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# **Title: Overcoming Pupils' Ethnocentrism: The Case of Third Year Foreign Languages Stream at Najah Secondary School**

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## **Abstract**

*The current study is basically attempted at finding the core ways that may help language teachers to improve this situation; more precisely that of ethnocentrism and to provide remedial interventions to that problem. Exploring that problematic which is related to the negative stereotypical judgments of pupils is based on evidence from questionnaires, an interview and classroom observation. Therefore, this investigation provides information and detailed descriptions concerning the highlighted problematic which is that of ethnocentrism.*

**Key words:** ethnocentrism, intercultural competence, cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity

## **Introduction**

This study attempts to discuss the ethnocentric attitudes that some pupils have towards the cultures related to the English language especially secondary school pupils. It also examines their degree of exposure to the intercultural dimension of teaching as a key to reduce the effects of the highlighted problem. Through this investigation, the researcher attempts to investigate the opinions and attitudes of learners regarding the English speaking countries and cultures. She also seeks to determine the opinions of the teacher concerning the intercultural instruction and to see how and to what extent these attitudes are reflected in the classroom applications. To reach those objectives; the investigator observes 40 pupils in their secondary school studies (3<sup>rd</sup> year). To accomplish this study and to reach the objectives designed; different procedures have been followed in addition to questioning one teacher from Najah

Secondary school at Sidi Bel Abbes and her learners (40 pupils) by means of questionnaires, interview and classroom observation.

### **Problematic**

Determining the problematic represents the starting point for the investigator because it leads him/her to formulate different research questions, hypothesize possible answers and then use suitable tools to collect data and to propose solutions in order to reduce the problem being investigated. The present study is designed on the basis of a problematic which seems to be interesting as a topic of investigation for a number of specialized people in the field of TEFL. The researcher suggests the problematic of ethnocentric attitudes and their negative impacts on learning because she considers it as one of the negative learning experiences which needs to be improved by actions in the classroom and the combination of some beliefs and practices. Creating the best solutions and instructional tools are the first steps to succeed. The researcher believes that measuring the level of that learning problem may lead to deepen knowledge on how to find solutions to reduce it. Formulating the research problem inspires the researcher to start thinking of the procedures of research and amass information about a selected population which reflects the problematic.

### **Research Questions**

Since effective teaching is teachers' major concern, Algeria, like other countries, is certainly interested in improving learning situations; however, some learners are still facing great difficulties. In the light of what has been said earlier, ethnocentrism represents an obstacle. For that reason, this study addresses three major research questions concerning this problem:

1. What are the attitudes of EFL pupils towards the English language and the culture of the people whose native language is English?
2. Are pupils interculturally competent?
3. Are teachers interested in introducing the intercultural dimension to their classroom instruction?
4. Can intercultural competence reduce ethnocentrism?

### **Research Hypotheses**

When trying to form a good hypothesis for research or experiments, one should first ask different questions for example if it can be tested or not, and if it is linked with the

problematic. Taking into consideration the aforementioned problematic and the three formulated questions, the researcher hypothesizes that:

1. Pupils have ethnocentric judgments and stereotypes about the culture of the TL.
2. Pupils are not interculturally competent
3. It is also hypothesized that the teacher is not interested in the intercultural instruction and as a result pupils are ethnocentric.
4. The researcher thinks that the dimension of intercultural competence can reduce the level of ethnocentrism.

In order to test those hypotheses, processes, principles and procedures are followed, because no problem can be scientifically solved without being involved in research which requires methods and tools.

### **Procedures of data collection**

While gathering data for this work, both quantitative and qualitative data were of equal importance and have been collected for the purpose of extending an approach to the problem and quantifying how prevalent it is. Questionnaires for quantitative data whereas, classroom observation and interview have been used for qualitative data. For the sake of providing answers to the research questions, quantitative methods provided the researcher with numerical data which can be symbolized in averages and percentages, and qualitative have enabled her to get a valuable insight into the situation. Concerning the quantitative methods, two questionnaires were used one for the teacher and one for the pupils. As far as the qualitative methods are concerned, the use of both classroom observation and interview has been of a great importance in obtaining information.

The pupils' questionnaire attempts to examine the attitudes of pupils and the teacher's questionnaire aims at examining her beliefs and viewpoints regarding the issue that is being investigated. For the sake of obtaining more reliable data for this work an interview was used in addition to observing the courses. This constituted an important data source and to systematically accomplish this task, the researcher took notes about all that is going on in the classroom environment; this has been done through observing the type of activities introduced by the teacher, the time devoted to grammar, vocabulary and culture teaching, the teaching materials used, the way the course is conducted, tests, exams, topics introduced, etc.

## Review of literature

The term ethnocentric is an adjective which describes having attitudes and feelings of superiority over other ethnic groups. Those feelings come from comparison; comparing the own ethnic group to otherness rises the belief of superiority. Bennet et al (1998) used the term “ethnocentrism” to refer to the belief of one’s own culture as “central to reality”, and he uses the term “ethnorelativism” to mean the opposite. In other words, the ethnocentric person views other social groups from his own perspectives and judges the cultural differences as inferiority. As the word indicates, persons with ethnocentric beliefs see their ethnic identity as being situated at the centre point; we can then extract and understand the meaning of the concept of ethnocentrism from its terminology. Lustig et al (1999) see that all cultures have strong ethnocentric tendencies to evaluate the actions of others: *I think we all agree on how common it is for us as a nation to claim, or at least think, that we produce the cleanest food and the best machines, or that our language is the most beautiful and our strategies for doing business are the most effective.* (1999: 146). Berry et al point out that ethnocentrism is *the synonym for general antipathy towards all out-groups...a lack of acceptance of cultural diversity, a general intolerance for out-groups and a relative preference for one’s in-group over most out-groups.* (1995:303). In addition to that, the studies of Neuliep et al have also shown that ethnocentrism is *an obstacle to intercultural communication competence* (1997: 389). The term “intercultural education” was first introduced in the USA during the two world wars to refer to the educational programmes designed for integrating different ethnic groups in North American society (Doyé 1999). The concept of intercultural competence is frequently used in the field of teaching foreign languages, and it cannot be understood without conceptualizing a clear understanding of the term competence. Contacts with foreign languages and cultures provide the opportunity to foster the development of intercultural competence which is defined as the ability to successfully communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds. This ability can be promoted and developed through reducing the stereotypical attitudes which leads to refusing any kind of interaction or exposure to knowledge of other aspects. According to Neuliep (2006), intercultural competence enables to predict beliefs, values and behaviours of others and it can be described as consisting of four dimensions: knowledge (how much one knows about otherness), affective (the willingness to interact with people from different cultures), psychomotor (the actualization of the cultural knowledge and affective elements), and the contextual component (the way intercultural

communication occurs). Some researchers define intercultural competence as the continuous, developmental process of pursuing cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, encounters and sensitivity among service and people (Smith, 1998 as cited by Santos et al (2007).

### **Discussion and interpretation of the results**

Accomplishing this research can make diagnosis of different problems at different levels: for example Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation and other problems; but since the study is about a specific problematic, the focus is not on all the problems encountered by the selected group of pupils. Both qualitative and quantitative data have been analyzed i.e. all the questions of the questionnaires and the interview have been interpreted in addition to providing a detailed description of the classroom observation.

Pupils' responses indicate that they are not culturally aware of the differences between nations especially the English speaking countries. For example, when asking them if they perceive people from other cultures as strange only 15 respond with no. Question 4 results in declaring that they respect people from other cultures and countries. Though respecting otherness is an important step to increasing the degree of cultural awareness; it is not enough because they announce in another question that they are not interested in acquiring information about anything which does not belong to their ethnic group; then they declare that they do not see differences between nations as normal. The questions as well as pupils' responses are mentioned as follows:

- Do people from other cultures seem to be strange for you?
- Do you have friends from foreign countries? If no, do you wish to have?
- If you have the chance to meet people from foreign countries, will you refuse to interact with them?
- Do you respect people from other cultural and ethnic groups?
- Are you interested in acquiring information about other cultures?
- Do you see similarities and differences between cultures as normal?

The responses of the questionnaire indicate that the selected group of learners shows a kind of ethnocentrism; being ethnocentric means the strong belief that one's own beliefs and ways of life are better and more desirable than those of others. Learning foreign languages may raise in some learners the tendency to avoid seeing and discovering the cultural traits of otherness; this conflict occurs when the rules of their own culture are contradicted with the rules of the culture associated with the foreign language they are learning. Developing knowledge about

the similarities as well as the differences is the first step toward cultural awareness. Interpreting the teacher's responses to the questionnaire and the interview reveals that she emphasizes on grammar and vocabulary i.e. she plans to enhance her pupils' language skills mainly (writing, speaking and reading), and to develop their sociolinguistic competence by making them able to use the language in its social context and in an appropriate way. Developing their familiarity with any of the aspects associated with the English language is not considered by her as a priority. Concerning her aims before planning a lesson, the answer reveals her emphasis on following the programme so she has no other plans in relation to her pupils' needs or problems. Having interpreted those comments may lead the researcher confirm that she lacks knowledge of the positive effects of intercultural instruction. Maintaining observation has highlighted a problem encountered by the population under investigation and reinforces the understanding of the target situation by describing the way the courses have been conducted, i.e. the content that has been provided for those learners through a series of lessons.

The problems that the selected pupils seem to face are mostly related to the teacher's beliefs and practices which have a heavy impact on them. Throughout the research process, the researcher notices the following difficulties:

- Pupils' lack of motivation to discover the characteristics of other cultures especially those of the English speaking countries.
- Pupils' negative perceptions about the people whose native language is English
- Pupils' unfamiliarity with the cultural aspects of otherness
- Lack of respect from the part of pupils shown to other cultures
- Limited time allocated to intercultural teaching
- Following the syllabus design with no efforts to introduce any change which fits pupils' needs.

Based on the above mentioned difficulties and on evidence from the procedures followed to accomplish this study, one can find answers to the four formulated questions suggested in the early stages of the research. The following table mentions the answers obtained through the research:

<b>The formulated research questions</b>	<b>The answers gained through investigation</b>
What are the attitudes of pupils towards the English language, and the culture of the people whose native language is English?	Pupils have negative attitudes towards the cultures of the English speaking countries i.e. they are ethnocentric
Are pupils interculturally competent?	Pupils are not interculturally competent since they negatively perceive cultural differences among nations
Are teachers interested in introducing the intercultural dimension to their classroom instruction?	Concerning the selected population of study, the teacher shows no interest in the intercultural dimension of language teaching
Can intercultural competence reduce ethnocentrism?	Intercultural competence is a key parameter to reduce any attitude of ethnocentrism since it develops pupils' knowledge of the foreign culture and it makes them aware that similarities as well differences between cultural groups are normal

#### Answers to the Research Questions

From the table and based on the findings obtained from triangulation, it has been concluded that the hypotheses proposed by the researcher can be confirmed. These are the four hypotheses:

- Pupils have ethnocentric judgments and stereotypes about the culture of the Target language.
- Pupils are not interculturally competent.
- The teacher is not interested in the intercultural instruction and as a result pupils are ethnocentric.
- The dimension of intercultural competence can reduce the level of ethnocentrism.

It is of principle importance to mention that the four hypotheses have been confirmed and strengthened i.e. the teacher, who is a key-parameter in the situation, has neglected the intercultural dimension of instruction. This may be considered as the main reason of ethnocentrism. For the purpose of ameliorating the situation teachers need first to acquire the intercultural competence to be able to transfer it to pupils. Having a good command of the language is not enough to meet the needs of learners. It is also necessary to know how to implement instructional techniques and methods that are appropriate to cope with any problem. To do this, teachers need to keep in touch with current researches in addition to

participating in conferences. Language teachers need not to be only experts in the field, but they need to cover all the aspects related to what they are taking part in.

### **Conclusion**

What is generally concluded is that the English language teaching process needs to purposefully be aimed at developing the dimensions of learners' intercultural competence as a strategy to cope with their ethnocentric beliefs and behaviours. Learners cannot get rid of stereotyping unless they will be initiated to knowledge of the unfamiliar aspects. For that purpose, the researcher chooses that topic i.e. she has as primary objectives to determine ways to introduce ethnocentric attitudes to any dimension which helps them proceed to a better understanding of otherness in order to reformulate their view points and negative judgments.

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