

The Importance of Cultural Background Knowledge in EFL Classes: the Algerian University Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions

أهمية المعرفة الخلفية الثقافية في أقسام تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفت أجنبية :
مواقف وتصورات أساتذة الجامعة الجزائرية

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Abstract:

This descriptive research aims at investigating the attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of cultural background knowledge among the Algerian English as Foreign Language University teachers. Thus, we hypothesize that the participants would have positive attitudes towards the importance of teaching culture in English as foreign language classes. To this end, the data were collected through a Likert questionnaire with 32 statements based on the agreement option webbed to the participants. Eighty teachers from Khenchela University and other Algerian universities answered the questionnaire. The analysis of data was through the use of SPSS version 25. Results highlights tow major findings: EFL university teachers are aware of the importance of cultural background knowledge in their classroom; and it also reveal that teachers believe that learning culture is essential for effective communication.

keywords: cultural background knowledge; English as foreign language; Algerian university teachers; attitudes; perceptions.

ملخص باللغة العربية:

يهدف هذا البحث الوصفي إلى التحقيق في المواقف والتصورات تجاه أهمية المعرفة بالخلفية الثقافية بين المدرسين الجامعيين الجزائريين الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وبالتالي ، نفترض أن المشاركين سيكون لديهم مواقف إيجابية تجاه أهمية تدريس الثقافة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تحقيقاً لهذه الغاية ، تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان ليكرت مع 32 سؤال ، بناءً على خيار الاتفاقية على الويب للمشاركين. أجاب على الاستبيان ثمانون أستاذاً من جامعة خنشلة وجامعات جزائرية أخرى. تم تحليل البيانات من خلال استخدام الإصدار 25 من SPSS. تسلط النتائج الضوء على نتيجتين رئيسيتين: مدرسو جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مدرسين لأهمية معرفة الخلفية الثقافية في فصولهم الدراسية. ويكشف أيضاً أن المعلمين يعتقدون أن تعليم الثقافة ضروري للتواصل الفعال الكلمات المفتاحية: المعرفة الخلفية الثقافية؛ الأساتذة الجامعية ؛ اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ مواقف؛ تصورات.

1. Introduction

The aim of teaching English as a Foreign Language is none other to make the students able to communicate appropriately with its native speakers. Henceforth, teaching EFL is no more simply focusing on teaching the language codes; the cultural component plays a crucial role as well. This simply means that EFL students need to develop communication competence; in this way the mastery of grammar rules, lexis, and vocabulary are not enough for them to become truly fluent and efficient language users, cultural background knowledge is also required.

Based on the accepted fact, language and culture are closely related, teachers should integrate culture in their classes; however they spent much time on teaching grammar and vocabulary rather than teaching culture since it is considered as the weakest component in the process. Many researches in the field of teaching EFL dedicate the importance of integrating culture in the process; moreover several attempts, contributions, and valuable insights were provided by scholars which emphasize the importance of cultural background knowledge in the process of teaching EFL. Dai (2011) stated that "It is clear that cultural background knowledge is necessary in language teaching"(p.1), he adds that learning language is about developing students' awareness of the world; and to achieve this learning cultural background knowledge is important. Kramsch (1993) also maintains that cultural background knowledge is considered as the basis of modern language learning. Within the same vein, Dema & Moeller (2012,

p.81) claim that “L2 learners cannot truly learn the language without acquiring knowledge about its culture and native Speakers”. Moreover; Zhan (2011) suggest that teachers should realize the importance of cultural background knowledge in teaching foreign language setting, since it helps the students in terms of communication in foreign language. In the view of teaching EFL this current paper aims to shed the light on the importance of cultural background knowledge in the process from EFL University teachers' perspectives and views, Therefore this research paper endeavors at exploring the following question:

- What are the Algerian EFL university teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of cultural background knowledge in their classes?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Culture is Defined as...

The word “culture” has been mentioned in thousands of books, it is complex term that doesn't accept one definition. Culture is the “glue” that makes a group of people bound together, and also what makes them different from other social group, it is unique and specific. The National Center for Cultural Competence defined culture as “integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations.” (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000; as cited in Akbarov, 2015, p.61)

Culture is the way of life, the surroundings which we live, believe, feel, and behave; it gives us a better understanding of ourselves as individuals and as members of a particular society (Brown, 1994); One of the common ways to define culture is to discriminate between Big “C” culture and little “c” culture. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) among others argue that to call big “C” culture as ‘achievement culture’. It refers to the sum of culture aspects which are more visible and consciously learned and shared such as music, art, literature, history, civilization, holidays.

In contrast, little “c” culture identified as ‘behavior culture’ that refers to different aspects of culture which are hidden, not obvious, unconsciously learned, and difficult to learn. It is the way of everyday life, how members of society act and react through every day situations and contexts. The small “c” culture includes beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993).

2.2 Language, Culture, and Communication

Culture and language are intertwined one particular language mirrors the customs, traditions, behaviors, values, laws, religion...etc of one specific social group. The relationship between language and culture is more like the relationship between the two sides of the same coin; the separation of the two is impossible, otherwise the coin become worthless. Similarly, Brown (1994) claims that teaching language without its culture leads to losing the significance of the language. In the same vein, Mitchell and Myles (2004) believe that language and culture are not separable, and both are acquired in integrated manner.

Kramsch (1998) also described the interrelatedness of language and culture in three main functions; the first one is "language expresses cultural reality". People express their feelings, beliefs, ideas, behaviors, and their cultural practices through the words they utter; in the second function "language embodies cultural reality" the non-verbal cues and body language including gestures shape and embody cultural reality. Concerning the third function "language symbolizes cultural reality" we can say that any particular language represents and symbolizes the cultural identity of a specific social group.

Moreover, culture and communication are inseparable, since communication is the ability to convey an intelligible meaning between the speaker/writer, and the listener/ reader, which only happened when both share the same cultural background knowledge. Brown (1994) thinks that culture is deep-rooted part in us, while language-the means of communication among members of a culture – is only the visible expression of that culture. He adds that "culture is language and language is culture...Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it." (p.170). Culture affects language in many ways; "The fact that 'tu' and 'vous' exist in French, for example, tell us that French speakers need this distinction in their culture." (Moran, 2001, p.35); that is to say; the language users express their cultural experiences through their language.

2.3 The importance of cultural background knowledge in EFL classes

Within the context of teaching EFL, the communicative language teaching approach emphasizes the importance of teaching culture in the process. Thus, teaching a foreign language without its target culture is more like teaching meaningless symbols. Learning a language without its culture is the reason behind being a "fluent fool. A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well, but does not understand the social or philosophical content of that language." (Bennett, 1993, p.9).

Obviously, in our first language learning process, we immersed in our own culture so we acquire our cultural background knowledge unconsciously through social interaction; while in second/foreign language learning is a different and difficult process as a result of the differences between our' native culture and the target culture. EFL students should realize that the behaviors and speech patterns that are appropriate in their community may consider inappropriate in other communities; these cultural differences causes many communication conflicts. Consider the example, at an International Airport, two English speakers, one American (native), and the other one Algerian (non native), were talking. Throughout the conversation, the Algerian kept approaching, while the American kept retreating. This indicates that for the Algerian; when you talk to someone, you have to be closer to feel relaxed, while for the American, it's different; you have to keep the social distance.

The cultural background knowledge shared between the speaker/listener; and reader/writer (cook, 2003); language creates meaning only in its cultural context. Moreover the language users have to be able to interpret cultural differences to avoid culture shock which leads to miscommunication (Alpetkin, 2002). Further, adapting other people' values, beliefs, customs, norms, ideas, thoughts, behaviors, social and cultural practices facilitate and permit intercultural communication with that people even more it reduces miscommunication conflicts as an old saying confirms "when in Rome, do as Romans do".

2.4 Teachers' attitudes towards integrating culture in Foreign Language classes

A glance through literature shows that not all the teachers have the same attitudes towards integrating culture in foreign language classes; there are some who appreciate the crucial role of culture and its relatedness with language, and others treat culture supplementary with teaching the linguistic forms of the language. While there are some who do not recognize its importance and even more they consider teaching culture useless. "Yang and Chen (2014, 2016); set three categories about teachers' attitudes; 1. Teaching culture is not important, 2. Teaching culture can be considered as a forerunner to precede the teaching of grammar, and 3. Teaching culture is part of a meaningful context" cited in Esther (2018, p.14). In the first category; teachers ignore the importance of culture, and they seem that they never add culture-related content in their courses. In the second category; teachers treat culture as an additional component and use it only to motivate the learners to learn the foreign language. Teachers in the third category

recognize the significance role of culture; moreover they are aware of the cultural differences between the learners' native culture and the target culture.

3. Methodology

3.1 The method

In order to investigate EFL University teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of cultural background knowledge in foreign language classes, a descriptive method was used relied on one research tool which is the questionnaire.

3.2 Population and Sampling

A sample with 311 EFL university teachers from different Algerian universities including Khenchela University, Batna 2, Oum Elbouaghi, Tebessa, El Oued, Biskra, Souk Ahras, Constantine 1, Oran 2, Setif 2 and Algiers 2 University are requested to answer the questionnaire .However, only 80 teachers answer the questionnaire.

3.3 Data Gathering tools: The questionnaire

The questionnaire is anonymous with three parts; in the first part the teachers are asked to provide some general information about their qualifications and work experience. The second and the third part consist of 32 statements about teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of cultural background.

3.4 Procedure

In order to collect data for this current study, a five -item Linkert questionnaire coded as follows: (5= strongly agree, 4= agree, 3:=neutral; 2= disagree, 1=strongly disagree). The researchers asked the participants to answer the questionnaire via Google form through sending them the link to their emails; they are the researchers' colleagues from Khenchela University as well as from the international conference held in Batna University, on October 30-31, and another international conference held in El Oued University on December 4-5 (2019). And a national conference held in Souk Ahras University on 11-12 March (2019); hence the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were measured through the help of the statistical model SPSS version 25.

3.5Validity and reliability measures/ questionnaire

3.5.1Validity:

The validity refers to the degree to which a measurement measures what supposed to be measured. In this current research the validity of the questionnaire was sought through using the Spearman correlation, the results showed in the table below:

Table 1. Results of Internal Validity Test

	Correlation	Significance
Internal validity	0,893	0,05

The results in table 1 show that the index of the validity test is statistically significant with .893 across the whole questionnaire; therefore the questionnaire is consistent which means that it is valid.

3.5.2 Reliability:

The reliability refers to the consistency of a measure; we use Split-half method to calculate the reliability, this method works through dividing the items of the questionnaire into two equal parts, after that we give both parts to one group of the teachers at the same time, calculating their correlation. Then applying Guttman formula; the results illustrated in the following table 2.

Table 2. Results of Split Half Reliability Test

Reliability Statistic		
Spearman-Brown Coefficient		0,944
Guttman Split-Half Coefficient	Equal length	0,944
	Unequal length	0,911
Cronbach' Alpha		0,955

The index stability as shown in the table 2 is .91, which confirms the reliability of the questionnaire; the table also shows that the index of Cronbach' Alpha is .95, and that is fairly high significant. One more important point is that when Guttman Split- Half is bigger than .70 and less than Cronbach' Alpha, the questionnaire is highly reliable.

4. Data Analysis

The researchers gathered teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards culture teaching, and the importance of cultural background knowledge in EFL classes. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively and presented in tables.

4.1 Teachers' general information

Observing table 3, one could conclude that the participants belong to different Algerian universities; Khenchela University, Batna2, Oum Elbouaghi, Tebessa, El Oued, Biskra, Souk Ahras, Constantine1, Oran2, Setif2 and Algiers2 University, and the majority of the teachers (25%) declared that they work in Khenchela University. With the regard of their qualifications, the majority of them have a PhD degree (62, 50%), it is also noticed that the percentage of teachers with more than 10 years of experience (56, 25%) is dominant which means that the majority of the teachers are very experienced. So they provide us with effective answers,

this teachers' demographic information (their place of work, qualifications, and teaching experience) help foreground the study's context.

Table (3): Teachers' general information

Teachers' place of Works	N		Percentage
Khenchela University	20		25%
Batna 2 University	10		12,50%
Oum Elbouaghi University	08		10%
Tebessa University	02		2,50%
El Oued University	10		12,50%
Biskra University	08		10%
Souk Ahras University	10		12,50%
Constantine 1 University	04		05%
Oran 2 University	04		05%
Setif 2 University	02		2,50%
Algiers 2 University	02		2,50%
Teachers' qualification	Master	Magister	Doctorate
N	20	10	50
%	25%	12,50%	62,50%
Teachers' experience	1-5years	5-10 years	More than 10 years
N	15	30	45
%	18,75%	37,50%	56,25%

Note: In the whole paper, % = the percentage of the teachers

4.2 Teachers' attitudes towards the relationship between language and culture

From table 4, we notice that almost teachers either agree with a percentage of (56,25%), or strongly agree (18,75%) on the provided definition of culture " Culture is everything socially learned and shared" , Considering the close relationship between language and culture; (58,75%) among the participants agree, considerably the most frequently agree ; and even more (25%) of them "strongly agree". In the same vein, the table shows that only (1,25%) among the teachers which represent one teacher has "strongly disagree" on statement "2" that says "language and culture are two inseparable entities. Hence, the majority of teachers (57,50%) "agree" and (25%) "strongly agree". Concerning statement "3", (58,75% agree, 25% strongly agree) of the teachers accept that culture and language are closely related. Teachers' answers confirm the fact that culture and language has a close relationship, and mutually related and reflects one another.

Table 4. Results related to Teachers' attitudes towards the relationship between language and culture

N°	SD	D	N	A	SA
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
1	3,75	6,25	15	56,25	18,75
2	1,25	6,25	10	57,50	25
3	1,25	8,75	6,25	58,75	25

Note: In the whole paper, N°= number of the questionnaire Items
SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neutral, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

4.3 Teachers' attitudes towards the importance of integrating culture in EFL classes

The results in the table 5 show that a large number of teachers (58,75%) "agree", and moreover (25%) "strongly agree" interact positively with the importance of integrating culture in EFL classes; since they appreciate its vital role. We notice that the majority of the teachers in the present study accept that big "C" culture takes more emphasis than little "c" culture in the curriculum with a percentage of (50% agree, 7,50% strongly agree). Moreover, the higher rate (80%) "agrees" with statement "2" and conversely the higher rate (80%) of "disagrees" with statement "3" that revolve around the emphasis of culture in foreign language classes; the respondents believe that culture should take more emphasis in foreign language classes. Concerning statement "5", it can serve as evidence because more than half of the teachers (56,25%) agree; and (18,75%) of them strongly agree that culture integration promotes English learning. On the other hand only (6,25%) of them disagree; and after a deep analysis in teachers' responses we find that the teachers who disagree on that had no more than 5 years of working experience. So we can say that the lack of experience may be the reason behind their answers. We can also say that almost teachers believe that culture must be integrated in the process of teaching EFL with more emphasis and interest, and concentrate on little "c" culture aspects more than focus on Big "C" culture and teaching only American/British civilization and literature.

Table 5. Results related to Teachers' attitudes towards the importance of integrating culture in EFL classes

N°	SD	D	N	A	SA
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
1	1,25	8,75	6,25	58,75	25
2	1,25	6,25	12,50	80	0

3	12,50	80	12,50	6,25	0
4	0	12,50	30	50	7,50
5	1,25	6,25	17,50	56,25	18,75
6	1,25	6,25	17,50	68,75	6,25

4.5 Teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture in EFL classes

A glance at table 6 indicates that the majority of the respondents (31,25% agree, 31,25% strongly agree) believe that teaching culture is a difficult process, while only (25%) of them disagree. However, more than half of the teachers (56,25%) accept that teaching culture is enjoyable. The findings also show that despite the important role of culture in EFL classes; the majority of teachers (67,50%) agree, and (17,50%) of them 'strongly agree' on that teaching culture is ignored in EFL classes. It is highly noticed that the majority (68,75%) of the participants disagree on statement "5" which claim that teaching culture is not convenient. Last but not least, the majority of our participants (51%) "agree" and (25%) "strongly agree" on statement "6" which revolves around the significance of teaching both the students' native culture and the target language culture.

Table 6.Results related to Teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture in EFL classes

N°	SD	D	N	A	SA
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
1	0	25	12,50	31,25	31,25
2	0	25	6,25	56,25	12,50
3	1,25	6,25	7,50	67,50	17,50
4	25	58,75	6,25	8,75	1,25
5	18,75	68,75	6,25	6,25	0
6	1,25	8,75	13,75	51,25	25

4.6 Teachers' perceptions towards the influence of cultural background knowledge on EFL teaching process

Overseeing the table 7, the teachers (68,75% agree, 15% strongly agree) react positively with the influence of cultural background knowledge on teaching EFL. The majority of the participants (75%) "agree" on statement "4", (66,25%) 'agree' and (12,50%) 'strongly agree' on statement "5" which both of them dedicates the importance of cultural background knowledge in developing students communicative competence ; According to the findings we can deduce that the teachers accept that integrating culture in EFL classes develops students' cultural background knowledge since the majority of them with percentage of (77,50%) 'Strongly agree'. (75%) of the participants "agree" on statement "6" which emphasize that

cultural awareness helps to preserve students' cultural identity. besides, (81,25%) of the teachers agree on that cultural background knowledge gives the students an opportunity to recognize their cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. Additionally as we are living in 21st century, and our world is getting smaller and interconnected, intercultural competence is necessary, the majority of the teachers (81,25%) understand that acquiring intercultural communication skills is important.

Table 7. Results related to Teachers' perceptions towards the influence of cultural background knowledge on EFL teaching process

N°	SD	D	N	A	SA
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
1	2,50	7,50	6,25	68,75	15
2	0	6,25	16,25	0	77,5
3	1,25	32,50	26,25	31,25	8,75
4	1,25	7,50	7,50	75	8,75
5	1,25	6,25	13,75	66,25	12,50
6	5	7,50	12,50	75	0
7	1,25	6,25	11,25	81,25	0
8	1,25	7,50	10	81,25	0

4.7 Teachers' perceptions towards the impact of the lack of cultural background knowledge on EFL teaching process

As illustrated in table 8; (53,75% agree, 30% strongly agree) of the teachers recognize that the lack of cultural background causes problems in the teaching process, hence (7,50%) of them disagree, and only (1,25%) 'strongly disagree'. A deep analysis shows that teachers who 'strongly disagree' have few years of experience. The findings confirm that the lack of cultural background knowledge has an impact on students' learning language skills (listening comprehension, reading comprehension, speaking, and writing). The majority of our participants (62,50%) "agree" on statement "2" which revolve around the importance of cultural background knowledge to develop students' listening comprehension; in regard statement "3" (62,50%) agree and (17,50%) "strongly agree" agree on that the lack of cultural background knowledge has an impact on students' reading comprehension. Additionally, teachers (62,50% agree, 20% strongly agree) believe that cultural background knowledge has an impact on students' speaking, moreover (67,50 % agree, 15% strongly agree) of the them accept the importance of cultural background knowledge on developing students' writing. We conclude from these results that cultural background knowledge is necessary for teaching foreign language skills.

The higher rate (75%) “agrees” with statement “6” which revolve around that the lack of cultural background knowledge causes problems which lead to miscommunication.

Table 8. Results related to Teachers' perceptions towards the impact of the lack cultural background knowledge on EFL teaching process

N	SD	D	N	A	SA
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
1	1,25	7,50	7,50	53,75	30
2	6,25	12,50	6,25	62,50	12,50
3	1,25	12,50	6,25	62,50	17,50
4	1,25	8,75	7,50	62,50	20
5	1,25	8,75	7,50	67,50	15
6	1,25	8,75	7,50	75	8,75

5. Discussion

The analysis of the participants' answers shows that integrating culture in EFL classes constitutes a great concern of EFL university teachers in Algeria; henceforth the teachers display their notions about what is culture, its relationship to language. Besides to the advantages of acquiring cultural background knowledge in learning a foreign language; yet a great number of the teachers agree on the lack of cultural background knowledge can be the reason behind major problems such as the students' ability to comprehend what they listen or read , and the ability to speak or write. In this regard, teaching language skills without their cultural context would be impossible (Liddicoat, 2004).

The results show that the majority of the participants have positive attitudes towards culture teaching and its importance since it opens the gate for the students to know more perspectives about different cultures, this result is consistent with the findings conducted by a study Karabinar (2012). Teaching culture is strongly linked to language teaching (Zhoa, 2011). The results also reveal that teachers underline the importance of promoting leaning among students through culture inclusion and determine the cultural differences between the target culture and the students' native culture. Teaching the target culture improves leaning the language (Dai, 2011). Another point, the analysis also shows that the relationship between acquiring cultural background knowledge and developing students' intercultural communicative competence is so strong. The results also show that teachers consider teaching culture inevitable while teaching a foreign language; Brown (2009) considers teaching culture important as teaching

the language. However; the majority of the teachers agreed on that teaching culture is a complex and challenging process.

Although teachers tend to focus mainly on teaching Big “C” culture (civilization and literature) rather than teaching little “c” culture. This may be due to the complexity of little “c” culture aspects. For example when the teachers present something about the American civilization it would be easy to explain because it is concrete and observable fact rather than explaining why Americans wear a strange costumes on Halloween. Comparison between the target culture and student’ native culture considered to be one of the best methods of teaching culture in EFL classes, the analysis shows that the majority of the teachers agree on that “in EFL classes, the teachers should teach the target culture and the students’ native culture”. They also pointed out that integrating culture helps the students to appreciate others ways of thinking. While some teachers’ have negative attitudes towards teaching culture as a result of the fear of losing one’s cultural identity.

Additionally some teachers do not agree on the advantages of acquiring cultural background knowledge, more over they seemed to be uncomfortable with culture integration, and believe that culture inclusion is inconvenient. All in all the results of this study reveal that cultural background knowledge is necessary in teaching EFL according to the Algerian EFL university teachers.

6. Conclusion

Teachers’ perceptions and attitudes play a key role in the teaching process; since their perceptions and attitudes shape their behaviors in class. For this reason the researchers attempt to shed the light on teachers’ perceptions and attitudes towards culture inclusion and the importance of cultural background knowledge in EFL classes.

Nowadays the students of EFL have the opportunity to engage in online interactions with native speakers of English, when they are doing so they realize that they need more than grammatically correct sentences to communicate; more over they realize that they also need to be culturally aware and possess cultural background knowledge. Integrating culture in teaching English as a foreign language process becomes a necessity for many reasons and to mention the major one is the interrelatedness of language and culture which has been an inquiry for many years for many researchers and educators. Culture should be included, and it is the last component to be ignored in EFL teaching (Zhan, 2016). Despite that, teaching culture in EFL still ignored.

To conclude, this current study is recommended for the teachers and decision-makers to restructure their insights of the culture teaching/learning process. Language teachers must inform their students about the cultural background knowledge of the target language (Leveridge, 2008). We can suggest that the teachers need training programs that revolve around the importance of culture in EFL classes, besides to the approaches and techniques of integrating culture in the curriculum.

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