community. In addition, Bolton (1980) sees language as not only the key instrument that human beings use to interact but also the bond between people and their culture. In short, as Byram (1989) states “when learners learn about language they learn about culture and as they learn to use a new language they learn to communicate with other individuals from a new culture” (p.22)

At this point, the thing that counts is to recognize the reciprocal relationship between language and culture. As a result of this relationship, culture teaching has gained importance in foreign language teaching (FLT), especially in the field of English language teaching (ELT). Thus, culture teaching should be paid special attention in EFL curriculum together with the necessary methods and techniques to be applied in the classroom.

However, more information is needed to find out the amount and the ways FL teachers address culture in their classes. In other words, the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of culture and their actual teaching practice in class gain importance for the comprehension of the concept of culture and its mutual relationship with language.

All these factors combined to provide a motive for this study aimed to find out whether teachers are aware of how, when and to what extent they exploit culture in their English language classes. In this sense, this paper also aims to explore the type and the amount of cultural information to be transmitted in ELT classes at tertiary level. The materials and strategies implemented in this transmission are also the areas to be dealt with.

1.1. Culture teaching in 1990s and intercultural competence

Taking the concept of socio-cultural competence as the starting point, in the early 1990s scholars Byram and Zarate (1994) developed the concept of the ‘intercultural speaker’. This concept foresees:

...a language speaker who does not strive to attain the hopeless ideal of approaching native-speaker competence linguistically and culturally, but who develops his or her ability to mediate between a number of cultural perspectives and between the target language and the first language. (Risager, 2007, p. 114)

Meyer (1991, cited in Castro, Sercu & Garcia, 2004, p. 91, 92) also defined ‘intercultural competence’ as “the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures”.

As a result of the shift in focus from the linguistic aspect towards the communicative aspect of language in the field of ELT, “English,..., as the foremost medium of international communication at the present time, is called upon to mediate a whole range of cultural and cross-cultural concepts, to a greater degree than in the past” and thus intercultural communication theory which was mainly developed by Byram in the 1990s found to be important (Prodromou, 1992, p.39).

It is important to state that although the idea of integrating culture teaching practice into FLT has been on the march for a while, a new dimension has come to foreground about the focus of culture teaching. To be more precise, there are continuing debates about whether the focus in transmitting cultural information should be on ‘Big C’ culture which is generally formed by the study of history, literary

products, and fine arts or small ‘c’ culture which is about the features of daily life such as food, transportation, clothing, and patterns of behaviour etc. However, as stated in a report by Social Science Education Consortium (1999) the main task should be not only the inclusion of ‘Big C’ and ‘small c’ culture, but also at the same time the expression of a general world view of attitudes and values so forth.

On that account, it is possible to note that the idea of intercultural learning came to light in the 1990s, and as Risager (2007) states, with the introduction of intercultural learning to the FL study, teaching cultural differences and using the target language worldwide became more important.

1.2. Culture teaching in 2000s

Forming the basis of FL education today, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has been influenced by Byram’s model of intercultural communication theory. Here, the main aim can be described as developing intercultural speakers who have “the ability to see how different cultures relate to each other in terms of similarities and differences and to look at themselves from an ‘external’ perspective when interacting with representatives of other cultures” (Larzén-Östermark, 2008, p.528).

In this period, the relationship between language teaching and culture teaching was summarized as “a question of coming into contact with other ways of living, other ways of thinking” (Roberts at al., cited in Risager, 2007, p.149)

In addition, Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) set the aim of teaching as intercultural communicative competence which actually has a little bit different connotation than Byram and Zarate’s (1994). Thus, they summarize as follows:

It is the ability to communicate using language with other people and to be able to do so in a culture-sensitive way, taking as much account as possible of the cultural differences that can be predicted in the situation. So intercultural communicative competence is the ability to use language in ‘culturally appropriate ways’. (Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000, p.3)

In brief, the shift in the education system and society in general, goes hand in hand with the shift particularly in the culture teaching area which is towards postmodernism combining the old and the new. With this shift, learning methods and strategies, learner differences, experiences, attitudes and emotions, and recognizing ‘the other’ have been given priority. In other words, instead of the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension has become more prominent.

To sum up, FL teaching today is based on the objectives of:

...making the learners familiar with the target culture(s) by providing them with general background information, preparing them for future intercultural situations by giving them social and sociolinguistic skills, as well as promoting empathy, open-mindedness and respect for otherness, by working against stereotypes and prejudiced views of other cultures. (Larzén 2005; Larzén- Östermark 2008; cited in Larzén-Östermark, 2009, p.402)

2. Methodology

As a means of gaining a deeper insight on language teachers’ views on the concept of culture and how they shape up their classroom practices to develop intercultural competence accordingly, one-to-one interview sessions were held with volunteer instructors. 6 instructors from varying nationalities (3 Turkish, 2 British, and 1 American) were interviewed individually and these sessions were audio-taped with their consent. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 20 years in all levels. 2 of the participant instructors had an MA degree. Broadly speaking, they were asked to reflect on their views about the place of culture in FLT, how they deal with it and make use of the related techniques and materials in their own teaching practice.

In order to analyze the qualitative data derived from the interviews, content analysis was performed. Content analysis is a research technique by which certain words or key concepts within texts can be analyzed. By using this technique, the relationships and the meanings between these words or concepts were examined and possible inferences were made. To carry out a content analysis procedure, categories were made and linguistic components such as words, word phrases, sentences or themes were derived from the text and examined (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton 2002).

To explore how and why foreign language teachers develop intercultural competence the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do EFL teachers define culture?
2. What purposes and anticipated outcomes in culture teaching are indicated more by EFL teachers?
3. What materials and strategies do EFL teachers use to promote intercultural competence in their classes?
4. Is there a specific reason that makes EFL teachers ignore culture teaching in their classes?

2.1. Interview

Having a semi-structured format, an interview consisting of 11 open-ended questions was conducted with each participant instructor.

The interview questions were designed to gather information about ELT instructors' own opinions about the concept of culture, the importance of culture in FLT, the preferred topics and issues, how they promote intercultural competence in their classes, the cultural items taking place in textbooks and the efficiency of textbooks in terms of presenting culture, the place of culture in choosing language teaching materials, the benefits and the drawback of having cultural information in a syllabus and so forth.

3. Results

3.1. Definition of culture and the connection between language and culture

Interview questions 1 and 2 were designed to find out how interviewee EFL teachers perceive the concept of culture and their opinions on the relationship between language and culture.

Table 1. Participants' answers given to interview questions 1 and 2

| How would you define culture? | | |
|---|---|--------------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| Uniqueness to a distinct community | 5 | T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 |
| Shared norms, values, behaviour & an identity | 3 | T1, T2, T4 |
| Personal & social interaction | 1 | T6 |
| What is the connection between language and culture? | | |
| Mutual Interaction | 5 | T2, T3, T4, T5, T6 |
| Providing a context for communication | 4 | T1, T3, T5, T6 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

Regarding the definition of culture and the connection between language and culture, the results of the first interview question revealed that the majority of instructors emphasized the concept of uniqueness, half of the interviewees emphasized the importance of shared norms, values and behavior and an identity.

1 participant stated that personal and social interaction is the other element which plays an essential part in forming culture. As for the connection between language and culture, the majority of participants stated that there is a mutual interaction between language and culture and 4 participants pointed out that culture provides a context for communication. As one of the instructors (T1) stated as:

Culture would be shared values, behaviour, a shared identity by a group of people and they wouldn't necessarily have to speak the same language though. They might have primary languages and their own secondary languages. I am thinking the US, for example. Well, obviously a shared language allows people to express themselves and communicate in a way so that everyone understands in the same way what they are talking about. And, so the culture is maintained through communication either in speech or in written form.

3.2. Purposes and anticipated outcomes in culture teaching

The purpose of interview questions 3, 4, 5 and 6 was to elicit information about EFL teachers' opinions mainly about the importance and the advantages of culture teaching, and their preference for the use of target or local culture elements in FL classes.

Table 2. Participants' answers given to interview question 3

| In your mind, what are the outstanding benefits of having cultural information included in FL teaching? | | |
|--|---|----------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| Raising cultural awareness | 3 | T1, T2,T6 |
| Arousing curiosity & attention | 3 | T2, T4, T5 |
| Aid to learning process | 2 | T1, T5 |
| Aid to communication | 1 | T1 |
| Travelling | 1 | T3 |
| Globalization | 1 | T6 |
| Personal development | 1 | T6 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

Half of the interviewees consider raising cultural awareness among students as one of the outstanding benefits of having cultural information in FL teaching. Arousing curiosity and attention is claimed to be the other benefit by 3 participants. 2 instructors consider having cultural information in FL teaching as an aid to learning process, and 1 instructor considers it as an aid to communication. Travelling, globalization and personal development are stated as other advantages of having cultural information included in FL teaching. How one of the participants (T1) elaborates on the question is as follows:

Well, I think it helps the student understand how other people use this language to really communicate. It is not just spoken language but it is also body language. I often teach this. Think about how Japanese bow. They get confused about how to shake hands properly. Something which seems utterly simple to us is really difficult at first for them and vice versa, but it is important to force students to fully understand the culture. Language is just a part of that. But in an ideal class, I'd involve things like music, food, movies and may be some literature, poetry, photographs of people who are important to that culture, and fully involve them in the culture not simply the language. Language is just a means of expressing oneself within it, but I think you need the whole picture.

All the interviewees agreed and pointed out that they consider teaching about culture to be a very useful tool while teaching a FL. However, one interviewee (T4) reported that she believes in teaching about culture to a certain extent and her response to the question is as follows:

Yes, of course. To some extent, yes. In order to prevent cross-cultural miscommunication--. However, thinking about other societies speaking English as a second or foreign language, culture seems to function less if we only think about other cultures. But probably it is better to focus on universal aspects of communication.

Table 3. Participants' answers given to interview question 4

| Why do you think it is important to teach about culture? | | |
|---|---|----------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| A means of accurate communication | 4 | T1, T2, T4, T6 |
| Acquisition of a wider perspective | 2 | T1, T3 |
| Acquisition of culture specific knowledge | 2 | T3, T5 |
| Globalization | 1 | T2 |
| Self-reflection | 1 | T2 |
| Arousing curiosity & attention | 1 | T5 |
| Travelling | 1 | T3 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

When explaining the reasons for teaching about culture, most of the participants stated that they teach culture to maintain communication. 2 participants view culture teaching as a means of acquisition of a wider perspective. Globalization, self-reflection, arousing curiosity/ interest and travelling are other categories which are mentioned only once by instructors as the reasons for teaching about culture in classes. To exemplify the important place of cultural knowledge in the globalized world, what T2 reports is as follows:

Well, because now the world is becoming a global village so we are all going to have to interact with each other. Particularly for the young people that we teach in the industry that they are in, they need to be aware of how their behaviour might portray their own culture and the image they may give abroad, and they also need to be prepared for something in other cultures they may encounter which may be difficult or strange for them.

Table 4. Participants' answers given to interview question 5

| How important do you think to know about the foreign culture when communicating with the people of that culture? | | |
|---|---|--------------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| Promotion of culture bound communication | 5 | T1, T2, T3, T5, T6 |
| Application of the norms of culture | 4 | T1,T2, T3, T5 |
| Recognition & acceptance of differences & similarities | 3 | T1, T2, T4 |
| Difficulty integrating into a foreign culture | 2 | T1, T2 |
| Prevention of misunderstandings/Misinterpretations | 2 | T1, T6 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

All instructors agreed that knowing about the foreign culture when communicating with the people of that culture is highly important. The majority of participants supported their opinion by saying that cultural knowledge is needed to promote culture bound communication. This category is followed by application of the norms of culture which is stated by 4 participants. Another category stated by half of the participants is the recognition and acceptance of similarities and differences among cultures. 2

participants found culture teaching important in order to be able to integrate into a foreign culture and the prevention of misunderstandings/ misinterpretations is another category stated.

In support of his response, T1 made his point as follows:

Extremely important. I can give examples of this. I went into a store in Vienna. I speak a little German and when I walked around, I didn't find anything I wanted and I thanked the woman in German. I said 'Vielen Dank' and I walked out and she said 'Auf Wiedersehen'. But she said that very loudly, -what I thought was- very rudely and very aggressively. I talked to an Austrian who was the manager of the hotel. He is a friend of mine. I asked him what happened. I didn't understand the interaction, the discourse. And he said she probably thought that you were being sarcastic because you haven't bought anything. You haven't found anything worth buying at the shop, and so she was angry at you. Because the appropriate response for a Viennese person is to say goodbye 'Auf Wiedersehen' not 'Thank you' because you haven't bought anything. So it is true examples like this that students learn. That takes place--They need to understand people in their cultural setting - no matter what language it is that they are learning or trying to use- because your words to you may have one meaning but the listener, the native speaker may hear it quite differently.

Table 5. Participants' answers given to interview question 6

| Why do teachers prefer target/local elements in their teaching? | | |
|---|---|------------------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| Familiarity & appropriateness of content | 6 | T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6 |
| Integration of cultural elements | 4 | T1, T2, T4, T6 |
| Local culture as the starting point | 3 | T2, T3, T6 |
| Having a general perspective | 2 | T1, T6 |
| Familiarity with international cultures | 1 | T1 |
| Comparison of two cultures | 1 | T2 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

Regarding participant instructors' preferences for using target or local elements in culture teaching, it can be stated that all the interviewees take students' familiarity with the content and the appropriateness of content into account when giving examples related to culture in class. Most of the participants use cultural examples to integrate cultural elements into teaching. Local culture is taken as the starting point when teaching about culture by half of the instructors. 2 participants implied imposing a general perspective as another reason for including cultural examples in class. Familiarity with general cultures and comparison of two cultures are the other factors stated by 1 instructor each.

In her own words, T2 commented on the question as follows:

I usually compare the two. We talk about things which are normally in Turkish culture and then I ask them, for example, which other cultures they would be interested in and why. We talk about elements of other culture. I usually use Turkish culture as the starting point because they normally have information about that.

Another teacher (T4) stated that:

Both of them. Local one because students will have more examples, will have a lot to say. And also target one to some extent because they will understand the topic, or they will understand the structure better. For example, I prefer to talk about the history of target

culture because it will help them understand the language better or even the geography. I don't know. The food they eat, their traditions, their national holidays, all these things

3.3. Materials and strategies EFL teachers use to promote intercultural communication in their classes

Interviewees were asked to state their ideas on how to promote intercultural communication in their classes, evaluate the current textbook they use in terms of its efficiency and to reflect on their reaction accordingly, tell about a sample lesson or unit which includes cultural elements in it.

Table 6. Participants' answers given to interview question 7

| How can you promote intercultural communication? | | |
|---|---|----------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| Using speaking activities | 4 | T1, T4, T5, T6 |
| Using visual materials | 3 | T1, T2, T5 |
| Improving cultural awareness | 3 | T1, T2, T3 |
| Emphasizing cultural differences | 2 | T4, T6 |
| Using written materials | 2 | T5, T6 |
| Using authentic materials | 2 | T1, T2 |
| Using hands-on materials | 1 | T5 |
| Teaching about various cultures | 1 | T3 |
| Arousing curiosity & attention | 1 | T5 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

4 participants promote intercultural communication by using speaking activities in class. This category is followed by using visual materials which is stated by 3 instructors and improving cultural awareness is another technique preferred mostly. The next category noted by 2 interviewees is emphasizing cultural differences. Using written materials is another technique used by 2 teachers. Other responses are given only once and they use hands-on materials, teaching about various cultures and arousing curiosity.

T5 responds to the question as follows:

If I understood correctly yes. We can ask students to find some friends from foreign countries, may be pen-pals or we can organize some competitions which are cultural. They may prepare some posters or I don't know some different projects related to different cultures so we can arouse their curiosity to that culture.

Table 7. Participants' answers given to interview question 8

| How do you evaluate the current textbook you use in terms of the cultural elements included? Is it insufficient, sufficient or too much? | | | |
|---|---|----------------|---|
| | f | Teachers' Code | Reasons |
| Very sufficient | 1 | T4 | - Suitability to needs& interests - Sufficient cultural knowledge - Arousing curiosity & interest |
| Not very sufficient | 3 | T2,T5,T6 | - Emphasis on grammar - Focus on British or American culture - Lack of information about various cultures |
| It depends | 2 | T1, T3 | - Teachers' responsibility - Indirect teaching of cultural elements - Culture teaching of broad topics |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

The results reveal that only 1 instructor found the current textbook very sufficient in terms of its suitability to learners' needs and interests, the amount of cultural knowledge it includes and the ability to arouse curiosity and interest among students. Half of the instructors did not find the current text book they use very sufficient considering its excessive emphasis on grammar, its main focus on British and/or American culture, and thus the lack of information about various cultures. 2 instructors stated that whether instructors find the current textbook sufficient or not in terms of the cultural elements it includes is closely related to the extent to which teachers feel responsible for teaching culture. In other words, instead of directly using the current textbook to teach cultural information, they may prefer to teach culture indirectly or broadly depending on learners' level, age, interest and so forth.

Without exception all the interviewees stated that the textbook definitely includes examples mainly from the target language culture. In addition, results also indicate that instructors use examples from both target and local cultures depending on the level of students.

As the next interview question (Interview question 9), when the instructors were asked to give an example of a lesson or a unit that show s how they include cultural elements in teaching, FL instructors stated that they make use of a variety of teaching activities such as role play, brainstorming, discussion, and cross-cultural scenarios based on the aim of the lesson. Regarding the materials, it can be seen that the textbook is the main material used in teaching culture. Apart from the linguistic aims, developing learners' cultural awareness and intercultural perspective, being able to reflect on their own culture and being able to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of learning about culture are among the culture-bound aims which FL instructors adopt in their classes.

Moreover, all the instructors agreed to specifically include cultural elements in their own material selection as one of the criteria.

Table 8. Participants' answers given to interview question 10

| If you were to choose your own material (in a reading class, for example) would you include cultural elements as one of your selection criteria? Why? | | |
|--|---|----------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |
| Integration of cultural elements | 4 | T1, T2, T3, T4 |
| Emphasizing cultural differences | 3 | T1, T2, T6 |
| Development of cultural thinking | 2 | T4, T6 |
| Developing tolerance for other cultures | 1 | T1 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

4 interviewees reported that they include culture specifically in their materials to integrate cultural elements into their teaching. Emphasizing cultural differences is the second reason stated by 3 participants. 2 participants claimed their reasons to include cultural elements specifically in their materials as development of cultural thinking. Other category which is noted only once is developing tolerance for others.

3.4. Specific reasons that make EFL teachers ignore culture teaching in their classes

Interview question 11 aimed to find out the interviewees' views on the drawbacks of having cultural information included in FL teaching.

Table 9. Participants' answers given to interview question 11

| In your mind, what's the most serious drawback of having cultural information included in FL teaching? | | |
|---|---|----------------|
| Categories | f | Teachers' Code |

| | | |
|--|---|------------|
| Time limitation | 3 | T1, T4, T6 |
| Attitudes to learning about culture | 2 | T2, T5 |
| Need to set a standard | 1 | T6 |
| Tight pacing schedule | 1 | T1 |
| Risk of conveying cultural information realistically | 1 | T2 |
| Risk of stereotyping | 1 | T2 |
| No drawback | 1 | T3 |

Note. T1, T2 and T3 are native English speaking teachers. T4, T5 and T6 are non-native English speaking teachers.

Half of the interviewees stated that time limitation is one of the reasons for not including enough cultural information in teaching. 2 participants believe that including cultural information in FL teaching may cause negative attitudes to learning about culture. 1 participant stated that a standard needs to be set if the aim is to include cultural information in FL teaching and another participant claims teaching about culture slows teachers down and this may cause a problem if there is a tight pacing schedule that teachers have to follow. Another response given to this question is about the risk of conveying cultural information realistically and she added the risk of stereotyping as another drawback of having cultural information included in teaching. 1 instructor did not come up with any drawbacks.

T2 refers to the attitudes to learning about culture, risk of conveying cultural information realistically and risk of stereotyping as follows:

I don't think there are many drawbacks. I think the only drawback I find that it is really difficult to convey realistically what another culture is like, so it ends up inevitably with some stereotyping. Or perhaps they judge a culture from their interaction with me, with only one individual they have met and I may not be typically many ways a representative of my culture. So you can't convey it may be accurately and when I am trying to elicit information about culture from them because we are in quite a polarized country and there are different elements in each class that could also alienate some people because they have different versions of that. You have to manage carefully so that nobody is feeling offended. But I don't think it is a drawback, I think it is a positive thing.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

When providing definition of the term 'culture', all interviewees mainly focused on the inimitable or novel nature of culture which includes rules, values, and manners that are common to a certain society. The participants believed that there is an undeniable mutual interaction between language and culture and they cast culture in the role of providing a context for communication. In brief, it can be stated that language instructors generally have quite a clear idea of what culture is, where it fits in the curriculum and what the nature of connection between culture and language should be like. To be precise, how teachers perceive the concept of culture might closely be related to the language instructors' personal experiences. In his study Ryan (1995) found out that language teachers use their past experiences as a base to provide a meaningful description of the concept of culture.

The results signified that majority of participants believe in the importance of culture teaching because they see it as a means of accurate communication, and it helps acquire a wider perspective and culture specific knowledge.

Another important inference drawn from the interview was that, all the interviewees agreed on the importance of knowing about the foreign culture when communicating with the people of that culture. According to these participants, knowing about the foreign culture is crucial when promoting communication which is based on cultural grounds, applying the norms of culture and appreciating similarities and differences among cultures. Furthermore, knowing about the foreign culture may be of

assistance when the aim is the social adaptation on cultural facts and prevention of misunderstandings and/ misinterpretations.

From the classroom practice point of view, the main tendency seemed to be exploiting cultural information based on both target and local grounds when teaching a FL. However, there is still a preference for the use of local culture elements as the starting point which might be explained by providing familiar and appropriate contexts to speed up the learning process so that learners do not feel intimidated from the beginning. The fact that local culture is generally taken as the starting point can also be explained by the convenience and safety it provides for non-NESTs where they can feel free to comment on and give examples about. Concerning the integration of examples from target and local cultures into the language teaching practice, some EFL instructors aimed to impose a general cross-cultural perspective, intercultural awareness, and the ability to compare local culture with target culture on learners.

The data suggest that the majority of participants do not find the current textbook they use sufficient enough. This finding is compatible with the study by Aliakbari (2004) where the researcher reported that ELT textbooks in use in Iranian high schools did not prove to be useful in terms of developing cultural competence and cultural understanding. The reasons lay behind this inefficiency are stated as too much emphasis on grammar, its main focus on British or American culture, and the lack of information about various cultures. In other words, it can be inferred from the responses that EFL instructors would like to see a balance between the social practice including the cultural elements and the linguistic elements that are included in textbooks which are used for teaching a FL.

All of the participants think that the current textbook they use definitely includes examples mainly from the target language culture which may indispensably pose a risk of stereotyping. Hence, apart from the linguistic elements, language instructors would prefer a textbook including a well-balanced combination of cultural elements from a variety of cultures suitable to learners' age, needs, interest and level. The data obtained through the interviews also pointed out that in order to promote cultural interaction among learners in class, most of the participants benefit from various speaking activities such as discussions, role-play, competitions, and using visual materials like posters.

The study also investigated the participant instructors' preference for the inclusion of cultural elements as one of their material selection criteria. Without distinction, all interviewees supported the integration of cultural elements specifically in their material. This implies that all participants prioritize teaching about culture when choosing their materials for mainly the purposes of integration of cultural elements into teaching and emphasizing cultural elements.

It is not surprising to see that participant instructors all benefit from a wide range of activities and materials depending on the subject and the aim of the lesson. The majority of EFL teachers' aims concerning the cultural instruction were to make learners gain cultural awareness and general world knowledge, to be able to reflect on their own culture, develop an intercultural perspective and learn different customs and traditions.

Among the various types of activities which all have different aims depending on the type of the lesson, it is important to remark that the interviewees included activities like brainstorming, discussions and role-plays which include a speaking component in them. Regarding the materials used, participants' responses to the interview question revealed that they mostly prefer textbooks as the main material to teach about culture. This fact can be related to the teacher-friendly, easy-to-exploit and integrated nature of textbooks which language teachers can easily rely on. In this regard, the results of Richards, Tung and Ng's (1992) study which suggests that the primary teaching resources of language teachers are mainly the textbook, supplementary materials and audio tapes, confirm the results of the present study.

As a result of the analysis of the interview data, it is possible to conclude that all the interviewees are aware of the importance of integrating culture in FL classes by using a variety of strategies and materials. However, they also state that mostly they have to stick to the textbook and activities in the textbook which are ready-made as they have very limited time to treat cultural issues in class as a consequence of

the excessive requirements of the syllabi. Thus, they are able to allocate more time to grammar teaching rather than culture teaching. These results are consistent with a number of studies (e.g. Social Science Education Consortium, 1999; Casto, Sercu & Garcia, 2004; Larzén-Östermark, 2008) which have also found out that in general FL teachers devote minimum amount of time to culture teaching.

Therefore, apart from the linguistic dimension, a more sophisticated cultural component with its carefully designed teaching methods and techniques should be added to the FLT curriculum so that it could be taught in an integrated way. This component is also crucial to support learners in raising their cultural awareness, adopting feelings like empathy and tolerance, showing respect to other cultures, widening their perspectives and appreciating similarities and differences among cultures. In other words, intercultural activities and courses must be given the same importance in the curriculum as well as the other language activities.

Accordingly, textbooks should be organized in a way that cultural items along with the linguistic dimension should be equally benefited from. They should provide the learner with equal opportunities to compare his own culture with others and promote cross-cultural understanding. For this reason, it is recommended that EFL materials should be selected in such a way that they encourage an intercultural point of view.

Finally, in order to draw FL instructors' attention more to culture teaching and improve their related knowledge regarding this issue, teacher training courses and/or professional development activities including necessary culture teaching methods and techniques should be organized. These courses and/or activities should lead EFL teachers to realize that developing intercultural competence, empathy and respect towards others, and knowing more about 'the other' are not something to be ignored but welcomed.

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