

Assessing Intercultural Competence in Middle School Teachers Formation

Ms Khadidja Hezil
University of Mascara (Algeria)

Prof. Habib Yahiaoui
University of Mascara (Algeria)

Abstract: To Byran (1997), Intercultural Competence entails *savoirs*, *savoir comprendre*, *savoir apprendre/faire*, *savoir être* and *savoir s'engager*. However, this bundle of cognitive, affective, ethnic, and behavioural levels is monitored by teachers' curiosity, openness, and interest in knowing and reflecting about the "other culture." This paper aims at investigating how middle school teachers at Mascara conceptualize intercultural competence to infer their daily cultural teaching practice. To this objective, a questionnaire was implemented to elicit information about the practitioners' formation so that adequate implications would be proposed. The results demonstrate that the practitioners did not receive any formation on how to teach the native culture, let alone the target culture.

Keywords: Byran's theory, Intercultural competence, Practitioners' formation, Teachers' perception, The Other Culture.

Introduction

Teaching a foreign language entails teaching both its linguistic and its cultural systems. In intercultural communication, a linguistic error, be it grammatical or even phonological, may be accepted by a native speaker; however, cultural errors and misunderstandings or misbehaviours would not be adequate as it would create confusion, tension and even enmity. This confusion between the participants of different cultures may interrupt the communication and create serious problems.

In addition to the various factors that contribute to achieving successful communication including linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and socio-cultural competence, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a vital element in the teaching/learning process of EFL. Language learning may be incomplete in case the ICC is ignored and neglected. Fantini (2006) states that it is a significant issue for a learner to be as aware of the cultural aspects of the foreign language as the linguistic aspects since the cultural errors are less borne and may be considered disrespectful (Garrett-Rucks, 2017, p. 5).

ICC is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Dreadroff, 2006, p. 247). This competence involves both linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge as an attempt to achieve efficient communication. To construct the Intercultural Communicative Competence, Fantini (2000) explains that there are five dimensions which can help develop the intercultural communicative competence: awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and language proficiency in addition to linguistic and cultural dimensions.

On that account, EFL teachers' awareness and understanding of the worth of the English culture's teaching in EFL classes should be taken into consideration and must be increased. Integrating English culture into EFL teaching is a very important step to prepare the young

learners to use English in real situations with native speakers in a good atmosphere of understanding, tolerance, and respect.

Teaching EFL in Algeria requires integrating the English culture into the Algerian school. Both linguistic and cultural competencies are monitored by EFL teachers' practice in the class. The Algerian society is known as being a conservative and Muslim society with a set of different shared local cultural beliefs and traditions, which make it a difficult task to inherit a new culture and introduce a foreign culture and strange traditions. To adopt the teaching of Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Algerian middle schools, Algerian teachers should be passed through a set of formation and training to prepare them psychologically and socially to teach the "other" culture. As an attempt to compare the practice and the cultural beliefs of the "other," to be able to compare both cultures and make a distinction between the local and the "other" culture, and to accept this difference,

Intercultural competence should be deduced in the daily cultural teaching practice of EFL teachers. This integration should be initiated as an attempt to encourage teachers to fulfil the objectives of teaching both cultures and as an effective way to introduce the target culture to the learners in parallel to the teaching process of EFL. Meanwhile, teachers' practices in the class are guided by their curiosity, openness, and interest in knowing and reflecting about the other culture. Therefore, it is a necessity to form and train teachers on how to teach culture and to provide them with a common approach to be shared between them during the teaching process.

The problem raised in this research is to investigate the teachers' applications of the intercultural communicative competence in their daily practices of teaching EFL. To attempt this level of application teachers are expected to have acquired a set of formation and training about integrating target culture into their classes. This paper is conducted to investigate:

- To what extent EFL teachers in Algerian middle schools are able to adopt the ICC.
- To explore whether their academic and pedagogical formations and training were sufficient to accomplish the aims of intercultural communicative competence as a way to reach a successful communication between Algerians and the other English speaking individuals around the world.
- The extent to which middle school teachers at Mascara are ready and aware to integrate English culture in their classes, are able to conceptualize intercultural competence to infer their daily cultural teaching practice and whether they are able to reflect English culture in their actual classroom practises.
- Whether the intercultural competence is assessed in the middle schools of Mascara while teaching EFL, and whether EFL teachers are formed to integrate and assess the target culture.

I. Literature Review

A. Defining culture

There are too many definitions of the word culture which make it a complicated assignment to give one adequate definition since it is associated with different disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, and education. In general, culture is all that is linked to art, literature, customs, and everyday life peculiar to a particular human group. It is commonly acknowledged that the term culture has raised continuous disputes over its definition because of its complexity. This is cunningly spotted by Hinkel (1999, p.1; cited in Saluveer, 2004, p. 10) when he states that

there are “as many definitions of culture as there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviours, and activities”. This implies that for every society, group, system, behaviour, and activity, there would be a different definition of the word culture.

For the anthropologist Duranti (1997), who links the learning of culture to the way it is transmitted, where he says that culture is everything learnt and transmitted through the generations of the same community throughout verbal and nonverbal communications. This way of transmitting is language. For him, language is the tool that conveys the meanings and the values of the cultural practices of any society during any era. So, according to the arguments of Duranti, language can be considered to be a component of culture.

To avoid stereotypes, bigotry, and intolerance, researchers and practitioners alike should strive to inoculate in the learner's mind the sense of cultural knowledge, competence, and awareness. The school is the ideal place to promote these concepts and foreign language teaching is the right opportunity to do so. In the long run, this goal if attained will not only enable the learners to better understand the culture of the target language and the ‘Other’ but also their own culture the ‘Self’. There was no shortage of defining the terms cultural knowledge, awareness, and competence, however; to make things plain, some clarifications are provided to limit the significance of each and every term.

The focus of this paper is to emphasize the term of culture from the educational perspective and to highlight the meaning of cultural identity. Kramsch has connected culture to language in most of her studies. This connection defines culture as a reality that is rooted in one’s language since the individuals express their daily experience through their language. Language is the concrete symbol of one’s own identity and culture. Damen (1987) exposes the term “cultural identity.” It links the individual thoughts to their society and creates a relationship between acquiring a local culture and learning a target culture.

B. Approaches to Teaching Culture

In the history of the teaching of culture, there are two broad categories of approaches. The first category is constituted by those approaches that narrow down their focus mostly on the culture of the country whose language is studied; this is called: the mono-cultural approach. The second category of approaches is the one that strives to compare learners’ own culture and to the culture of the other. The aim this category endeavours is to accept and tolerate the different cultures. This category is known as the intercultural approach. Each one of the previous categories is followed by other approaches depending on the context of teaching culture. This is called the comparative approach. The most prevalent approaches are: the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach, the comparative approach, the trans-cultural approach, and the foreign cultural approach.

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

This approach stipulates that culture is best taught through comparison. The intercultural approach focuses mainly on the target culture. However, it pays great attention to the learners’ native country and to the country or countries where the target language is spoken. In the case of English, besides the United Kingdom and the United States of America, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and even India can be easily included in the list of English speaking countries. The aim behind such enterprise is to nurture the learners’ intercultural and communicative competences. Byram (1997) pioneered intercultural and communicative

competence in linguistic and cultural studies which can play an important role in helping individuals communicate, understand, and tolerate the cultural differences.

Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (1997) is derived from Canal and Swain's communicative competence (1980) and Ek's communicative ability (1986). It encompasses four sub-competences including: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and intercultural competences. Those competences are interconnected to form intercultural communicative competence. However, the intercultural competence is to develop the skill of intercultural communication and to sustain the communicative ability. Byram's ICC encompasses five essential sub-elements:

- **Attitudes (Savoir être)** Byram has used the French concept "Savoir être" to refer to attitudes. In this respect, Byram (1997, p. 57) states this concept incorporates "curiosity, openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own". In other words, it is about the individual's attitudes towards the differences of cultural aspects which are implicit in their interactions with the "Other."
- **Knowledge (Savoirs)** knowledge refers to the requisite knowledge about the perceptions and acts that describe foreign cultures which are associated with the target language. This particular component is defined as "the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and interlocutors' country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 58).
- **Skills of interpreting and relating (Savoir comprendre)** Byram has employed "savoir comprendre" the skills needed to understand and interpret the cultural aspects. This element enables the learners to interpret social events and features. Byram (1997, p.61) adds that savoir comprendre is "the ability to interpret a document or an event from another culture, to explain it and to relate it to documents from one's own.
- **Skills of discovery (Savoir faire)** is the " ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 63)
- **Critical cultural awareness (Savoir engager):** As its name denotes, the know-how to engage embraces an understanding of how one's cultural identity is sometimes similar as well different if compared to that of the other. It is that readiness to evaluate the products of one's own and other culture. To attain this level of cultural awareness the learners need to go through all the previous levels.

Both culture and language are interrelated aspects that should be interconnected in the teaching process of a foreign language to build up the learner's intercultural communicative competence.

II. Methodology

The study was conducted at five different middle schools in Mascara (Algeria) 2020/2021. The sample of the study is a group of 20 EFL teachers. The objective of this study is to raise the teachers' awareness of integrating English culture in the EFL classes, to explore the teachers' formation on how to teach the target culture in their EFL classes, to investigate the extent to which EFL teachers in middle schools of Mascara reflect English culture in their actual classroom practises.

The conducted research was to probe into teachers' readiness, background, and formation to integrate and teach the target culture into their EFL classes. A five item Likert questionnaire was adapted from Secru (2002) to explore teachers' points of view about the importance of integrating English culture into Algerian Middle schools EFL classrooms. The questionnaire consists of two sections:

1. The importance of teaching English culture in EFL classes (Table 1)
2. The teachers' formation of teaching English culture (Table 2)

Table 1: The importance of teaching English culture in EFL classes

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I suppose it is important for EFL teachers to include aspects of English culture in their classroom.	0	3	1	10	6
2. Teaching English culture motivates middle school learners to learn English language	0	0	0	5	15
3. Teaching English culture to middle school learners will help developing their openness and tolerance towards English people and culture and make them global citizen	2	10	3	1	4
4. Learning English culture does not place learner's own culture at risk	8	6	3	1	2
5. English culture should be introduced to the students from their first time they start learning English.	2	5	6	4	3
6. Learning English culture can help learners develop critical thinking regarding English culture, their own culture.	5	3	0	8	4
7. Understanding English culture will improve my learner's understanding of their cultural identity.	0	2	7	0	1

Table 2: The teachers' formation of teaching English culture

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Teachers of English are able to teach English culture in their classroom.	3	2	7	7	1
2. EFL Teachers received academic / pedagogical training on how to teach culture.	20	0	0	0	0
3. Teachers of English are following the ICC in their EFL classroom practices.	5	3	10	2	0
4. The intercultural communicative competence is assessed in Middle school EFL classes.	5	6	8	1	1
5. EFL teachers are formed to assess ICC.	15	5	0	0	0

III. Results and Discussion

After the analysis of the collected data of the questionnaire from the previous tables, all the teachers of the five schools have participated in this study. The teachers are of different academic formation and degree: two years teachers' formation in an institution, license degree, and a master degree. They were specialized in applied linguistics, didactics, English literature and civilization. Their experience in teaching is between 1 year and 20 years. Their opinions about teaching TC in their classes are as mentioned in table 1 and as explained afterwards.

- 16 out of 20 (80%) believe that it is important for EFL teachers to include aspects of English culture in their classroom.
- 20 out of 20 (100%) agree that Teaching English culture motivates middle school learners to learn English language.
- 12 out of 20 (60%) deny the suggestion that teaching target culture (TC) will help developing the learners openness and tolerance towards English people and culture and make them global citizens.
- 14 out of 20 (70%) refute the Learning about English culture doesn't place learner's own culture at risk.
- The result of both opponents and advocates, of introducing TC to the students from their first time they start learning English, are equal with a result of about 30.5% for each however the remained 40% were neutral.
- 60% agree on teaching TC can develop the learners' critical thinking regarding both cultures.
- 55% think that the understanding of TC will improve the learner's understanding of their cultural identity.

The results above demonstrate that both culture and language are interrelated aspects and are very important in developing the EFL learner's communicative competence. It shows that almost all the EFL teachers in Algeria are sharing the same point of view that it is important to teach TC in their classes and this is as an attempt to:

1. Enhance the linguistic knowledge,
2. Make the learners aware of the varieties of culture in the world,
3. Develop their critical thinking towards these differences.
4. To develop their critical thinking regarding both local culture (LC) and TC.
5. To improve their understanding of their cultural identity.

However, most of EFL teachers deny the idea that the TC doesn't threaten the LC.

The second section of the questionnaire investigates the EFL Algerian middle school teachers' background, readiness and formation/training to integrate and to assess the target culture in their classroom practices.

- 8 out of 20 (40%) believe that they are able to teach English culture in their classroom.
- 20 out of 20 (100%) state that they have not received any formation nor training on how to teach the TC.
- 2 out of 20 (10%) are following the ICC in their EFL classroom practices, however; 10 out of 20 (50%) express their neutrality as a fact of ignoring the theory itself.
- 2 out of 20 (10%) believe that ICC is assessed in Middle school EFL classes. However, 11 out of 20 (55%) of the teachers deny it.
- 20 out of 20 (100%) declare that they have not received any formation on how to assess ICC.

The findings of table 2 show that all the Algerian EFL teachers have received neither an academic nor a pedagogical training/formation on how to teach culture. The results also demonstrate that the majority of EFL teachers neglect the ICC and they do not adopt it in their classroom practices. All the teachers declare that they have not received any formation on how to assess culture in their classes.

IV. Implications

The global village we live in, the social media (facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc.) this global village is actually using are transcending both time place and time. People from remote places and peculiar cultures are communication with each other and discovering for the first time different even strange customs and beliefs that can be shocking for some and the usual thing for others. In this global village, it has become fashionable to talk about tolerance and understanding but we wonder whether these two concepts are put into practice. In fact, intolerance is skyrocketing all around the world spreading anger, tension and fear of the Other just because we don't know him and because he sounds different and his behaviour is uncommon.

From the discussion of the research findings, it becomes crystal clear that teaching culture is as significant as teaching language. In fact, the two components are intertwined. Teaching cultural awareness brings to the open in the learners' minds that behind the language they are striving to learn stand people with history habits and the like and that these peoples might behave differently. The sole aim is to widen the learners' horizon as to accept or tolerate the "Other." This will boost their motivation to discover other people who share the globe but with different customs and traditions. In the long run, it is hoped that the propagation of tolerance commences from school. However, to attain these aims, a thorough revision of how teachers are formed and trained should be done. The implication which can be elicited from the analysis of

the findings is the teacher has been left behind as far as teaching cultural awareness is concerned. He should have been taken in charge much earlier while studying at the university. This is where culture with both big C and small c should have been taught. There should a module that tackles this issue.

Teaching solely the target culture would a vain enterprise if it is not accompanied with a comparison with the native culture. Comparing and contrasting the target culture to/with the native culture will enhance understanding and tolerance. However, there should be fully fulfilled condition: readiness to teach the foreign culture. A teacher who is ready to talk positively about the target culture will only spread tolerance and understanding. In the long run, this will enhance the learners' curiosity.

From pedagogical perspectives, the teacher needs to be cognisant of the cultural practices that might shock the learners and decrease the motivation to learn the foreign language. Issues of this sort should be talked smoothly so as to avoid any stereotypical misrepresentations of peoples and cultures. And here again teachers' readiness is of great contribution. We believe that with open-minded, tolerant teachers, the threat we fear of the other will be eased.

Conclusion

There are many issues discussed in this research that require further examination. The first one that arises and needs further investigation is teachers' readiness to teach the target culture. We find it vital to suggest a further study about the issue of teachers' readiness or non-readiness because it has a huge impact on the learners' perception to the other especially in middle schools where the learners' age is a cornerstone of the learning/teaching process.

Images can easily kill the learners' curiosity; we suggest, therefore, a wider study in order to investigate how the target culture or even the native culture is represented in the second generation middle school textbooks. In line with that, the study can be a good stimulus of another study that discovers which culture is represented in those books: British (Scottish, Irish English, Welsh) or American culture. Another study might raise the issue of what about the cultures of the other English speaking countries. Why are they utterly neglected?

Lastly, another issue that may be carried through surveying teachers is whether cultural awareness is assessed or not and whether that assessment has any value in the learners' pedagogical achievement. One thing for sure, if the cultural awareness has been granted no pedagogical value it will be totally neglected by the teachers who with all the constraints that might be encountered will find it a waste of time teaching something that will not be evaluated. This is also true for the learners who other fish to fry.

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