

## Intercultural Communication Competence in EFL classrooms: The Importance of Teaching Culture

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**Abstract:** Within the context of teaching a foreign language, the link between language and culture has been the source of interest among many scholars and educators especially those who belong to applied linguistics. Foreign language teaching aimed to develop the students' communicative competence, since language does not only represent the set of symbols; it also carries the cultural aspects of the people who use it. Language and culture are intertwined and closely related; language is the most visible aspect of culture. Recently, globalization and technology changed the living world, and more importantly changed the way we teach, and we learn. As a result EFL teachers consider the importance of integrating culture in their language classes in order to develop students' intercultural communicative competence. Indeed teaching a foreign language does not require only providing the students with grammar rules and lexis; the cultural inclusion is vital for successful communication. In addition, EFL learners emphasized their need to learn the target culture since the linguistic competence is not enough to fully understand foreign language texts (written/spoken), and to engage in real life communication. Intercultural competence is the ability to use linguistically correct language in its appropriate context; it is also used to describe a form of communication between people across different cultures and social groups. According to Chen and Starsota (1999) intercultural communication competence is "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (p.28). It allows us overcoming stereotype, discrimination and misunderstandings among people of different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the real question addressed in this paper aims to show the importance of teaching culture for an overall development of students' intercultural communication competence in EFL classes.

**Keywords:** language teaching, culture, EFL, intercultural communication competence.

### Introduction

As a result of globalization and advanced technology, intercultural communication is firmly increased, and the inquiry of integrating culture in foreign language classrooms has been ended, now the main issue is what type of culture, whether Big "C" culture, or little "c" culture. And which are the approaches and techniques of including culture in the curriculum. Intercultural communication has been officially regarded as a major aim of teaching a foreign language. Linguistic competence is no more sufficient to the students to use the language correctly (grammar, structure), and appropriately (context, culture). Unfortunately despite the hundred of studies that emphasized the close relationship between language and culture, culture is still ignored and neglected in foreign language classrooms, and teaching foreign language is still considered as teaching grammar, vocabulary, and lexis. Without paying the intention that language is only the most visible part of culture, and teaching language without its target culture is no more than teaching meaningless symbols. All the educational systems in Algeria, particularly in the universities we focus on only on the linguistic competence, and if we include culture we teach it in separate module. However the word "integration" literally means bringing together, uniting things, and an attempt to give things equal importance. So we need to give culture an equal importance as we give it to language structures, and teach culture in every particular class.

For example many studies showed that if we teach grammar rules intentionally, our brain give as limited capacity to learn and memorize grammar rules. While when we teach grammar in the context, the learners will learn the rule unconsciously and that would help them to use what they have learned in real life situation.

Before we seek to define what is intercultural communicative competence, we should be able to discriminate between ICC and IC, according to Byram (1997, p.71) the IC refers to people's "ability to interact in their own language with the people from another country and culture", while ICC is more about the language teaching setting "the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language". IC consists of Knowledge, attitude, skills. However, ICC is the ability to interact with other people from different cultures and countries in a foreign language, the knowledge of the participants of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately and their awareness of the specific meaning, values and connotations of the language (Aguitar, 2010). As such, ICC includes the ability to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural settings (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2007; Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009) smavoka pdf. Moreover Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) extended Byram's initial definition to "the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and the ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (p. 10). Intercultural communicative competence is the process of mutual understanding of both our own culture and the other's culture. It is the ability to use grammatically correct sentence in its appropriate context. It is the ability to comprehend/produce a speech in the foreign language. Since the goals once focused on becoming a native-like English speaker, the aim now includes becoming an intercultural speaker who can interact across cultural boundaries effectively and appropriately, thus achieving successful communication in an intercultural context (Kunanbayeva, 2013; Yaylaci & Islam, 2013). The main objective is to restate the reasons behind the importance of teaching culture to develop students' intercultural communicative competence.

## **I. Review of literature**

### **A. Culture and foreign language teaching**

Within the context of teaching EFL, the relationship between language and culture has been an inquiry for many researchers and educators. Also the majority of scholars dedicate culture inclusion in foreign language classes (Byram, 1989, 1997; Dunnett, Dubin, Lezberg, 1986; Kramsch, 1993, 1998; Brooks, 2001; Cullen, 2000; Robinson, 1985; Huhn, 1978). The link between language and culture is closely strong; and their relationship is more like the relationship between the body (the flesh) and the soul; Language and culture are two inseparable entities. Brown asserts that the separation between the two is impossible, either language or culture loses its significance.

To answer today's needs integrating culture in foreign language classes is highly recommended. Culture is "the very core of language teaching" that supports language proficiency (Kramsch 2000, p. 8). Samovar and Porter (2003, p. 8) define culture as "the deposit of

knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving". Furthermore Hall (1959), believed in the inseparable balance between culture and communication stating that "culture is communication and communication is culture".

Weaver(1993), described culture with iceberg theory, the visible portion consists of two parts behaviours and beliefs such as art, literature, music, games, cooking, can be seen, heard or touched and it represents explicitly learned culture. Whereas the invisible portion "internal" represents the values and thought patterns such as emotion, justice, modesty cannot be seen, heard or touched and it represents implicitly learned culture. Weaver's Iceberg Theory is as presented in Figure 1.

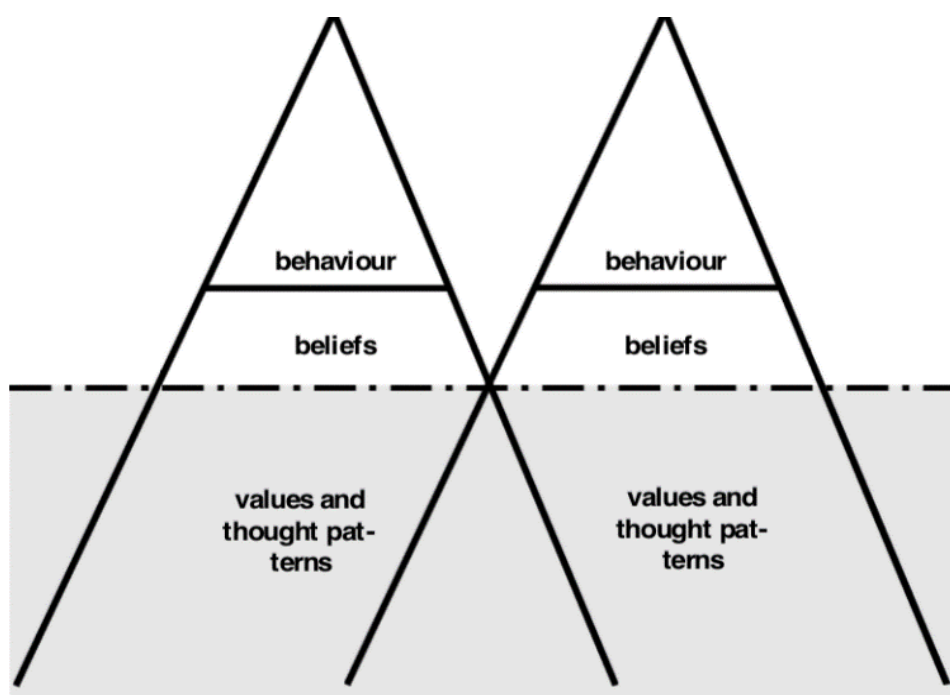


Figure 1. Weaver's Iceberg theory (Weaver, 1993, p. 135).

With the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages by the Council of Europe (CEFR, 2001) much greater importance was given to cultural aspects in foreign language education. Kramsch (1993) claims that speakers have expectations based on their own experiences and consequently interpret situations based on their own cultures, and this can often lead to misunderstanding. Although it is very crucial to teach the target culture in contrast and comparison with one's own culture, Robinson (1985) adds that cultures never remains static and that they are constantly changing, which makes it especially difficult for foreign language teachers to keep up with developments.

#### B. The elements of ICC

According to Wiseman (2002), ICC is not innate; there are some preconditions such as knowledge, skills and motivation, or attitudes that help to develop intercultural competency

(Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). From this we can say that Byram's model of ICC is one of the influential models and widely cited that teachers in their classrooms. According to Byram model, the ICC consists of three main components: knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

- **Knowledge:** it involves the practices, the products, and the perceptions one's own culture and in one's interlocutor's culture.
- **Attitudes:** curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other culture and belief about one's own.
- **Skills:** which are consist of three main types, First type is the ability to interpret a document or an event from another culture, to explain it and to relate it documents from own one's own which called the skills of interpreting and relating. The second type is called skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge about the target culture, the ability to operate it under the constraints of real-life communication and interaction. The last one is about Critical cultural awareness/political education skills an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

### C. The importance of ICC in the context of teaching EFL

Intercultural communicative competence is an attempt to raise students' awareness of their own culture through interpreting and understanding other culture as an old saying said "when you travel so far you will find yourself" which means that understanding, and appreciating others culture will help us to recognize our culture much better. Furthermore, Hybels and Weaver (2004) stated that "when a message is created by a member of one culture, and this message needs to be processed by a member of another culture, intercultural communication takes place" (p.7).

In EFL classrooms, integrating ICC has been one of the main goals since it can enhance teachers and students' knowledge, attitudes, skills so their ICC increased to avoid cultural misunderstanding, cultural chock, and communication breakdown. For Byram, a language classroom is an inevitable potential ground for constructing intercultural competencies; he noted, "teaching for linguistic competence (in the foreign language) cannot be separated from teaching for intercultural competence" (1997, p. 22). Therefore the teacher plays a significance role in the process of integrating ICC in their classrooms, so in order to promote and engage learners into that process, the EFL teacher needs to provide teaching materials and a teaching environment to meet students' needs. Therefore, Byram et al.(2002)suggested that a teacher's knowledge of and exposure other cultures are not important as the teacher' s ability to encourage students to be more observant, and be more aware of the power of perceptions towards their culture and other cultures. As the concept of culture is the key into understanding ICC. In EFL it is essential to supply learners with aspects of the cultural deposits and to foster awareness of both the target and the home language cultures. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) add that:

It is crucial that foreign language learners should become aware of differing cultural frameworks, both their own and those of others ;otherwise they will use their own cultural system to interpret target language messages whose intended meaning many well be predicated on quite different cultural assumptions. (p. 197)

The ICC model draws on sociocultural situations with a very solid perception of the native English speakers' culture. Alptkin (2002) claims that culture in language teaching and learning is usually defined practically as the culture of the language being learned. Also, with regard to developing IC in FLT, very broad studies by Sercu and Bandura (2005) on how teachers perceive the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching give rise to questions, such as: What are teachers' perceptions of IC? How those perceptions shape their instructional behaviour and classroom practice? Are teachers' adequately prepared to promote IC?

#### **D. Techniques of teaching culture in EFL classrooms**

As has been mentioned earlier in this paper, the cultural inclusion becomes a necessity and a must in EFL classrooms. Learners need to develop their ICC in order to communicate fluently and appropriately with the foreign language. According to Brooks (2001), ICC are the best gained practically, just like learners acquire phonological accuracy, syntax or morphology through actual practice. Regular conversational topics should be about daily tasks, which should highlight identity, similarity and differences in comparable patterns of culture. Here are some various techniques and approaches for teaching cultural aspects are considered the most used by teachers in their EFL classes

##### **1. Using authentic materials**

We cannot speak about teaching culture techniques without mentioning the great role of authentic materials in teaching culture. Authentic materials such as internet, web pages, Ted talks, TV shows, Films, Animation, songs, cartoon, literature, etc could be very helpful to develop students' ICC. By observing cultural behaviours and attitudes of people from the target culture, learners will "become aware of the ways in which their own cultural background influences their own behaviour, and develop a tolerance for behaviour patterns that are different from their own" (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993, p. 82)

##### **2. Comparison method**

The comparison method is one of the most used techniques for teaching cultures. It aims at discussing the differences between the native and the target cultures. This technique can be used for developing socio-cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and non-verbal competences. It is also an important comparison between the phrases for requesting, offering, thanking, and addressing the teacher.

##### **3. The cultural capsules**

This technique demonstrates a brief description of one aspect of the other culture followed by discussion of the contrasts between the students' native culture and the target culture. It also can be accompanied by visual aids to show differences and a set of questions for class discussion (Hughes, 1986). The main advantage of using a culture capsule is its "compactness and practical manageable quality" (Stern 1992: 240). Another advantage is that learners become involved in the discussion and can consider the basic characteristics of their own culture (Chastain 1988:310).

#### **4. *The culture assimilator***

It consists of a brief description of a critical incident of cross-cultural interaction that may be misinterpreted by students. According to Seelye (1993: 163), they are fun to read and they involve the learner with a cross-cultural problem. Chastain (1988: 310) sees the main advantage of this type of activity as helping to create an insight into and tolerance of cultural diversity which can help the students to raise their cultural awareness and develop their ICC. On the other hand, it takes much time to prepare and requires “a high degree of familiarity with the culture”.

#### **5. *Total physical response***

This technique is mainly designed to respond to oral commands in order to act out a cultural experience (Hughes, 1986; Pokrivčáková, 2013). TPR is considered one of the most suitable teaching culture techniques for non-verbal communication setting; learners need to be knowledgeable about different gestures and their meaning across different culture and countries. For example, gestures as a hand shake, thumbs up, thumb and forefinger sign, nodding the head. The learners of EFL should be aware that the aforementioned gestures may have different meaning as compared to their own one’s culture; and can cause misunderstanding in terms on intercultural communication.

## **II. Implications**

The existing curriculums of foreign language teaching in general and EFL teaching in particular must change; there is a strong need to give culture its appropriate interest in the teaching programs. Of course, to make a change is a difficult process. However the course design makers and teachers should integrate culture in their classes as much as they can in order to develop students’ ICC. Larzén (2005) points out those teachers are aware of the significance of integrating cultural aspects in language teaching; yet, they do not always problematize the complexity of the concept of culture. Moreover, they do not implement it in their own teaching in ways that would effectively promote intercultural understanding. Throughout this study we can recommend some points:

- The teachers should give teaching culture much time and effort as they give teaching grammar and vocabulary
- The teachers should be more aware of the great significance of teaching culture to develop students ICC
- Teachers should be knowledgeable of the target culture, since it would be very difficult to teach it if the teachers don’t know much about it
- Teachers should develop their cultural understanding so they can confidently involve in critical discussion with their students.
- Teachers should have clear objectives in integrating culture through their EFL classrooms.
- Teachers should elaborate a variety of teaching approaches and including their own enthusiasm
- Teachers should be able to create an exciting class for the students.
- Teachers should know their students’ needs since they are teaching them a foreign language and culture.

- Teachers should encourage their students to collect information about the target culture in and outside the EFL classroom setting.

## Conclusion

Getting a comprehensive picture of the target culture, and increasing students' cultural awareness in order to develop their ICC has been considered as the main goal of teaching the target language; Therefore culture plays a crucial role in teaching EFL; as mentioned in this paper that the goal behind teaching culture is inculcating intercultural communicative competence among the students rather than showing superiority of the target culture over native culture and vice versa. The target culture should be integrated to help students to communicate with native speakers fluently and appropriately, it should mirror the attitudes, knowledge and the skills of the other's culture to get the chance to understand our own one's culture. Culture learning should be a conscious, purposeful process in which the tacit is made explicit. Teaching culture is currently being understood as "aspect of values education" (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:4). According to Byram (1997), culture learning is seen as a comparative process in which learners are encouraged to get aware of their own culture and contrast it with the target culture.

The activities presented in this paper represent a variety of techniques and approaches to teaching and assessing intercultural competence through culture integration. By including such activities in the foreign language curriculum, students begin to see how their attitudes, knowledge, and language skills can affect their intercultural experiences. Through this the students will gain understanding of how to interact in intercultural situations with an open mind resulting not only in more successful communication, but in building meaningful relationships with target language speakers.

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