DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: SURVEYING EFL LEARNERS' KNOWLEDGE, STRATEGIES, AND ATTITUDES

By Farhad Roodi, University of Ottawa, Canada & Zahra Azin, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey

Abstract

Understanding others has long been a goal of language teaching yet remaining in the background of educational practices (Liddicoat, 2012). One of the existing challenges in the language-teaching domain is the integration of culture and language. The incentive to conduct this study is the existing gap of teaching culture in language classrooms. The researchers investigated learners' opinions on the presentation of English-speaking countries' (ESC) cultures and explored the cultural knowledge scope of Iranian EFL learners. Besides, the strategies used by the learners to acquire intercultural communicative competence were explored. A questionnaire was distributed among 250 language learners, yet twenty-six male and female EFL learners, intermediate and upper-intermediate level, were interviewed to probe their knowledge, strategies, and attitudes. The results showed the total inclination of the EFL learners toward cultural understanding. However, their knowledge scope was not proportionate with their language proficiency. Analyzing the strategies, the researchers found some were common to the EFL learners. The participants of this study corroborated the importance of culture teaching and considered culture as influential as the English language itself. It can be concluded that culture teaching is a requirement for language classrooms, which facilitates language learning, makes learners tolerant of the target culture, and results in the realization of the learners' own culture. Much more effort is required in order to apply and perform culture teaching in real language classrooms.

Introduction

The growth and expansion of relations with foreign countries and advancement in science and technology, which requires constant contact with the world, have led to the incremental growth of the English language used as a lingua franca in the world. For the time being, knowledge of the English language is a window to communicate with foreign countries (Feng, 2009). On the importance of culture to language learners, Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) claim that intercultural awareness assists learners to bridge the gaps in their understanding of foreign culture and to develop a close relationship with foreign people. Defining culture, Kramsch (2001) regards it as "membership in a discourse community" (p. 10). Therefore, establishing communication with foreign countries requires both lingual and cultural knowledge. However, the relationship between culture and language is not crystal clear, but there is no doubt on the close yet complicated relationship between them (Byram, 2006).

Literature Review

The history of language teaching, in general, and foreign language teaching, in particular, has witnessed plentiful instances of connection between language instruction and culture teaching (Garrett-Rucks, 2016). However, the link between culture and language is contingent on how culture has been perceived. By the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), culture has gained a proper stance in ELT practitioners' views. Applied linguists discussed the possibilities and consequences of including cultural components into language education curriculum (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002). These endeavors brought the thoughtfulness about an intertwined relationship between culture and language (Pulverness, 2000). The result of this attention was that culture has been recognized as an indispensable component of language teaching. This point is sufficient on the importance of culture that human nature independent of culture is nothing (McDevitt, 2004). The way people speak and behave is directly inspired by their culture, religion, and folklore. Whether to incorporate culture into language teaching materials and see its fruit as intercultural understanding is still a vital question in the domain of ELT (Garrett-Rucks, 2016).

Intercultural Communicative Competence

The idea of 'intercultural communicative competence' revived the integration of language teaching and culture. Having used the 'intercultural' term, Kramsch (1993) claims that language learners need to be familiarized with both their own and foreign cultures. With the advent of communicative language teaching, culture gained a proper stand in the realm of ELT and, hence, practicing culture and considering its components, i.e., intercultural competence, were highlighted (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). They used intercultural competence to name the knowledge of understanding a different culture as a result of learning a foreign language.

Intercultural knowledge and competence are "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2008, p. 105). Therefore, it can be stated that intercultural competence is the capability of working successfully within and across various cultures. Intercultural competence has been named differently in the literature, for example, global competence, intercultural effectiveness, cross-cultural competence, international competence, or intercultural effectiveness.

Through awareness of a foreign culture, learners can cater for a close relationship with a foreign interlocutor; furthermore, the learners become more cognizant of their own culture as they have been introduced to the differences of the two cultures (Byram, 2006). Hence, developing an intercultural competence will benefit learners in both appreciating their own culture and establishing mutual understanding. Intercultural competence is a mean by which people are capable of flourishing shared understanding with the members of foreign cultures and countries (Byram et al., 2002). Intercultural competence necessitates an interlocutor to take part in a productive interaction and communication with people of cultures different from his (Clark, 2008). As culture includes the norms and values of each society, the notion of intercultural understanding entails the awareness of such norms that should be observed in intercultural communication (Ojeda & Cecilia, 2005).

The extension of Hymes' communicative competence can lead to intercultural communicative competence that consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies (Sercu, 2004). Further, Sercu (ibid) claims that intercultural competence has gone through changes as the purposes of culture teaching had been altered. These back-and-forth moves are tangible in the terminologies of intercultural competence from, traditionally, "familiarity with foreign culture" to "cultural awareness" and, recently, "intercultural competence" (ibid). Byram et al. (2002) define intercultural communicative competence as the "ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (p. 10). This competence and ability enable one to look at their behavior according to the values and beliefs of the target culture. This ability gives an 'external' point of view to the person who has already gained an extent of affective, behavioral, and cognitive capacities through intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 2006).

Research on Teaching Culture

As culture became a salient concept in language teaching, teachers, educationists, and linguists did not overlook its importance in learning a foreign language. All scholars around the world have done studies to investigate different facets of culture and its incorporation into the language learning domain. Since the first explicit realization of culture in the 1970s in communicative language learning, language practitioners have tried hard to define culture and its components clearly. Many theories and frameworks have been suggested to shed light on what culture is and how it should be interjected into language learning classrooms. Studies on cultural issues can be threefold, i.e., investigating culture from the viewpoint of learners, teachers, or exploring textbooks' contents. In each and every one of these three areas, scholars have done noteworthy studies, but among them, the former one still requires more detailed investigation. The richest area of studies is related to textbook analysis. Different textbooks were analyzed of their contents to see whether they are presenting an adequate quantity of cultural information.

Rousseau (2011) inspected teachers' awareness of cultural values and diversities in English classrooms in Qatar. The research dealt with how native English-speaking lecturers at one specific language center in Qatar acknowledge these cultural diversities and values and how they accommodate adult learners in the multicultural classroom environment by conducting literature reviews and an empirical investigation. Qualitative data was collected by distributing open-ended questionnaires among lecturers and learners, holding focus group interviews with lecturers and learners, having individual interviews with lecturers, observing classrooms, and keeping field notes. Findings revealed that lecturers were aware of the cultural diversities and values of learners who came into the classroom from different nationalities and accommodated these learners without bias (Rousseau, 2011). These differences, however, did not necessarily influence their teaching styles, and lecturers remained focused on teaching English as effectively as possible.

In a study, Alpay (2009) examined the effect of using cultural content for the development of language skills, i.e., she tried to show the interaction and bond between language and culture. The researcher designed a new syllabus based on different types of reading texts, each consisting of different cultural motives for a 10-week English class. Although the result did not show any significant effect of cultural content on developing language skills, the class observation showed great enthusiasm for learning English that would affect learners' motivation.

Genc and Bada (2005) probed Turkish learners' views on the cultural classes they had attended. Inspecting the stance of culture in language learning and teaching, Genc and Bada (2005) showed the analogy between learners' affinity to culture teaching and the advantage of teaching culture as had been proven in the literature of cultural studies. They claimed that learners' cultural awareness had been raised to a considerable level by attending the culture classes. The necessity and cruciality of presenting cultural information, or conducting separate cultural classes, have been justified by the views of the participants in the study (Genc & Bada, 2005).

In another study, Saluveer (2004) focused on an overview of culture teaching in the literature of foreign language teaching to present the essential ideas and

suggestions for teaching culture. He examined learners and teachers' views by the aid of two questionnaires and presented some teaching techniques and other materials related to the teaching of culture for conducting his study. He concluded that setting goals for teachers and presenting the culture-related topics and activities are the easiest way of designing a cultural syllabus for a foreign language classroom. Furthermore, he verified that teachers mostly focus on the acquisition of language than culture in Turkey, and learners are not competent in terms of British culture.

Most of the studies in the domain of intercultural competence and culture focused on the attitude of both learners and teachers; however, investigating the strategies of acquiring intercultural competence was not addressed appropriately in the literature. The most extensive area of research is textbook analysis regarding their presentation of intercultural information.

Purpose of the Study

Integration of culture into foreign language education is not a new controversy, and this need has long been emphasized in numerous studies (Byram, 1989, 1997, & 2002; Kramsch, 1998 & 2001). Nevertheless, many language education practitioners seem to ignore the implication of these studies and the importance of the fact that knowledge of target language culture would assist learners in attaining intercultural competence. Regarding the growth of attention to intercultural language learning and the fusion of culture and language teaching, this study aimed to investigate the cultural knowledge of English language learners to determine whether English learners, both male and female, possess adequate knowledge of English culture through years of studying English. Second, the researchers were motivated to probe into the strategies learners employ to acquire intercultural competence and advance their understanding of English culture. Third, through exploring learners' attitudes, the researchers tried to seek answers to learners' willingness to the integration of English culture and language teaching, i.e., whether culture teaching is more important than the language itself or vice versa. Whether knowledge of the target language increases learners' awareness of their own culture was another theme to be disclosed. Furthermore, the stance of teachers, positive or negative, toward English culture

was asked from the learners. Pennington (2002) asserts that learners and their teachers form an in-group connection that shapes their identity. This bond between teachers and learners will affect learners' attitudes toward culture, that is, if the teacher speaks positively of English culture, learners will think the same and vice versa. Therefore, surveying learners on their cultural knowledge, type of strategies they use, and their attitudes was the purpose of this study.

Methodology

Participants

The researchers involved 26 intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners studying at two different English language institutes. The language institutes were the Iran Language Institute (ILI) and Homapoor Language Home (HLH), located in Tehran, the capital of Iran. The participants were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of their attitudes toward and knowledge of the intercultural content of ELT textbooks and the strategies they used to gain their knowledge. The motivation for involving these learners was that learners in language institutes are likely to have higher motivation for learning language, and this was the reason that triggered them to enroll in language institutes. In addition, learners of higher levels are more sensitive to cultural issues than beginners are. They have learned language rules and have become proficient to some extent; hence, their ideas about teaching culture can be of great use. Therefore, the participants were chosen from intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. To make sure of the proficiency level of the participants, they were asked to specify the total years of learning English in the beginning part of the questionnaire. However, the placement tests of the institutes themselves were a confirmation to learners' language proficiency.

The Interview

The researchers tried to go in detail to seek learners' opinions in-depth and explore their attitudes toward culture and culture teaching. Whether learners deemed culture teaching essential or what the stance of culture should be in language classrooms were investigated further in this phase. Learners were

asked about the strategies they employed to gain intercultural understanding. The interviews were intended to reveal the connection between learning a foreign culture and learners' awareness of their own culture. The interview section aimed to collect as much information as possible regarding the nature of any potential contribution of culture learning to the teaching profession.

The questions of the interview were extracted from the intercultural identity questionnaire adopted from Sercu (2004). The questions entailed inquiries about learners' knowledge, strategy use, and attitudes toward English-speaking countries' cultures. Additionally, the questions asked about the roles of a teacher or textbook in the classroom and the effect of English-speaking countries' cultures on learners' own culture. The stance of the English language culture in the classrooms and its importance compared to textbooks were asked from the participants. The Iranian EFL learners were asked about how the culture was reflected in their classrooms.

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The participants were interviewed separately, answering several questions regarding their knowledge, strategy use, and attitudes toward English-speaking countries' cultures. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for content analysis to discover the themes related to learners' attitudes toward the cultural content of ELT textbooks. The analysis of the data revealed in-depth information about learners' knowledge of cultural points, the strategies they have used, and their attitudes toward intercultural understanding. Since culture is a concept which is not introduced to beginner learners, the proficiency level of learners was chosen to be intermediate and upper-intermediate for the sake of eliminating the lack of language proficiency.

Results and Discussion

In the theoretical part of this study, the prospects and reasons for integrating culture and language were presented. In this section, the results of content analysis are described to reveal the scope of knowledge that learners have

acquired, the type of strategies that they have used, and the attitudes that they have adopted regarding the culture of English-speaking countries.

The knowledge

First of all, the learners answered the question of 'How much are you familiar with the culture of English-speaking countries?'. The learners were asked to indicate their knowledge scope on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, from 'not familiar at all' to 'very familiar', and the average of their knowledge scope was 3. Most of the learners declared that they know about the culture of English people, such as their food, drink, lifestyle, daily-life routines, music, traditions, education, and public relations. The participants, mostly, numbered themselves 3 out of 5 regarding the knowledge of English culture and 4.5 out of 5 regarding the knowledge of their own culture. The components of cultural knowledge are presented in Table 4.1 from which the participants revealed their knowledge and the components are the definition of cultural knowledge. The ten items of cultural knowledge were presented to the participants, and they chose the items which they were familiar with. However, an average of 3 was the score for learners' familiarity with the whole ten items. Among the ten components, literature and different ethnic or social groups were mentioned less frequently. The participants were mostly familiar with their daily-life routines and youth culture.

Table 4.1: The cultural knowledge components

1. History, geography, political system
2. Different ethnic and social groups
3. Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink, etc.
4. Youth culture
5. Education, professional life
6. Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions
7. Literature
8. Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art)
9. Values and beliefs
10. International relations (political, economic and cultural), with students' own country and other countries

Some of the responses to the first question of the interview are presented below, which reveal the knowledge of Iranian EFL learners in detail. The participants

answered the first and second questions at the same time. The second question, 'Which cultural knowledge do you consider more important?' dealt with the components of cultural knowledge and the importance of knowing each item.

Extract 1: I give myself 3 out of 5. I know their traditions, marriage conventions, and their in-family relationships.

Extract 2: I'm familiar most with their daily life according to the movies I have seen, also part of their history according to what I have read in history books, and their international relations. I think 3.

Extract 3: I know their beliefs and values, but I think their life routines and social groups are more important in this category.

Extract 4: Since I want to go there, their daily life routines and their customs and traditions are more important to me.

Extract 5: If a person doesn't want to live in their society knowing their literature is sufficient, but if that person wants to live in an English country, she/he should learn their culture totally.

Extract 6: It depends on the learner. For example, for myself, according to my job and scientific position, international relations are more important; however, I think knowing their everyday life, traditions, and folklore are significant.

Extract 7: It depends on the thinking style of each person, but I think art and music are more important.

Strategies

The second part of the questions was focused on the strategy use of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were asked about the strategies they used or considered useful regarding culture learning. Like the first part of the questions, the strategies have been introduced to the learners; however, they could present and introduce their own strategy of learning as well. Among media, movies, the internet, self-studying, books, teachers, traveling, friends' experiences, etc., the participants chose media, movies, the internet, friends' experiences, and books more frequently than the other strategies respectively. They believed that media and movies are credible and affordable means for any learners. The strategies were presented in order of importance according to learners' responses in Table 4.2. Some of the responses to the question of 'Which strategies do you think help the learners to attain the knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture?' were inserted to illuminate the reasons for choosing the mentioned strategies.

Table 4.2: Strategies' Rank Order

Rank	The Strategies	Frequency
1	Media	26
2	Movies	24
3	The Internet	21
4	Friends' Experiences	17
5	English Language Textbooks	15
6	Self-studying	13
7	Traveling to those Countries	11
8	English Language Classes	9
8	Language Teachers	9

Extract 8: …Through reading books and media and through some of my friends who have been there before, but I think being in those countries is more helpful for a person.

Extract 9: Movies, media, and (the) internet can help learners most to understand their culture.

Extract 10: I learned both through movies I have seen and the books I have read, but media, I think, have the outmost importance.

Extract 11: The movies show their daily life and jobs and how they treat and behave each other helped me a lot to learn their culture.

Extract 12: More through the help of my friends who traveled to those countries and the classes I have attended…, but I think media and the Internet can be of great importance and help learners.

Extract 13: An individual's interest and care are very important, after that, a direct contact with native people is very important.

The participants were asked to evaluate the books they read and their teachers in the language classrooms. Some of the learners were on behalf of their teachers and some were not. The same story was true of English language textbooks; some agreed that their textbooks reflect English culture, mostly their daily-life routines, and some did not.

Extract 14: Traveling to those countries is very good…but books can't help a lot…

Extract 15: Our teachers are not knowledgeable about their culture because they were not there, but the books are quite satisfactory regarding the cultural reflection.

Extract 16: My teacher is good, sometimes compare our own culture with theirs, and also raise a topic to be discussed in the classroom. Since we study international textbooks, culture of different countries is presented together.

Extract 17: More or less they convey cultural information, but books published in Iran usually choose the middle path...

Extract 18: Not completely, but books are not devoid of cultural information.

Extract 19: Teachers should pay attention to culture but, unfortunately, they don't.

Attitudes

Regarding EFL learners' attitudes toward English-speaking countries' cultures, the researchers asked them to pinpoint the importance of teaching culture in the language classrooms and the impact of learning English culture on learners' own culture. Therefore, the participants answered two questions regarding their attitudes toward teaching culture in language classrooms. The interviewees mentioned that their culture is as important as the English language itself. Lack of cultural knowledge may result in miscommunication and misunderstanding. Some of the responses to the first question are:

Extract 20: I think cultural points should be taught like English language in the classroom.

Extract 21: Knowing their culture will ease communication, thus culture is as important as language.

Extract 22: Culture is very important. For example, knowing their culture will give learners self-confidence, which is true for me. Culture should be taught alongside the English language in the classroom.

The second question tried to reveal the consequences of learning a foreign culture. Due to religious differences, some of the English culture routines are forbidden in Iranian culture and committing those actions would be considered a sin. Whether these differences change learners' attitudes toward English culture was the aim of this question. The learners were asked about the impact of learning English culture and if there is any impact, either positive or negative? In addition, they were asked about the attitudes of teachers and learners, whether they should be positive, negative, or neutral. Some of the responses are presented in the following.

Extract 23: It depends on the person; however, there is an impact. Teachers should be neutral to their culture, but a learner should have a positive view of their culture to help him/her to learn better...

Extract 24: I think positive or negative view is meaningless. They have positive and negative aspects in their life as we do, we should focus on their deep aspects of life and to see the filled part of the glass...

Extract 25: Of course, it affects our culture, but the positive or negative impact depends on the learner. Some may decline their own culture, but I am sure most don't.

Extract 26: Teachers usually don't care about their culture since they have not been there and their view is neutral, but learners should like their culture to learn better for either they want to travel to their country or live there.

Extract 27: Knowing their culture is important; the negative or positive view is not a matter...

Extract 28: It has an impact, but it depends. For example, I changed a lot and I don't use 'Tarof' expressions anymore. Some may view this positive and some may not.

Discussion

The participants of this study showed an average level of knowledge about English-speaking countries' cultures. Most of the participants scored themselves 3 out of 5. However, when they were asked about the ten cultural components, most of them did not have any knowledge about their literature and different ethnic/social groups. They were familiar with primary cultural knowledge, such as daily-life routines, food, drinks, music, and education. Since most international textbooks reflect daily life routines, the learners were mostly familiar with it. Sercu, Méndez, and Castro (2004) consider language education as an intercultural subject, and the participants substantiate that language learning is not the acquisition of lexical items and linguistic symbols. Students should become interculturally competent through the learning of a new language (Sercu et al., 2004).

The inadequate knowledge of literature is not unexpected since neither English classrooms nor English textbooks focus on teaching literature. The four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are the ultimate goal of English classrooms, which result in establishing the communicative competence of learners; however, the focus on each skill may be varied in each English classroom. Regarding the importance of each cultural component, some learners assigned it to the goal and need of a learner. Some prioritized international relationships

for the sake of their job and some focused on music or art due to their likings. However, there was a consensus on the importance of daily life routines.

Considering the EFL learners' language proficiency, their intercultural competence was not as proportionate to their language competence. Since the participants of this study were intermediate and upper-intermediate learners, a higher culture familiarity was expected due to the number of years of studying English and the lucid importance of culture in the language teaching domain. Hence, the knowledge scope of Iranian learners is not commensurate with their language competence. As they considered some elements more prominent, they had quite satisfactory knowledge of youth culture, daily-life routines, living conditions, food and drinks, and international relationships with other countries. More attention to English literature and their social and ethnic groups is needed for Iranian EFL learners.

The EFL learners assigned this low level of cultural knowledge to the fact that their textbooks, teachers, and language classrooms did not reflect cultural teaching. The sheer focus on language skills forced textbook publishers and teachers to cause the present gap between language and intercultural competence in the EFL domain. Although textbooks and teachers are among the primary sources of acquiring language and culture competence, they were not beneficial to Iranian EFL learners. Textbooks' inadequacy in presenting culture is tangible in the learners' opinions. Most of the learners stated that textbooks, and even teachers, were not convenient regarding cultural information (Extract 15, 17, & 18). However, some of the learners were on behalf of their teacher and textbooks. It can be concluded that textbooks are not utterly useless regarding culture teaching; however, there is a need for improvement.

Among the strategies, media, movies, and the internet were ranked as the first three useful and beneficial strategies for acquiring cultural knowledge. The reason for this significance may be the availability of these media. Each learner can easily watch TV or movies and search the internet to find a meaning or definition. One's friends' experiences ranked 4 because not all the learners had friends who had traveled to those English-speaking countries. Regarding textbooks, the views were not consistent, some favored textbooks, and others did not. However,

some of the participants made a distinction between international textbooks and Iranian-published textbooks. They stated that textbooks published in Iran are not representing English culture (Extract 17). On the contrary, international textbooks met the needs of Iranian EFL learners. Although the learners admitted that direct contact with native speakers is the most effective and easiest way of boosting cultural knowledge, traveling was ranked 6 due to its affordability. Among 26 participants, just a few of them have traveled to foreign countries. The low ranking of this effective method of acquiring cultural knowledge can be assigned to its affordability to EFL learners in Iran. Language teachers and classrooms were the least effective medium of presenting cultural knowledge. Although culture has long been emphasized in the literature (Byram, 2006 & Kramsch, 2001), proper attention has not been paid to culture teaching.

According to the results of this study, more attention should be given to culture teaching in language classrooms. Among the defining elements of culture, the knowledge of literature and social/ethnic groups needs more consideration. The EFL learners were not content with the load of cultural information presented by their textbooks or teachers. According to Phipps and Gonzalez (2004), studying another language and culture results in the act of realizing and recognizing one's own culture. Therefore, by studying English-speaking countries' cultures, the learners become more cognizant of their own culture and tolerant of the differences between the two cultures. Having asked the interview questions, the researchers investigated different strategies and the usefulness of them. Among the presented strategies, textbooks and teachers were not considered beneficial. However, according to Ojeda and Cecilia (2005) and Byram (2006), teachers and textbooks should be the primary sources of presenting different information about the language and culture associated with it. The participants reasoned that their teachers were not interculturally competent themselves; hence, they could not contribute much in language classrooms. Thus, based on the results of this study, it can be discussed that more attention to cultural knowledge, primarily political, social, and historical knowledge, should be injected into language textbooks in general and locally published textbooks in particular.

Asking questions about attitudes showed the stance of culture in the viewpoint of Iranian EFL learners. The participants of this study emphasized the role of teaching culture and mentioned the existing gap of presenting cultural information in language classrooms. They believed that culture and language are equally important and stated that good language learning needs a balanced scale. Incompetent teachers and culturally low-quality textbooks, regarding cultural information, made the learners declare that cultural knowledge cannot be attained in language institutes, which in turn justifies the low ranking of language teachers and classrooms as strategies of developing intercultural competence.

The Iranian EFL learners corroborated the importance of culture, and they are thoroughly willing to learn English-speaking countries' cultures; however, the path of teaching culture is not paved in the TEFL/TESOL field. The result of the attitude questions was a confirmation of the necessity of language and culture amalgamation. As Mackey (2003) asserts, learning culture facilitates language learning. Thus, presenting different cultural information will make the language learning process more exciting and facilitates the hardships of learning a new language. The benefits and significance of developing interculturally competent learners are not hidden to anybody; however, the important consideration of teaching culture is the necessity of amalgamating language and culture in an interculturally oriented language education (Bayram, 1991).

Regarding the impact of English culture on learners' own culture, the participants accentuated the trace of English culture on their own behavior (Extract 28). Almost all the participants admitted the impact of learning a foreign culture on their own culture; however, the positiveness or negativeness of its effect depends on the learner. The participants declared that some might view foreign culture negatively and do not approach it at all, but others may look for compatible parts to their culture. All the learners assigned their view conditional to personality type. They did not give a direct answer of yes or no. Comparing the two cultures in the classroom may help learners to find the similarities and accept the differences for intercultural understanding, which will make learners tolerant of the foreign culture.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

Studying another language can be implied as a way of studying and understanding another culture and its people. The existing challenge in the language-teaching domain is the integration of culture and language, i.e., how to develop the need for intercultural competence to practice in language classrooms. Different scholars and teachers have deemed culture teaching and intercultural communicative competence a necessity in language classrooms (see Garrett-Rucks, 2016), and this study is a confirmation to that.

The participants of this study corroborated that teaching culture and boosting intercultural competence accompany language learning, confirming what Byram (1990) and Byram and Flemming (1998) emphasized. According to the result of this study, the first view of culture teaching was verified by the Iranian EFL learners who maintained that the target culture should be presented and taught in language classrooms. After analyzing the knowledge scope of Iranian EFL learners, it became clear that their knowledge of cultural elements was not commensurate with their language competency, i.e. compared with their language proficiency, the participants of this study lacked intercultural communicative competence. The widest gap in the Iranian EFL learners' knowledge is the capital C side of culture definition. They do not have proper knowledge about literature, music, art, geography, and ethnic groups of English-speaking countries. However, the small c, which is daily life routines, food, drinks, beliefs, education, etc., is properly introduced to them. Thus, more attention to high-status cultural elements is required to be envisaged in language learning classrooms and textbooks since the learners have regarded capital C as important as small c. Culture with capital 'C' is defined as the study of literature, art, history, music, etc., but small 'c' culture refers to human interactions and viewpoints and daily life rituals (Alatis, Straehle, Gallenberger, & Ronkin 1996, p. 148).

Textbooks were considered as an incentive to learn language and culture but not a representative material of English-speaking countries' culture by the participants of this study. Although the importance of intercultural competence

is clear to scholars, teachers, and language learners, the knowledge of cultural points is not practiced in the language classrooms, and EFL learners lack intercultural communicative competence. Presenting the cultural features of English-speaking countries and how it would be like to live in these countries was an essential strategy in the views of EFL language learners. Almost all the strategies were considered useful and were practiced in the route of learning English. A comparison of the two cultures, Iranian and English, was regarded as a useful strategy to establish the differences and similarities in the minds of learners. The EFL learners explained that sometimes they compare one cultural element in the two cultures to find similarities and differences. However, they are not always successful in finding contrasting or corresponding points. Teachers or language textbooks should mediate to ease learning and make the classroom environment appealing. For instance, introducing the expression 'knock on the wood' used for preventing evil intentions will show the similarity between the two cultures and, consequently, will motivate the learner toward the learning of the English language. In the same vein, when learners acknowledge the differences between the two cultures, they will be more tolerant of the target culture (Phipps and Gonzalez, 2004). Asking for the EFL learners' opinions on the strategies of acquiring intercultural communicative competence will help teachers structure their tasks and exercises toward an optimized level. Overall, the strategies introduced to EFL learners in this study proved useful to benefit intercultural understanding and the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Iranian EFL learners answered the inquiry about their attitude toward English-speaking countries' culture positively. They asserted that culture learning is as important as language learning. The positive or unbiased view of English-speaking countries' cultures was considered beneficial to learners, and this view should be practiced in English language classrooms. Unlike some studies in Arab countries, which show the learners' negative view of the English culture (Jabeen & Shah, 2011), this study acknowledged the importance and significance of language and culture amalgamation in Iran. Although the participants did not possess an appropriate level of cultural knowledge, they regarded culture as crucial as language competence itself, for they stated that communication flaws

can be attributed to both cultural and linguistic deficiency to the same extent. Therefore, it can be concluded that, according to the results of this study, EFL learners need to boost their intercultural knowledge through group work, sharing knowledge, media, etc., for they have considered culture teaching a necessity in the language-learning domain.

Implications

According to scholars who are on behalf of withholding the introduction of the target culture from language classrooms (Kachru, 1986; Kachru & Nelson, 2009; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003), culture presentation is deemed unnecessary where the target culture is present and the learners are in direct contact with the target culture. Thus, this viewpoint per se verifies the importance and necessity of presenting culture in EFL situations, as emphasized in this study in the viewpoints of language learners themselves. This study provides insightful information for language teachers, textbook publishers, and curriculum designers to foster language learners' needs in learning a language, i.e. what intercultural information and knowledge is deemed important to be learned, what strategies are more helpful, and what attitudes toward English culture should be inserted into textbooks and language classrooms. First of all, EFL learners' knowledge about ESC' cultures should grow via the strategies which are most appropriate and useful, such as group work based on cultural knowledge sharing, comparison of the two cultures, using media and movies in the classroom, and role-playing or visualizing the life of people in English-speaking countries. Most changes should be made in local textbooks, which exclude the target culture due to cultural aversions. Due to the fact that learning another culture will make learners aware of their own culture, introducing the target culture may result in the appreciation of learners' own culture. Lack of intercultural knowledge may result in a lack of confidence in language learners when they encounter native speakers and, thus, they fail to communicate effectively. As the participants declared that cultural deficiency can cause communication problems, teachers should create the opportunity for learners to realize the importance of culture in their communications with native speakers.

Since Iranian EFL learners manifested their inclination toward English culture, language practitioners do not shoulder the burden of encouraging students toward learning English-speaking countries' cultures. EFL learners, according to the result of this study, need to boost their knowledge and intercultural understanding and to see how culture can be productive in their communication for they already acknowledged the importance of cultural understanding. The survey on the strategies of acquiring intercultural communicative competence can help language teachers make culture tangible in their classrooms. However, the endeavor should not stop there, and more exploration and research should be done to distinguish the most appropriate strategies.

The researcher tried, first, to reveal the degree of Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of ESC' culture and, then, the strategies which helped them gain the current knowledge scope. Thus, language practitioners, curriculum designers, textbook publishers, and others who are engaged with the teaching of foreign languages should consider learners' needs for receiving intercultural information. Media, the internet, CDs, movies, friends and classmates, posters, and news are a few strategies which can be an aide to language teachers. The goal should not be set on native-like language competency, but as Alptekin (2002) stated, the primary goal should be developing intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes English as an international language for communication. Both local and international cultures and the comparison between them should be covered by language textbooks and in classrooms. In this way, students can become more aware of linguistic and cultural issues, which contribute to their development of intercultural competence and, hence, create meaningful and authentic communication in the foreign language.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study revealed the importance of language and culture integration in the views of Iranian EFL learners. However, the investigation will not end in disclosing the importance of culture and intercultural understanding. Emphasizing the role of cultural knowledge, researchers should further investigate the ways of bringing culture to language classrooms. Devising the kinds of tasks appropriate to each level and group of learners is the enterprise that remains to be explored.

Further studies can be conducted on applying procedures of culture teaching in the language classrooms. They can seek other methods, such as classroom observations, think-aloud protocol, and recall protocol in order to collect diverse resources and examine the issue in depth. Class observations will help researchers to realize the actual use of language and practice of culture teaching. Moreover, further studies can focus on the definition of culture in other modes, i.e., teachers and students can be asked what cultural points are more relevant to be acquired.

References

Alatis, J. E., Straehle, C. A., Gallenberger, B., & Ronkin, M. (1996) (Eds.). *Linguistics and the Education of Language Teachers: Ethnolinguistic, Psycholinguistic and Sociolinguistic Aspects*. (Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics) Washington D. C.: Georgetown University Press.

Alpay, E. (2009). *The effect of using cultural content for the development of language skills*. Turkey: Tarkya University.

Alptekin, C. (2002). Towards intercultural communicative competence in ELT. *ELT Journal, 56*(1), 57–64.

Bennett, J. M. (2008). Transformative training: Designing programs for culture learning. In M. A. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations* (pp. 95–110). https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/intercultural-knowledge

Byram, M. (1989). *Cultural studies in foreign language education*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M. (1990). Foreign language teaching and young people's perceptions of other cultures. In B. Harrison, (Ed.), *Culture and the language classroom* (pp. 76–87). Hong Kong: Modern English Publications and the British Council.

Byram, M. (Ed.). (1994a). *Culture and language learning in higher education.*
Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Byram, M. (1997a). Cultural awareness' in vocabulary learning. *Language
Learning Journal, 16*, 51–57.

Byram M. (1997b). Cultural studies and foreign language teaching. In S.
Bassnett (Ed.), *Studying British cultures. An introduction* (pp. 53–65).
London: Routledge.

Byram, M. (2006). *Language teaching for intercultural citizenship: The
European situation.* Paper presented at the NZALT conference, University
of Auckland.

Byram, M., & Flemming, M. (Eds.). (1998). L*anguage learning from an
intercultural perspective.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Byram, M., Gribkova, B., & Starkey, H. (2002). *Developing the intercultural
dimension in language teaching: A practical introduction for teachers*
[Electronic Version]. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1c3

Clark, M. (2008). *Language teacher identities: Co-constructing discourse and
community.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Feng, A. W. (2009). Becoming intercultural competent in a third place. In
A. Feng, M. Byram, & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Becoming interculturally
competent through education and training,* (pp. 71–91). Clevedon, UK:
Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Garrett-Rucks, P. (2016). *Intercultural competence in instructed language
learning: Bridging theory and practice.* NY, US: Information Age
Publishing, Incorporated.

Genc, B., & Bada, E. (2005). Culture in language learning and teaching. T*he
Reading Matrix, 5*(1) 73–84. http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/
genc_bada/article.pdf

Jabeen, F., & Shah, S. K. (2011). The role of culture in ELT: Learners' attitude
towards the teaching of target language culture. *European Journal
of Social Sciences, 23*(4) 604–613. https://www.researchgate.net/
publication/260045647_The_Role_of_Culture_in_ELT_Learners'_
Attitude_towards_the_Teaching_of_Target_Language_Culture

Kachru, B. B. (1986). *The alchemy of English*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Kachru, B. B., Kachru, Y., & Nelson, C. (2009). T*he handbook of world Englishes*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Kramsch, C. (1988). The cultural discourse of foreign language textbooks. In A. Singerman (Ed.), *Towards a new integration of language and culture* (pp. 63-68). Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference.

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1996). The cultural component of language teaching [Electronic Version]. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 8*(12), 83–92. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07908319509525192

Kramsch, C. (1998). Language and culture. *Oxford introductions to language study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (2001). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C., & Sullivan P. (1996). Appropriate pedagogy. *ELT Journal, 50*(3),199–212.

Liddiocoat, A. J. and Kohler, M. (2012). *Teaching languages from an intercultural perspective: Building bridges for and with students of Indonesian*. University of Adelaide press, Adelaide, SA, pp. 73–100.

Liddicoat, A.J., Papademetre, L., Scarino, A., & Kohler, M. (2003). *Report on intercultural language learning*. Canberra ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.

McDevitt, B. (2004). Negotiating the syllabus: A win-win situation?. *ELT Journal, 58*(1), 3–9.

McKay, S. L. (2003). Teaching English as an international language: The Chilean context. *ELT Journal, 57*(2), 139–48.

Ojeda, J.R.G., & Cecilia, R. R. (2005). Training EFL teachers to become interculturally competent: Reflecting upon identities through multicultural literature. In M. Singhal & J. Lions (Eds.), *Proceedings of the international online conference on second and foreign language teaching and research* (pp. 1–24). CA, USA: The Reading Matrix Inc.

Pennington, M. C. (2002). *Teacher identity in TESOL*. Paper presented at the quality in teacher education seminar, London, UK.

Phipps, A., & Gonzales, M. (2004). *Modern languages: Learning and teaching in an intercultural field*. Sage, London.

Pulverness, A. (2000). English as a foreign culture? ELT and British cultural studies. In A. Mountford & N. Waldham-Smith (Eds.), *British studies: Intercultural perspectives*. London: Pearson Education Limited.

Rousseau, R. (2011). A*cknowledging cultural values and diversities when teaching English as a foreign language to adult learners in Qatar*. Africa: University of South Africa.

Saluveer, E. (2004). *Teaching culture in English classes*. Turkey: University of Tartu.

Sercu, L. (2004). Assessing intercultural competence: A framework for systematic test development in foreign language education and beyond. *Intercultural Education, 15,* 73–89.

Sercu, L., Bandura, E., Castro, P., Davcheva, L., Laskaridou, C., Lundgren, U., & Ryan, P. (2005). *Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence. An international investigation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Steir, J. (2006). Internalization, intercultural communication, and intercultural competence. *Journal of intercultural communication, 11,* 1–11.

Sysoyev, P. V., & Donelson L. R. (2002). Teaching cultural identity through modern language: Discourse as a marker of an individual's cultural identity. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287261442_Teaching_cultural_identity_through_modern_language_Discourse_as_a_marker_of_an_individual%27s_cultural_identity

Author Bio

Farhad Roodi has studied English Translation studies and earned his first Master's in Teaching English as Second/Foreign Language at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran. He has been engaged in the teaching profession for several years and has taught learners with different backgrounds and age ranges. Currently, He is a graduate student at the University of Ottawa in Bilingualism. His main area of interest is computer-assisted and technology-mediated language learning. He is interested in virtual exchange and his research focuses on novel ways of teaching with technology. He can be contacted at Frood080@uottawa.ca.

Author Bio

Zahra Azin earned her B.A. in English Literature in 2010 and studied a Master of Science in Computational Linguistics, at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran. She is interested in Semantics and is currently working on Abstract Meaning Representation in two languages of Farsi and Turkish. She is interested in finding the structural, semantic, and cultural differences among languages. She can be contacted at Zahra.azin87@gmail.com.