



ISSN: 3005-5091

AL-NOOR JOURNAL
FOR HUMANITIES

Available online at : <http://www.jnfh.alnoor.edu.iq>

JNFH
Al-Noor Journal
for Humanities

Revisiting EFL Teaching in Iraqi Settings: An Intercultural Approach

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Abstract:

The current study aims at: A, inviting Iraqi EFL educators (from primary to university levels) to reflect and re-examine their current teaching beliefs and practices from an intercultural point of view; B, raising their awareness of what the concept of “culture” really is and its impact on language learning in modern world; C, introducing an adaptable and flexible framework towards intercultural instruction. Moreover, it focuses on shedding light on some linguistic aspects from a cultural point of view as well as the reasons behind overlooking the concept of “culture” in Iraqi EFL contexts.

Keywords: Culture, Interaction, Conversational Activities

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إعادة النظر في تدريس اللغة الإنكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في سياقات التدريس العراقية: مقارنة من منظور تباين الثقافات

أ.م. د. عمر علي الياس

جامعة الموصل

المستخلص:

تهدف الدراسة إلى:

أ. دعوة العاملين في مجال التعليم (من المرحلة الابتدائية إلى الجامعية) التأمل وإعادة النظر في مفاهيمهم وتطبيقهم التدريسية من زاوية نظر ثقافية.

ب. رفع مستوى وعيهم بماهية مفهوم "الثقافة" وأثره في تعلم اللغة في العالم الحديث.

ت. اقتراح إطار عمل مرن وقابل للتطبيق في مختلف السياقات التعليمية من منظور ثقافي. يركز البحث على تسليط الضوء بعض الجوانب اللغوية من وجهة نظر ثقافية إضافة إلى الأسباب التي أدت إلى التغاضي عن مفهوم الثقافة في السياقات التعليمية في العراق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة. التفاعل. نشاطات المحادثة

1. Introduction

Recently, language pedagogy has shifted from structure manipulation to engaging learners in information-gap manipulation. That's to say, a series of activities that expose and engage the learner's "cognitive" abilities. In ideal conditions, such manipulation would result in a natural development of learners' language skills and proficiency to the extent they would be, in Corbett's (2022) words, "indistinguishable" from native speakers. Unfortunately, this shift usually underrates the value and the significance role of *culture* despite the frantic pursuit of establishing its huge significance and attracting educators' attention to it. In his review of ELT in the 70s-80s, Alan

Pulverness (1996) states that English is seen as a means of communication that is not culturally bound, and “cultural content was often stripped from learning materials”. Curricula were “needs analysis” driven and culture was, and still is, subordinate to language learning objectives. Materials that have the potential to be culturally bound are strictly avoided.

2. Statement of the Problem:

In a digitally connected world, English has become *urgent*. Consequently, there is an urgent need for Iraqi EFL learners to shift from seeking native-like competence, “being fluent fools”, to assuming the role of efficient mediators between their own language and culture and the different languages and cultures all over the world. “Native speaker proficiency has been rightly challenged as a realistic or even desirable outcome for language programmes” (Byram, 2009). In Pinker’s (1994) words “language is a cultural invention” “it is the dialogic assertion, negotiation, construction, reconstitution and maintenance of individual and group identity”. In light of the established crucial impact of “culture” on language learning, it is of critical importance to invite Iraqi teachers of EFL to reflect and re-examine their basic assumptions about what language is and what it is really used for. Even though the current Iraqi EFL textbooks are communicatively based, teaching culture is not a central objective. Moreover, teaching EFL at university level is believed to be communicatively based and culturally loaded, yet, it is really NOT. Learners must be equipped with the ability to understand and comprehend the practices and beliefs of the target language members if they wish to improve their acquisition of the language that target culture produces. Students seriously lack cultural competence in both the target culture as well as their own.

3. Aims of the study

1. Inviting Iraqi EFL educators (from primary to university levels) to reflect and re-examine their current teaching beliefs and practices from an intercultural point of view.
2. Raising their awareness of what the concept of “culture” really is and its impact on language learning in modern world.
3. Introducing an adaptable and flexible framework for intercultural instruction.

4. The Cultural Anxiety

This section reflects on some reasons behind the subordination and underrating of “culture”. A closer look at the development of English curricular design reveals a lot of mysteries concerning why designers, educators, and teachers are so anxious about the integration of “culture” into curricula and teaching practices. The so-called anxiety might be attributed to many valid, yet, not *Holly* reasons.

Some have **political** roots; for instance, designers wouldn’t risk being accused of imposing or promoting certain cultural attitudes, traditions, and values, over others.

Another closely related source for such anxiety might be of a **social nature**. The fear of Identity loss will always be an obstacle. Languages have always been an effective instrument in shaping and maintaining cultural identity and distinctiveness. A foreign language learner may not wish to adopt or be affected by the practices and views of the target language. It is of great significance to view “culture” as nationality-free.

Moreover, some of these reasons might be viewed from a **practical** point of view. “Culture-free” designs are easier, faster, and more focused. An integration of culture-bound content would raise a series of hard-to-answer questions. For instance; which of

a very vast range of cultural aspects should be included? Which criteria to grade and sequence should be adopted? Even a whole culture-based design would propose more questions especially when it comes to defining learning objectives. Of course, one of the answers lies in the use of authentic materials. But again, the same questions still stand.

A central problem is embedded in the **definition** of culture itself. Culture is an undisputed and vague concept. Byram (2021) won't even "indulge in the 'ritual discussion' of defining culture". Some might even think that due to this ambiguity, pedagogical benefits are doubtful in language teaching. Endeavors to conceptualize "culture" have set out by many disciplines and subdisciplines; linguistics, applied linguistics, ethnography, anthropology discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, media and communication studies, etc. Each conceptualization has its own understanding and point of view about culture which fuels the ongoing controversies and debates.

Finally, the eternal question "*Can culture be taught?*" and if yes, how? And that is the **methodological** source for cultural anxiety.

5. Modern Interaction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) asserts the drastic role of culture in language teaching. Curricula and methods of teaching are all communicatively oriented and interactionally activated. A communicative competent learner is the desired outcome of modern applied linguistics. Yet, is it really interaction and interactional skills that are fostered?

Aside from the above-mentioned cultural issues in Iraqi settings, educators should reconsider the term "interaction". Yes, CLT has effectively broadened the concept of communication, yet, it still conceives it from an information-gap point of view. In

other words, interaction in CLT is *transactional* rather than *interactional*. Transitional speech is “message-oriented” (Corbett 2022); it involves the transfer of information to bridge a gap or to accomplish something. In essence, interactional conversation is social. It involves aspects of daily life communication; aspects that are socially and culturally rooted. Greetings, telling a simple and silly joke, telling a story, paying a compliment, small talk... etc.; these are not info-gap based!!! If we really want to foster “culture” in our teaching, a reformation of what interaction means is a must. Interaction should be seen as a simple “chat” rather than filling gaps or speech acts.

6. Nationality: Enculturation and Acculturation

As discussed earlier, one of the major reasons for cultural anxiety in language teaching is rooted in fear of identity loss or at least 'contamination'. It is teachers' role to be aware of and differentiate among some culturally related concepts, such as culture and nationality. Thinking of English culture as British or American, though useful examples, is a misconception. For instance, the British culture is a mix of Irish, Scottish cultures...etc. The American diverse societies and ethnicities is another example why “culture” is not supposed to be attached to nationality. This again, can reduce the anxiety of identity loss in FL learners. Preparing students to be international mediators and negotiators should be set as primary goal.

Moreover, in most cases, the teaching of 'culture' in EFL aims at acculturation rather than enculturation. The two terms are differentiated only in terms of outcome. While enculturation seeks a total assimilation into the target culture; acculturation signifies an adaption and functioning within the target culture while maintaining learner's own identity.

“Enculturation and acculturation can be considered a set of points along a continuum: learners can be fully assimilated (enculturation) or alternatively, they might find themselves integrated into the new culture while retaining their identity, or they might be marginalised by the other culture, or totally alienated from it” (Berry,2003)

To me, in EFL settings, especially in Iraq, enculturation should not be an aim or a desired outcome. Some EFL settings might though; for instance, courses for immigrants, ESP courses, and so on. Such settings where learners need to be accommodated and immersed into the target community should aim for enculturation. Acculturation aims to produce a bi/multi-cultural as well as a bi/multi-lingual learner. As soon as learners secure their social and cultural uniqueness and feel that they are the product of their own cultural aspects, they would be open to tolerance and acceptance of other cultures.

7. From Primary to University Level

“English for Iraq”, is a series textbook for teaching EFL by *Olivia Johnston and Caroline de Messieres*. The textbook is adopted for primary and secondary schools. It has undergone several critical analysis endeavors by educators all over the country, for instance, Musa, H. (2017); AL-Ali, K. (2021); Saleh, M. (2022), Fayadh, I. H. (2022), and many former other attempts. The research body shows some critical conclusions concerning “culture”. First, the cultural input is radically insufficient; second, imbalance is found between Iraqi and target cultural aspects and references to Iraqi cultural aspects are subject to stereotyping.

Third, lack of integration and contrastive references amongst cultural aspects.

The same also applies to EFL learning and teaching at University level. For instance, “culture” in the curricula of the Departments of English at The University of Mosul is seriously marginalized. Serious cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and cultural communication problems can be easily spotted. Not only there are problems with the target culture, but within Iraqi cultural aspects as well. That goes even with advanced learners of English and teaching staff.

8. Towards an Intercultural Approach to EFL

Introducing an intercultural approach to EFL teaching and learning is a tricky and risky expedition. As controversial, broad, multidisciplinary, and rather mysterious and vague the concept of “culture” as it is, it makes it nearly impossible to construct an intercultural methodology. The deeper you go, the faster you get lost.

As a central point in language proficiency, “culture” has been a major concern to Europe and North America. Hence, there have been some “sophisticated” attempts to grasp interculturality, viz, the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) guidelines (Council of Europe, 2001; updated in North et al., 2018), and the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages and the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Communication (NCSSFL-ACTFL, 2017). These frameworks echoed globally as standardized descriptions of language proficiency. Nevertheless, educators beyond Europe found it much more complicated, as always, to integrate the CEFR (2001) guidelines expressed in 375 pages or even the 230 pages of the moderate Companion document (North et al., 2018)

into their teaching. This is exactly why we need to stick to the basics as a starting point for a methodology for an intercultural ELT that is accessible to teachers. Teachers should not think of an intercultural approach to language teaching as a replacement for their current activities and methodology or, by any means, demeaning to the CLT perspectives they are adopting. On the contrary, once their awareness is raised, teachers will indisputably see the potential possibilities of “culture” to enhance their students’ acquisition and communicative competence.

Among the relatively huge body of research quests to suggest a conceptual framework to teaching “culture” and intercultural communicative competence, (e.g. Byram, 2008; Dasli & Díaz, 2016; Holliday, 2018; Jackson, 2019), Byram’s (1997-2021) stands out. Even though Byram admits the controversial nature of “culture” and how broad and vague it is, to the extent he refuses to provide a simple definition, he still manages to provide some solid foundations and elementary skills.

Byram Identifies five essential competencies for intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Some of these are purely linguistic, while others are communicative. Teachers must develop the following competencies for their learners to be interculturally communicative competent:

1. Knowledge: Learners should be aware and have knowledge of the different social groups, their products, and practices in both their own and the target social community as well as the processes of individual interactions.
2. Skills of discovery and interaction: Learners must have the ability to discover new cultural knowledge and activate it in real-time interaction.
3. Skills of interpreting and relating: As they read and interact, learners must have the ability to interpret the social

and cultural aspects of what they read and relate them to their own culture.

4. Attitudes: It is very important for intercultural learners to develop certain attitudes such as curiosity and openness, tolerance, and readiness to overcome disbelief and stereotyping about other cultures as well as their own.

9. Culture and Conversation

As the purpose of this paper, a practical intercultural framework is due based on the conceptual assumptions discussed across this research. As stated earlier, sticking to the basics would help reduce the “cultural anxiety” that is evidently shown in my discussion so far. The integration of “culture” can and should be a central aim in language teaching in general within each and every academic course at University level. Yet, I have chosen “conversation” to implement the intercultural framework suggested in this paper. The choice is not random and it has both theoretical and practical rationales.

I strongly believe that an interactional conversation activity is a fertile ground to plant 'culture'. Conversation has a key role to play in fostering 'culture' and cultural aspects as the discussion next would show.

Firstly, conversation, as a syllabus or as a course, is taught for four years in the departments of English in Iraq. This would provide educators with invaluable time to achieve their aims. An accumulative strategy can be planned in advance to harvest the desired outcomes. Cultural themes and materials can be selected and sequenced along the accumulative continuum. Suitable conversational activities are constructed according to the general aims and sub-objectives.

Secondly, whether transactional or interactional, conversation has “interaction” as its playground. Integrating real interaction would definitely enhance and hasten the achievement of anticipated outcomes; “Participating in conversational behaviour is key to interacting with others and constructing, through that interaction an individual and group identity” Corbett (2022). In fact, in conversation, social identity is co-constructed and shaped by all participants. Thornbury and Slade (2006) assert “the central importance of interactional conversation to *all* communication practices”.

Thirdly, in line with Byram’s competencies (*saviors*), conversation is directly involved, knowledge of interactional framework, socio-cultural norms of interaction, conversation management...etc.; skills of discovery of these norms and interaction; attitudes are expressed and negotiated through participating in conversations; and so on.

10. Framework Assumptions

So far, I have laid the general foundations for the suggested layout. The general idea is to integrate Byram’s basic competencies (*saviors*) into conversational interactional activities with cultural themes and input. But before that, I have to briefly go back to the basic assumptions that I would adopt starting with the concept of culture itself.

- What is culture? Evidently, culture as a concept is problematic to grasp. Nevertheless, an operational definition is a must in this case. So, “culture” is a collection of cognitive resources and expressive behaviors by which individual members of any community establish and maintain their social individual and collective identity and at the same time distinguish them from any other community.

- Is language learning culture-free? Theoretical and practical experience proves that culture should be central to language teaching and learning. Communicatively competent learners as the aim of any language learning program should be culturally competent.
- Culture Vs nationality: It is of crucial importance to draw a line between culture and nationality. Culture is not necessarily attached to a specific nationality. On the contrary, in EFL settings, culture should be viewed as nationality free.
- What is interaction? Differentiation between interaction and transaction communication must be considered. Small talks and daily life chats are culturally loaded and they are the main interactional forms to be adopted.
- What is the aim? As EFL settings, Iraqi EFL educators should aim at acculturation rather than enculturation. The result is a bicultural learner who can switch from his own context to the immediate cultural context as appropriate as possible by adjusting his linguistic behaviors and practices.
- What is an interactional-cultural conversation? In spite of the fact that interactional conversations are applied in most CLT classrooms, they are usually short, evenly balanced and turns often take the form of adjacency pairs where speakers have limited options to reply; such as greetings, questions and answers, offers and refusing or accepting ...etc. whereas the challenge lies in, as Eggins and Slade (1997) state, the conversational stories. They argue that “These conversational stories are the main means by which social and cultural identities are negotiated, and they are worth considering in detail”. Conversational stories are of four major types:
 1. *Recount*: Things happened.
 2. *Exemplum*: Things happened, and I/we should learn from them.

3. *Anecdote*: Things happened, and I had an emotional response.
 4. *Narrative*: Things happened, and they were complicated, and I was perhaps emotional about them and there was a resolution from which we might learn (Eggins and Slade 1997).
- The cultural aspects: As argued beforehand, it is practically in vain to attempt to capture all cultural aspects and practices in any cultural course. Again, sticking to the basics as a threshold would prove efficient. So, what are the basics for intercultural input? I have come across many educators, applied linguists, teachers, and syllabus designers who assume that geography, arts, history, and traditions are the components of “culture”. Although true, yet insufficient. Simply because these aspects constitute the “civilization” of a given community; whereas culture includes an infinite number of these subtle aspects that shape one’s and group’s identity “civilization” included. And that what makes it “mission impossible”.

However, there is a way out. Interested in teaching culture, I co-designed a course to teaching culture in the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul, Iraq with one of my students (Mawaddah A. AL-Husseiny). It was a part of her thesis at the time. Now I have been teaching it for three years in the department. Input was the first problem we had to deal with. I was thinking comprehensive but not massive. We identified ten domains of culture (American and British as well as Iraqi examples) to be the sources of our input. We called them “themes”; as follows: Geography, History, Language varieties, holidays, Gestures, idioms, speech analysis, myths, legends, and superstitions. Later on, I added a new theme and called it “cultural products”, namely, music, movies, food, and

costumes. The same themes can be adopted in this suggested framework.

- The linguistic aspects: To me, the most important linguistic aspects are the linguistic concepts that would only manifest in ordinary colloquial chats such as sarcasm, irony, criticism, jokes, puns, and conversational implicatures. Of course, the rest should be taken into consideration like common colloquial expressions, idioms, catchphrases, proverbs, and wisdoms. Never forget the importance of ad hoc cultural information provided by the teacher here and there whenever suitable. Stern (1992) calls such info as cultural asides. I sometimes find myself going further and further explaining such asides that are related to the cultural concepts at hand.

11. Application of the Layout

Each of Eggins and Slade's genres of story-telling conversations demands specific linguistic and performance skills on the part of the speaker according to the definitions stated earlier. Anyways, it seems that the last one "narratives" usually include most of, if not all, the skills and it could be useful for teachers with limited time and resources. The most important skill is the speaker's ability to involve the listeners in the conversational activity. After all, a conversation is not a one-person activity. This involvement is called "listenership" as Corbett (2022) states. Listeners should be active participants and it is the speaker's responsibility to raise their interest and acquire their sympathy through minimal responses or body language and expressive behaviors.

12. Designing Conversational Tasks

Now it is time to decide the major components of a conversational task. Namely; goal or goals, input, the activity, learners' and teacher's role. All four components are left for the

teacher to decide which is which. That makes it very flexible, adaptable, and easy to apply. Moreover, it provides lots of room for improvising, creativity, and cultural asides. Next, I would go through some suggestions for what these components mean to a teacher.

- Goals: set out the outcome, genre, focus, openings, closings, engagement, rules of listenership, topic, nature of interaction, the social event...etc. Most importantly, decide how and which of Byram's competency/ies and skills you want to develop.
- Input: set out the linguistic resources, such as grammatical focus, range of possible responses, speech acts, proverbs, idioms, opening and closing expressions, forms and their functions, structure, and sequences...etc. Moreover, you have to decide the cultural input, such as the "domain", the cultural focus, socio-cultural norms of English interaction, the asides that you would provide, and so on. Of course, never forget to engage the Arabic culture. Finally, the additional materials that would help enrich learners' knowledge of the selected domain and raise their awareness of the focus you have already determined. It is always advised to adopt authentic materials.
- Activity: decide the relationship among the participants and the goal of the activity itself. Set out the procedure, the steps, roles, questions, level of interaction, and level of appropriateness. You should decide turn-taking management; is the speaker nominated or self-selected? Which learner can interrupt, overlap, and yield the floor? Which strategies are used to take and maintain the floor and keep the conversation going?. Moreover, the focus of the activity should be in line with one, more, or all of Byram's competencies and skills.
- Role of the learner/s: decide who is the main speaker, what should listeners do. Provide them with possible responses they should or would use. Decide how they should observe

and evaluate their performance. Give them the freedom to change how the conversation is shaped and to shift to another genre if they see fit.

- Role of the teacher: construct the activity, monitor, intervene when necessary, and provide feedback and evaluation. Provide cultural asides. Relate to Arabic and Iraqi culture. Highlight significant cultural concepts and implications.
- Setting: decide group formation and group work, decide the physical conversational situation, the immediate participants, their ages, ethnicities, if they are bi- or multilingual, their cultural background, gender, and their immediate relation to each other (like colleagues, close friends). Decide observer/s (learners might observe and evaluate their classmates), time, and duration of the activity. Most importantly, the setting should have “relevance”. In other words, a great possibility that it could/would be encountered outside the classroom and relevant to learners’ own cultural settings.

Concluding Remarks

Today, teaching English through the domain of culture has become inevitable as it is mandatory. The question of “Is language learning culture free?” has become a sold fact that language learning is “culture-bound”. It is time for Iraqi teachers and educators to take practical steps and decisive measurements to activate a cultural approach to EFL teaching and learning. Most importantly, the concepts of a cultural environment should be reshaped and grounded starting with the concept of “culture” itself. Cultural anxiety should be reduced and cultural awareness must be raised whatever the costs are. Interaction should be implemented as real interactional activities; in other words, transactional communication should be limited. Moreover, focus should be placed on cultural competencies and sub-competencies.

Teachers should be able to choose whatever model of cultural framework that would suit their needs and settings. That suggests extensive cultural training and self-enhancement.

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