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## Integrating Culture into ELT Classes: What, Why, and How?

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### Abstract

The lingua franca role of English has made a significant contribution toward developing foreign language teaching curriculums from an intercultural perspective. The present study aimed to investigate how pre-service and in-service foreign language teachers consider the integration of culture into language teaching. The participants' understanding of cultural elements they think should be integrated more in the curriculum was in the focus of the study, in addition to possible differences between perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers. The study was carried out with 4th grade ELT students at the Faculty of Education, Pamukkale University—a state university in Turkey—and English instructors at the School of Foreign Languages at the same university in the fall term of 2015/16 academic year. Data were collected both quantitatively and qualitatively via an inventory of cultural components and interviews. In total, 43 instructors and 75 students responded to the inventory. Five students and four instructors were also interviewed. The inventory included 45 elements of culture under nine categories: 'intellectual values', 'lifestyles', 'behaviours', 'media', 'artistic values', 'family', 'minor values', 'major values', and 'formal values'. The results indicate that both pre-service and in-service teachers consider a wide range of cultural elements should be integrated into language teaching to enable the development of intercultural skills. Interview sessions revealed reasons why teachers think that culture should be integrated. Findings are expected to contribute to development of foreign language teaching curriculums that give importance to intercultural competence.

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## 1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language requires the practice of sub-language skills by means of familiarity with linguistic features of the target language, namely, grammatical structures and lexical items. Although previous language teaching methods have mainly focused on these features, the notion of ‘culture’ has recently been considered as another vital component of foreign language teaching. The awareness of both in-service and pre-service foreign language teachers related to this new shift should now be considered more closely in order to prevent teachers from educating ‘fluent fools’ (Bennett 1993, p. 9) who think they can speak a foreign language, but in reality, lack understanding of it.

According to Bennett (1993, p. 16), “A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well, but doesn’t understand the social or philosophical content of that language”. Bennett suggests that the culture of the language learnt should also be understood in order not to be a fluent fool. The reason behind this is that “culture is a vital part of the communication process” (Önalın, 2005, p. 2). Such an understanding of culture reflects the perceptions of previous language teaching methods where practice of the target culture was essential in learning a foreign language. In this respect, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners were expected to familiarize themselves either with British or American culture. However, in accordance with new methodological trends, developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) requires familiarization with cultures from any part of the world.

Intercultural competence is defined by Bennett and Bennett (2004, p. 149) as “The ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts”. Relative to this definition, Byram (2008) describes an intercultural speaker thus:

The intercultural speaker is someone who is aware of cultural similarities and differences, and is able to act as mediator between two or more cultures, two or more sets of beliefs, values and behaviours. The intercultural speaker is not someone who is bicultural, someone who can pass as belonging to two cultural groups. This is a matter of circumstances, of being brought up in a situation where identifying with the values, beliefs and behaviours of two groups is an option or even a necessity. Bicultural people are not necessarily able to act interculturally as they may not be conscious of the two cultures in which they live and the relationships between them. Acting interculturally presupposes that one is aware of difference and similarity and can decentre in order to help others to act together – or indeed to act oneself with others – in ways that overcome obstacles of difference. (Byram, 2008, p. 78)

Intercultural speakers, then, are expected to benefit from their cultural schema at an optimum level. It should be remembered that cultural schema is basic to the communication process and (re)building schema is necessary for language learners to be able to communicate with others (Razi & Böcü, 2015). Therefore, it is clear that linguistic relativity, “How speakers of different languages think differently when speaking” (Kramsch, 2004, p. 244), is the reason for teaching culture in ELT classes. However, the question of which culture to teach needs to be answered. There has been a move from the target culture to ICC and the reason behind this can be defined through Kachru’s (1992) three circles of English. The smallest circle in the centre represents about 275 million people that speak English as their first language (L1), the middle circle represents about 400 million people that speak English as a second language (L2), and the largest circle represents 1 billion people that speak EFL. When these numbers are considered, it is clear that teaching only the target culture, the culture of those people who speak English as L1, will not be satisfactory while there are so many L2 and foreign language speakers of English. Therefore, this provides evidence for the need to develop intercultural communicative competence.

There are many components in any language that change according to the culture of the people speaking them and living in different regions around the world. Farnia and Abdul Sattar (2015) carried out a study on Malaysian and Iranian university students’ manner of expressing gratitude through an open-ended questionnaire and follow up interviews. They found that there were differences between the two groups of students in terms of the use of positive feelings, making apologies, and alerters: Malay students used more apologies and alerters. As an explanation for this, the researchers suggest that in Malay culture, it is the norm to show politeness and students used this norm while speaking English too. It can be concluded that the culture of the people affects the way they speak a language and the researchers suggest that language educators teach the cultural aspects of a language in order to help their students become more successful speakers of the target language.

Bearing these issues in mind highlights the necessity of culture being considered a vital component of foreign language teaching classes, with the hope of developing more efficient communicators in the target language. The relevant literature (e.g., Izadpanah, 2011, Muthusamy, Marimuthu, & Sabapathy, 2011, Qiao, 2010, Wu & Meng, 2010, Zhang & Yan, 2006) deals with this discussion and provides evidence for teaching culture in foreign language classes. For example, in a relevant study, Önalın (2005) investigated the opinions and beliefs of Turkish teachers on including culture in language teaching. The participants had a positive attitude toward including cultural information in language teaching. The researcher revealed that the 62% of the teachers believe that it is beneficial to include cultural information in their classes and therefore they did so.

## 2. Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data in this study. Firstly, to collect quantitative data, an inventory of cultural components was used related to the perceptions of pre-and in-service teachers on teaching cultural elements in language classes. Then, to collect qualitative data, interview sessions were conducted. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Do pre-service teachers in the department of English Language Teaching of Pamukkale University think that cultural elements should be included in language teaching? If so, which cultural elements should be included?
2. Do the English language instructors at Pamukkale University, School of Foreign Languages think that cultural elements should be included in language teaching? If so, which cultural elements should be included?
3. Do the views of pre- and in-service teachers differ on teaching culture in EFL classes?

### 2.1. Setting and participants

The study was carried out in the fall term of the 2015-2016 academic year at two different units of Pamukkale University, Turkey; namely, preparatory classes in the School of Foreign Languages, and the department of English Language Teaching in the Faculty of Education.

A total of 43 EFL instructors from the School of Foreign Languages and 75 senior students from the ELT department participated in the quantitative part of the study. 42% ( $n = 18$ ) of the instructors were male and 58% ( $n = 25$ ) were female. With regards to their second foreign language, 21% ( $n = 9$ ) of the instructors indicated that they speak German, 5% ( $n = 2$ ) French, and 5% ( $n = 2$ ) both German and French. One instructor also reported speaking Russian, one Italian, and one instructor knowing Spanish. When years of teaching experience were considered, 49% ( $n = 21$ ) of the instructors had been teaching for more than ten years, 40% ( $n = 17$ ) for 6-10 years and 12% ( $n = 5$ ) for 1-5 years. 58% ( $n = 25$ ) of the instructors were graduates of English Language Teaching, 23% ( $n = 10$ ) were English Language and Literature graduates, 7% ( $n = 3$ ) were American Culture and Literature graduates, 7% ( $n = 3$ ) were Translation and Interpreting graduates, 2% ( $n = 1$ ) was a Linguistics graduate, and 2% ( $n = 1$ ) was a Political Science graduate. 51% ( $n = 22$ ) of the instructors held an MA degree and 37% ( $n = 16$ ) of these MAs were on English Language Teaching. Only 9% ( $n = 4$ ) of the instructors had a PhD.

With regards to gender distribution, 72% ( $n = 54$ ) of the students who participated in the study were female and 28% ( $n = 21$ ) were male. 27% ( $n = 20$ ) of the pre-service teachers indicated that they could speak German, 12% ( $n = 9$ ) French, 4% ( $n = 3$ ) Russian, 3% ( $n = 2$ ) Arabic, 1% ( $n = 1$ ) Korean, and 1% ( $n = 1$ ) the Uzbek language.

Five pre-service and four in-service EFL teachers were interviewed. Three of the pre-service teachers were female and two of them were male, whereas three of the in-service teachers were female and one of them was male.

## 2.2. Instruments

The inventory of cultural components developed by Razi (2012) was used to collect quantitative data. The items in the inventory were five-scale likert type questions and the scale was regarded to be reliable ( $\alpha = .94$ ). There are 45 items under nine categories in the inventory, as follows:

- *Intellectual values*: Thoughts, habits, beliefs, traditional values, etiquette, ethics, and ideas.
- *Lifestyles*: Unique dances, unique jewellery, hobbies, particular skills, unique tools, dressing habits, food, and games.
- *Behaviours*: Non-verbal behavioural patterns, verbal behavioural patterns, other behavioural patterns, means of communication, and reactions to particular situations.
- *Media*: Television shows, news broadcasts, popular web sites, advertising, scientific/technological accomplishments, and printed materials such as newspapers and magazines.
- *Artistic values*: Music, cinema, art, and literature.
- *Family*: Family life, taboos, relationships, and daily life.
- *Minor values*: Public holidays, weather conditions, traffic rules, and travel habits.
- *Major values*: History, geography, and philosophy.
- *Formal values*: Legal system, politics, and the economy.

Questions for the semi-structured interview session were formulated in accordance with the research questions. The interview sessions included nine open-ended questions for the in-service teachers and three open-ended questions for the pre-service teachers. After the questions were compiled, three experts were consulted regarding the validity of the questions and they were piloted with two in-service and two pre-service EFL teachers.

## 2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

The researchers contacted the participants in person and asked for their consent to participate in the study. The inventory was delivered as hard copy to all participants by the researchers. Participants for the interview session were chosen randomly. The interviews were audio recorded and then were listened to for inductive content analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data on SPSS (20.0).

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Research question 1

Do pre-service teachers in the department of English Language Teaching of Pamukkale University think that cultural elements should be included in language teaching? If so, which cultural elements should be included?

All pre-service teachers indicated that the curriculums of language teaching should include cultural elements. While being interviewed, three clearly stated that language and culture should be woven together in an inseparable manner. They insisted that it would be impossible to learn a foreign language without dealing with culture. It is therefore clear that they are in favour of including cultural elements in language classes. The results of the interview sessions justified their reasons. One reason was related to the use of colloquial English due to the difficulties in understanding proverbs and idioms requiring familiarity in other cultures. Another reason highlighted the motivational impact of culture-related tasks in language classes. One of the respondents indicated that “when the culture is integrated, classes will be more interesting and the students are more willing to learn the language”. The respondent also mentioned the possible contribution of such an impact on the teachers’ motivation, that “integrating culture enables the teacher to incorporate various activities by avoiding simply focusing on teaching grammar”. During the interviews, pre-service teachers suggested possible culture-related activities, as listed below:

- Introducing someone from a different culture.
- Use of power-point presentations or videos to familiarize the students with history, customs, clothes, and music.

- Food homework: Asking students to cook food from another culture and bring it to the following class to share with their classmates while having an intercultural conversation about it.
- Use of songs and tasks related to the lyrics, with activities such as gap filling.
- Using movies as homework and asking students to identify the cultural elements they encountered.
- Role-play activities in the classroom.

The second part of the first research question aimed to reveal the components that should be included in EFL classes. To answer this research question, pre-service teachers' mean scores related to the nine categories on the scale were taken into consideration. Figure 1 illustrates these categories in descending order.

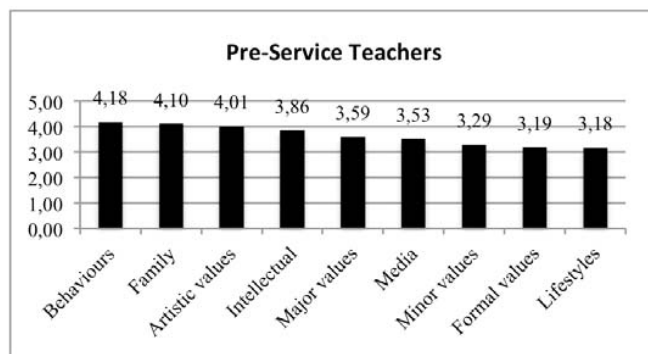


Fig. 1. Mean values of pre-service teachers on categories in scale.

As shown in Figure 1, all cultural categories received high mean values, with the implication that they should all be covered in language classes. It might also be inferred that pre-service teachers expect a variety of cultural components to be considered. This finding was supported by interview findings. For example, two of the interviewees indicated that religion should be integrated into language teaching since it has a vital impact on several other cultural components. The interviewees added that integrating family life is also important, as it is the factor that shapes an individual. As a final remark related to the interviewees' responses, two of them emphasised that all aspects of the culture are important and they should all be taken into consideration in language classes. In addition, the quantitative data related to pre-service teachers' responses to the 45 items of the scale revealed 'means of communication' ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), 'daily life' ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), and 'people's reactions' ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) as the highest-scored items; whereas 'unique jewellery' ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), 'unique dances' ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), and unique tools ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) received the lowest means scores.

### 3.2. Research question 2

Do the English language instructors at Pamukkale University, School of Foreign Languages think that cultural elements should be included in language teaching? If so, which cultural elements should be included?

All in-service teacher participants, as with the pre-service teachers, agreed on the need to include cultural elements in language teaching curriculums with regards to their answers in the scale. Interview sessions confirmed their responses, where they stressed that culture and language cannot be separated from each other. For example, one respondent indicated that:

Any EFL learner should know what others eat, how others live, how others spend their time, what is important to them, and which values they have. In order for a student to internalize the language wholly, culture should be taught. Teaching culture supports the content of language teaching and without it, the language becomes abstract. (In-service respondent 1)

Another reason mentioned by in-service teacher participants related to schematic knowledge. They insisted that it is more difficult to understand spoken and written texts without having the relevant cultural background knowledge. Moreover, they also indicated that integrating culture into the language teaching curriculum is important because it

ensures students have an enlarged view of the world and allows them to widen their horizons, adopt appropriate opinions, be aware of and respect different beliefs and lifestyles, and see things from another point of view.

In terms of integrating cultural elements into EFL classes, the in-service teachers called attention to the importance of coursebooks. For these teachers with the help of reading, videos, and listening activities, coursebooks already include cultural elements, since such activities deal with the characteristics of daily life, lifestyle, holidays, festivals, sports, etc. The teachers also referred to the contribution of videos available on the internet. Moreover, they indicated that they choose reading texts by paying attention to their contribution towards developing cultural competence. In this respect, they regarded simplified versions from literature to be beneficial in addition to movies and role-play activities. In-service teachers also highlighted that it would be possible to integrate grammar-focused activities in tandem with cultural activities.

All in all, as a result of the integration of culture into language teaching, EFL learners are expected to realize that there are lifestyles and beliefs different from theirs. This will enable them to welcome different cultures by contributing to their personal development. In this respect, it is hoped that EFL learners will become more enthusiastic about learning a foreign language since the integration of culture saves classes from becoming monotonous and makes learning more meaningful.

The second part of the second research question aimed to reveal the components that should be included in EFL classes. To answer this part of the research question, in-service teachers' mean scores related to nine categories in the scale were taken into consideration. Figure 2 illustrates these categories in descending order.

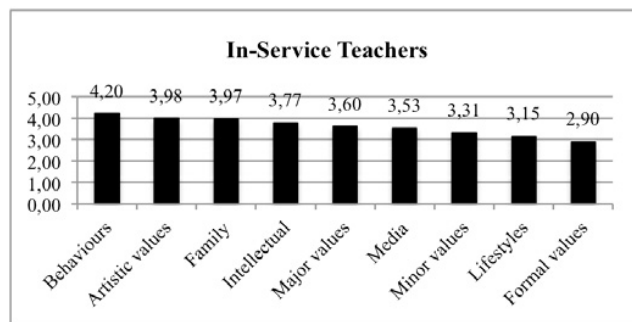


Fig. 2. Mean values of in-service teachers on categories in scale.

As shown in Figure 1, all cultural categories received high mean values with the implication that they should all be included in language classes. This indicates that, similar to pre-service teachers, in-service teachers also expect a variety of cultural components to be covered in language teaching curriculums. The quantitative data related to in-service teachers' responses on the 45 items of the scale revealed 'verbal behaviour' ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ), 'daily life' ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), and 'people's reactions' ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) to be the highest-scored items whereas 'unique jewellery' ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), 'unique tools' ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), and 'unique dances' ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) received the lowest mean scores.

### 3.3. Research question 3

Do the views of pre-service and in-service teachers differ on teaching culture in EFL classes?

A comparison of the mean values regarding the cultural components on the scale in the previous two research questions clearly highlights similarities between the pre- and in-service teachers' responses (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Such similarities are observable in the case of individual comparison of the scale items, as presented in Table 1. For three items, the two groups scored the same mean value and for the rest their responses were only slightly different from each other. To reveal whether the slight differences between pre- and in-service teachers' responses were statistically significant, independent samples *t*-test was administered. The results did not indicate significant differences  $t(115) = -0.58$ ,  $p > .05$  between pre-service ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ) and in-service ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) teachers' responses.

Table 1. Comparison of cultural components included in curriculum.

Items	<i>In-service teachers</i>		<i>Pre-service teachers</i>		<i>Mean Difference</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
thoughts	4.07	0.91	4.16	0.77	-0.09
habits	3.72	0.96	3.85	0.97	-0.13
beliefs	3.60	0.90	3.60	1.13	0
traditional values	3.93	0.83	3.97	0.93	-0.04
etiquette	3.51	0.99	3.52	0.91	-0.01
ethics	3.58	0.98	3.73	0.91	-0.15
ideas	4.00	0.98	4.17	0.88	-0.17
unique dances	2.74	1.22	2.73	1.12	0.01
unique jewellery	2.19	1.05	2.13	1.03	0.06
hobbies	3.53	1.16	3.57	0.99	-0.04
particular skills	3.19	1.01	3.47	1.03	-0.28
unique tools	2.56	1.01	2.97	0.99	-0.41
dressing habits	3.47	1.08	3.20	1.14	0.27
food	4.12	0.88	3.83	0.95	0.29
games	3.40	1.07	3.49	1.01	-0.09
non-verbal behaviour	4.00	0.93	3.84	1.00	0.16
verbal behaviour	4.35	0.78	4.23	0.97	0.12
behavioural patterns	4.16	0.65	4.16	0.77	0
means of communication	4.28	0.80	4.41	0.72	-0.13
people's reactions	4.31	0.84	4.25	0.84	0.06
television shows	3.23	1.00	3.43	0.92	-0.2
news broadcasts	3.40	0.90	3.57	0.84	-0.17
popular web sites	3.67	0.94	3.44	0.90	0.23
advertising	3.23	1.13	3.19	0.91	0.04
scientific accomplishments	3.70	1.04	3.63	0.91	0.07
printed materials	3.93	0.88	3.89	0.85	0.04
music	4.02	0.91	4.20	0.92	-0.18
cinema	4.05	0.84	4.05	0.94	0
art	3.70	1.06	3.77	0.99	-0.07
literature	4.14	0.74	4.01	1.10	0.13
family life	4.00	0.93	4.01	0.94	-0.01
taboos	3.51	1.14	3.35	1.01	0.16
relationships	4.05	0.90	4.12	0.82	-0.07
daily life	4.33	0.75	4.37	0.77	-0.04
public holidays	3.28	1.12	3.32	1.09	-0.04
weather	3.26	1.03	3.15	1.14	0.11
traffic rules	3.26	1.12	3.23	1.06	0.03
travel habits	3.44	0.93	3.45	0.98	-0.01
history	3.53	1.01	3.80	0.96	-0.27
geography	3.47	1.01	3.48	1.03	-0.01
country	3.95	0.95	3.84	0.87	0.11
philosophy	3.44	1.10	3.25	1.20	0.19
legal system	2.93	1.03	3.36	1.07	-0.43
politics	2.88	1.12	3.03	1.01	-0.15
Economy	2.88	1.03	3.17	1.01	-0.29

#### 4. Discussion, conclusion and implications

With regards to the findings, as with the in-service teachers, all pre-service teachers seemed to be aware of the importance of integrating cultural elements into the language teaching curriculum. However, this finding should be



approached with caution from the point of developing intercultural communicative competence. The participants highlighted that language and culture are woven together and cannot be separated. This may imply that they consider the integration of target cultural components (e.g., British or American) in accordance with EFL teaching. Yet, this finding is slightly different from previous research. For example, Önalın (2005) reported that 62% of teachers consider culture as a component to be included in language teaching. Therefore, it can be concluded that, a decade after Önalın's study, an increase in awareness of teaching culture among EFL teachers is observable. However, whether this increase is specifically related to the development of ICC or the target culture was beyond the scope of the present study. Therefore, future researchers may consider this gap in their studies.

Videos were suggested as the most beneficial way to integrate culture into EFL classes. The teachers' justification for this response was related to motivational factors. It appears that a systematic approach in which videos are incorporated into activities may result in better ICC development. Further scholars may develop a programme with the help of video activities. Such activities can also be accompanied by coursebooks for more effective results. Despite the weaknesses of coursebooks, as reported in previous literature (e.g., Gray, 2000; Turkan & Çelik, 2007), more recently books have been published which may function as models of how to incorporate ICC development with that of EFL teaching (see Razi & Böcü, 2015). Since the participants of this study considered almost all cultural components as important, culture-focused activities should cover a variety of themes addressing both little c and big c cultural components. However, teachers may give priority to the cultural components that received relatively higher mean scores, such as those related to 'lifestyles' and 'family'.

It should be noted that the present study reported the opinions of in-service and pre-service teachers from a single state university in Turkey; therefore, the results may not be generalizable. Further research studies at other universities both in Turkey and all over the world are encouraged to enable a wider understanding of the issue. With regards to pedagogical implications, in-service training on ICC development for in-service EFL teachers is suggested whereas relevant courses on the development of ICC is vital in ELT departments for training intercultural-competent EFL teachers.

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