

EFL Teachers in Foreign Countries and the Teaching of Culture: What Challenges?

Hind El Mimouni ¹

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In a global context, many English teachers are tempted by the idea of working abroad to increase their income, discover foreign countries and gain international experience. There is no doubt that teaching abroad has a lot of benefits to teachers and students. International experience not only allows teachers to develop their cultural awareness which will cause them to be in good relation with students from diverse groups but also enables them to develop effective teaching strategies to teach. While in theory, teachers can earn/learn much when they work abroad, in reality, before that, teachers encounter a number of challenges, more importantly cultural challenges that may influence them negatively both on the personal and professional levels. English language teachers face cultural challenges. When teachers bring with them their own culture, they are also exposed to a new culture (of the host country). Additionally, they are supposed to use materials that are culturally related to the language they are teaching. Ten teachers from different cultural backgrounds and who are teaching English in foreign countries were interviewed. Findings show that, in addition to teachers training, there are other factors that make teachers efficient when they teach abroad. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the different cultural challenges that English language teachers face when they are exposed to a new cultural setting.

Keywords: culture, intercultural competence, teaching culture, EFL, foreign teachers.

Introduction

Much emphasis has been put on teaching cultures in foreign language teaching classes. Many researchers argue that students are not only supposed to learn accurate forms of the target language, they should also be able to use these forms in a social context to produce an effective meaning for the native speakers of the target language. Much of this statement should be

¹ Muhammed V University, hi.elmimouni@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1531-8700>

discussed. In this section, we will talk about the importance of teaching culture to EFL students. Research on teaching culture has shown that language and culture are closely related (e.g., Kramsch, 1998) and are best acquired together (Schulz, 2007). Brown (2000) describes the interrelatedness of language and culture stating “that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition [...], is also the acquisition of a second culture” (p. 189-190). According to the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999), “the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language” (p. 43). While some language teachers have recognized the importance to incorporate more cultural activities in order to promote students’ cultural and intercultural understanding to “help combat the ethnocentrism that often dominates the thinking of our young people” (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999, p. 47), a question that is very important is how such cultural teaching should and could most effectively occur at the classroom level. Spradley defines culture as the knowledge that people have learned as members of a group (Spradley, 1984). This leads us to think about the relevance of learning a given culture that is not shared among the members of the community where we live. That is to say why should we teach our students about cultural norms and values that do not represent them? The answer is simple. Today, we are living in a globalized world where everybody is required to work with others who are different from themselves. The goal behind teaching cultures, for Kramsh (Kramsh, 1998), is establishing a ‘sphere of interculturality’. The learning of culture is more than just the transfer of information between cultures. When individuals learn about a specific culture, they are also required to consider their own culture in relation to the others, and that is the most important benefit from learning about cultures. Kramsh also puts emphasis on teaching culture as differences. Because even national identities are not monolithic, students should learn about the cultural differences, not only between cultures in different countries, but also within the same nation. Understanding that cultures may differ even from a city to another, in the same country, would make students less likely to draw stereotypes about cultures which would reduce racism and prejudice. As a natural result, establishing what Kramsh names a ‘sphere of interculturality’ enable students to become more tolerant towards the differences between them and the others which would make them more comfortable, spontaneous and efficient when travelling to a foreign country or working with international team members in the future.

Now what is the appropriate way of teaching culture as differences? and how can teachers make students understand these differences?

Spradley explains that to understand another culture, the first important thing to put aside is what he calls 'naive realism' (Spradely, 1984). According to him, 'naive realism' is the idea that all people define the real world in pretty much the same way, that love, worship, food, death and so on all have similar meanings for everyone. Therefore, teachers should put their students in different contexts where they can compare how people may react to a situation in a different cultural setting.

Easier said than done, students may react negatively to the cultural differences especially if these differences go against their beliefs. The situation may be worse if the teacher is coming from a different cultural background compared to his students. Therefore, it is the teacher responsibility to be instructed about the culture of the students he/she teaches and understand their values.

A good example of the previous idea is a situation I witnessed in Malaysia. The teacher who is from Spain was teaching his students the expression 'I enjoy eating.....' to a Hindu group of kids. The students were shocked and stopped drilling after the teacher when he said 'I enjoy eating beef'. Given the religious position that cows hold in the Hindu life, it was just humiliating for students to hear such a sentence and be asked to repeat it.

How can students create a sphere of interculturality? The Development Model of Cultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Bennett developed a model that he called the Developmental Model of Cultural sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 2004). The model contains six stages that describe the attitude that people have towards others' cultures as they improve their intercultural competence. The six stages are divided into two main stages: the ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages.

The first main stage is the ethnocentric stage and includes three stages. The first stage is Denial and it is the setting where people avoid noticing or confronting cultural differences. People at this stage live relatively isolated from other cultures. They think that their cultural experience is the only one that is valid.

After the Denial stage comes the Defense stage, at this level people mark cultural differences but attach negative evaluations to them. People tend to evaluate different cultures as 'underdeveloped'.

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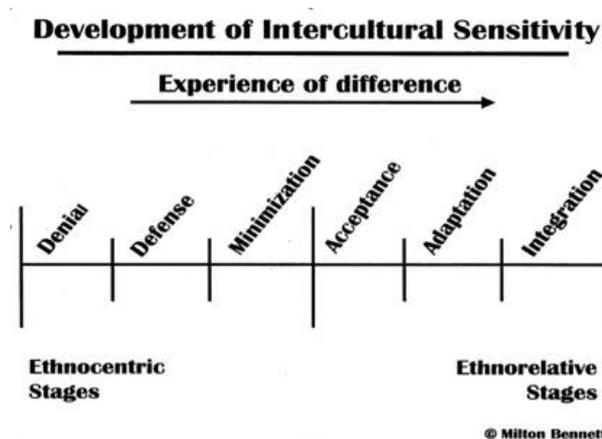
Minimization is the third stages in DMIS model, and it is when elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal. It is characterized by naïve naturalism where people think that the all people feel the same about life experiences.

The second main stage includes three stages as well. First, Acceptance and it is when people enjoy recognizing and exploring cultural differences. People here are fairly tolerant of ambiguity and show curiosity towards all what is different and strange to them. However, acceptance does not mean that a person has to agree with everything.

Second, Adaptation and it is when people use the knowledge about their own and other's cultures to intentionally shift into a different cultural frame or reference. People can see the world from the others' perspective and make intentional changes in their own behaviors and values.

Finally comes the stage of Integration. At this stages, people are inclined to interpret and evaluate behavior from a variety of cultural frames of reference. They recognize that worldviews are collective constructs and that identity is itself a construction of consciousness. People easily move in and out of different cultural worldviews.

When teaching a foreign language which also imply teaching a foreign culture, teachers should be



Bennett DMIS model (Bennett, 2004)

When a person reaches the integration level, they are considered as interculturally competent which means they are able to communicate appropriately and effectively with people who are different from them and accept the differences in their cultures.

Intercultural Communicative Competence: an important element in EFL teaching

Intercultural Communicative Competence generally refers to the ability to understand cultures, including your own, and use this understanding to communicate with people from other cultures successfully. Intercultural Communicative Competence or ICC includes 5 main components. These components often overlap but it is necessary to separate them in order to better understand ICC.

The elements of ICC are interrelated and do not come as steps. The first component of the Intercultural Communicative Competence is knowledge. Knowledge refers not only to the information we have about the others but more importantly the knowledge we have of ourselves and our cultures. To be Interculturally competent, a person needs to know themselves and then learn about the others. ‘‘Who am I?’’ is the first step to Intercultural Communicative Competence.

Awareness is when the person starts to realize that there are differences and similarities between their cultures and the others’ cultures. It is the stage when people start comparing their culture to the others’ culture.

Skill is the result of knowing the others and realizing the similarities and differences between their culture et the others’ culture. People at this level can behave according to the knowledge they acquired about themselves and the others.

Attitude is more about what we feel toward the others who are culturally and linguistically different from us and to what extent we accept the differences among our cultures

The final component is language proficiency and is not solely about speaking a shared language between you and the other. It is also about using this shared language to solve misunderstandings among us and the people who are coming from a different cultural background.

Finally, becoming interculturally competent is a goal that every person who is interested in doing business at the international level should walk towards. Intercultural Communicative Competence is what teachers and educational system should consider when designing curriculum and activities for EFL students.

Status of English in the world, What English and What culture should we teach to students?

The world is becoming more and more a ‘‘Global village ‘‘ and English is becoming its lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005). Consequently, the status of English has changed overtime. English is now used by an ever-increasing number of people as a first language (L1), second language (L2) and foreign language (FL). Today, English is not only used in English native

speaking countries. In many countries, English is used as a bridge language. This means that English is used in trade and business in some countries and in others, English is used as the language of academia and science. Therefore, in the current context we are in the necessity of talking about Englishes and not only English.

Today, much communication in English involves non-native speaker with non-native speaker interaction. e.g: a Chinese and a Moroccan person doing business together. In this context, it is important to question the relevance of learning the conventions of politeness in Britain or the importance of Anglo-American eye contact. As a consequence, learning English is no more used as a tool to understand American or British cultural values in order to function within these societies, it is rather a tool to communicate with everybody in the world. Therefore, practitioners in EFL need to define real communicative behaviour in ways that take account of the international status of the English language (Alptekin, 2002).

As language cannot be dissociated from culture, culture is always existent in the teaching languages. Considering the current status of English in the world, we are faced with an important question that is the nature of the culture(s) we should teach students in EFL classes. Thus, what is/are the cultural background(s) of the content that EFL students should be learning? How can students benefit from the culture of their teachers and how the local culture should be dealt with?

Having a foreign teacher is of a great benefit. Teachers can share about their cultures with their students in a way to show them their similarities and differences between the teacher's and the students' one. A simple example of this would be eating habits in the two countries, the different seasons in the two countries, etc. Having a foreign teacher would allow students to go through an international experience while staying in their classroom.

To sum up, in the current context, the aim of teaching English language should be the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence to enable speakers of English to cope with the issues that are related to the wider use of English in local and international contexts within the "Global village".

Teacher and the teaching of culture

Teachers are a main factor in the process of learning in general. As a consequence of what we mentioned above, teachers should help their students to become interculturally competent in order to enable them to function in different cultures while using English. However, we cannot give what we do not have, isn't it? Teachers should also be aware of the

similarities and differences between cultures, show respect to the difference and try to understand them.

Being interculturally competent will help the teacher, at the first place, to peacefully live in the host country, enjoy the experience and acquire new skills. In other words, in order to teach English not only the language as a structure but also the cultures as differences, teachers need to be themselves culturally competent and have the necessary tools to transmit this competence to their students.

In order for the teachers to teach the students belonging to the different cultures effectively it is very crucial to know their values and beliefs (De Villar & Jiang, 2012). Thus, how would a teacher know these details before starting the teaching experience? There are many factors that would help teachers be interculturally competent. Amongst them: having a positive attitude, travel, teacher training, reading, family background and others.

Having a positive attitude

As we mentioned before, attitude is about the feelings that we have towards the others who are culturally different from us. Our attitude can be influenced by the stereotypes and misconceptions we hear from people. Therefore, it is important to keep a positive attitude towards the others, and that by trying to understand the reasons behind cultural aspects and avoid viewing cultures through an ethnocentric lens. According to Chen (2015), lower acculturative stress and enhanced adjustment occurs when the individual has positive attitudes toward the native host culture and participates in both (Chen. 2015). As a consequence, having a positive attitude makes the teachers enjoy their experience abroad.

Reading: a door to knowledge

Reading, especially in the era of internet is a tool that is available to everybody. Internet today gives an unlimited access to information about all we want to know. Be it reading literary texts that tell stories that happened in different countries/places in the world, and that allows the reader to learn about the cultures in these countries/places, or simply reading web-users experiences, reading is always beneficial. However, readers should always avoid biased information in order not to fall into stereotypes and prejudices.

Travel cause and effect:

Travel has certainly an important impact on people's intercultural competence. Meeting the locals, trying traditional foods, visiting museums and touristic spots are main ways of

discovering and understanding the culture of any country. It goes without saying that reading about a specific country makes the reader understand the culture of this country. However, travel is more powerful. It is rather about living the experience with all your sensory receivers. Other than developing one's Intercultural Communicative Competence, interaction with other cultures has been linked to increase in the cognitive elements available for processing novel ideas (Chen., 2015)

Teacher training:

Teacher training is what many teachers need before teaching abroad. Many teachers go through pre-service teachers program before becoming teachers. However, teaching foreign people may not be something that is included in the pre-teaching program. Generally, in the pre-service teaching program, teachers are prepared to teach in their home country. However, if a teacher intends to teach in a foreign country, taking an international course such as TEFL Teaching English to Foreign Learners or CELTA Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults should be planned for.

Family and cultural Background:

Some teachers are more prepared to teaching in foreign countries than others. One of the factor that can participate to that is what we may call “the benefits of colonization” in terms of the diversity of the cultures that we can find within the same country and that is the simple consequence of colonization. Bicultural acquisition allows for individuals to be able to choose appropriate behaviors according to situational prompts while monocultural persons tend to have more stagnant identities that do not incorporate or change as a result of multicultural exposure (Chen. 2015).

There are absolutely other factors that help teachers build up their Intercultural Communicative Competence and go through international experiences. Be it by reading, having a positive attitude or traveling teachers with international experiences develop their cultural awareness and they use their awareness to motivate learners for better accomplishment in the classroom through using authentic materials, pictures and stories about their overseas experiences. International experience not only allows teachers to develop their cultural awareness which will allow them to be in good relation with students from diverse groups but also enables them to develop teaching strategies to teach effectively (Altun, 2015).

Aim of the study

The purpose of this research project is to fill the void in the existing literature and investigate the roles and the challenges of EFL teachers who are teaching in a foreign country to them. This research aims to understand the challenges that these teachers face and come up with recommendations and solutions that may help teachers limit and/or deal with the difficulties they face while teaching abroad.

Methods

As the main goal of this research is to know the cultural challenges teachers are faced with when they are teaching abroad, hearing from the teachers is the best way. According to Berg, interview allow the participants to “speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings” (Berg, 2007: 96). Also, interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic (McNamara, 1999)

It is true that focus group could also be one effective method to elicit the participants thoughts and experiences, however, due to the different locations of the participants, focus group was not an workable option.

Participants

Ten English teachers from different cultural backgrounds participated to this research. These teachers are working with students from different cultural backgrounds. The intercultural level of the students differ from a group to another. Below are the countries of origin of the interviewed teachers and their students.

1. Belarus → China
2. France → Sudan
3. France → Vietnam
4. Jordan → Malaysia
5. South Africa → Malaysian Orang Asli
6. Brazil → China
7. Morocco → India
8. Morocco → Turkey
9. El Salvador → Malaysian Chinese
10. Spain → Indonesia

Data collection procedure:

Interviews sessions with the participants were arranged in different places. Four teachers were met in their office at the NGOs where they work. While one teacher was met at a restaurant and the other teachers were interviewed by phone calls. The participants were asked open-ended questions to stimulate an open discussion where the participants freely talked about their experiences and shared how they have been living their teaching journey.

The interviews started with general questions about the participants' teaching experience abroad and moved to more specific questions about their studies, previous teaching experiences and cultural background(s).

Instrument:

One-on-one interview was used in this research. The interview was divided into 5 main sections.

1. Teachers' cultural background
 - a. Teachers origins
 - b. environmental composition
 - i. interaction with people who are different
 - c. Teachers' religion Vs Students' religion
2. Teachers' relation with teaching
 - Teachers' education
 - languages spoken by the teacher
 - Teacher training
 - Teachers' teaching experience
3. Teachers' travel background
4. Challenges encountered by teachers
 - Teacher Vs Students
 - Teacher Vs Community
 - Teacher Vs Environment
5. The way teachers deal with the challenges

Data analysis:

Given the nature of this research and the numbers of participants, a qualitative method was used. To make this analysis happen, the participants answers were transcribed. The

participants answers to the questions were than compared with the theoretical perspectives introduced above.

Results and Discussion:

The outcomes of the interviews conducted with the participants highlight some important challenges that EFL teachers are faced with when their are teaching abroad. They also shed light on some factors that helped these teachers better deal with these challenges.

1. Origin, education and travel history:

a. origin and culture:

All the participants are coming from different countries and are teaching in a country they have never visited before. However, the culture of the origin country plays an important role in the integration in the foreign culture. For example, Reza who is coming from a conservative muslim village in South-Africa did not find much difficulty in understanding the behaviour of the Orang Asli in Malaysia. This means that, even they don't share the same religion there are some common values in the two cultures and this may reduce the cultural challenges teachers can face in a foreign culture.

b. education

Many participants do not have a background in teaching English specifically. However, some of them have been teaching other subjects such as sport (Reza) and sociology (Juan). The participants feel that their teaching experience helped them better deliver the lesson to their students. In addition to other the factors that made Estelle's experience great, Estelle has a Masters in Education and Human Development. However, the participants who have no teaching experience and who are not very proficient in English encountered problems in interacting with their students. On the other hand, Angelina who has a CELTA certificate did not encounter much challenges when delivering the lesson to her students.

c. travel

Compared to the other participants, the two participants who have the longest travel history are Estelle from France and Juan from El Salvador. These two participants showed much open-mindedness and tolerance towards the differences in the target culture. Estelle who was teaching a muslim community students used to wear Hijab when she goes to school, while Juan used not to care much when his community was staring at him and not exchanging smiles with him. However, for Youssef who has never travelled before found it difficult to integrate the Malaysian society and was all the time complaining about people's shying away from talking

to him. Also for Fatima (Morocco) who has never thought in a foreign country before, she found her Indian community very hostile and rude.

2. The relationship with the host community

The relationship with the host community was generally influenced by the differences between the cultures of the teachers and their host community. The factors mentioned above had an important in making the teachers more tolerant and understanding towards the others in the host community. However, some of the host community members were not absorbing how different the teachers are from them. Angelina who was wearing tattoos could not easily find a job despite her education background and experience in teaching simply because she looked different. In China, as in some other countries, only criminals wear tattoos. Therefore, many schools rejected her applications except for one school. Also for Estelle, despite the fact that she was wearing Hijab, she was criticized because she was not wearing it properly. Parents were concerned about their kids and feared that her look may make their kids want to be dressed like her. The kids normally watch movies and see non-muslim women without Hijab. However, for them these women are not real, they are only on TV, said Estelle.

The relationship between the teachers and the host community is generally related to their appearance. Therefore, the male participants were not faces with much clothing code restrictions in conservative communities.

3. The practices in the classroom

All the interviewed teachers are aware of the fact that they are differences among their culture and their students' culture. They also think that they should introduce their students to their cultures. However, every teacher was doing this differently and some teachers were not aware of the limits they cannot cross when they are dealing with their students. Participants manifested their students unacceptance when they drilled examples such as I eat beef in a Hindu community and I drink wine in a muslim community. Some teachers such as Reza felt that he needs to stick to the curriculum he was given and did not try to provide examples from his culture during his class. However, he used to share with his students and community about his cultures outside the classroom. For Angelina, she was trying to introduce foreign food to her students, not specifically from her culture, for example you eat noodles, I eat pizza. Juan used to organize events in his school to introduce his culture such as food festival.

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All in all, most of participants shared that sometimes it depends on the school policy and students' age. Therefore, they prefer not to share much in order not to confuse their students and create misunderstandings in their classroom.

Conclusion:

The outcomes of this research show that all the factors mentioned in the literature play a tremendous role in limiting the cultural challenges a teacher may be faced with in a foreign country. Being careful all the time may spoil the teachers' experience. Therefore, before planning for an international teaching experience, a teacher should read about their destination, get informed about the host culture, avoid stereotypes, mingle with the locals to better understand their culture and enjoy the experience.

Limitation of the study

The study highlighted the experience of ten teachers from different countries. However, the experiences of these teachers cannot be generalized over all the teachers in the world. Including other teachers in the research may have shed light on other factors that interfere with EFL teaching in foreign countries and cultural challenges.

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