

Exploring the Problems of Teaching Intercultural Awareness: Insights from EFL Instructors in Turkey

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Abstract: This study aims to reveal problems that prevent teaching cultural issues in the EFL classroom. It tries to demonstrate EFL instructors' opinions and their classroom experiences about handling EFL learners' stereotypical assumptions and their prejudices towards the target culture. In order to give insights into instructors' opinion, data was collected quantitatively and qualitatively. 163 EFL instructors from six state universities in Turkey participated in the questionnaire and 12 of them were selected randomly to be interviewed. Findings show that instructors pay a good deal of attention to teach the textbook and have little time to teach intercultural awareness. The main objective in the EFL classroom is to develop learners' linguistic skills rather than intercultural competence. Moreover, learners are unmotivated to learn about different cultures as they have stereotypes and prejudices towards target cultures. Hence, instructors' giving priority to teach textbooks and develop merely learners' linguistic skills, and learners' reluctance to learn about other cultures bring forth the problems that prevent teaching intercultural awareness.

Keywords: EFL, English teachers, intercultural awareness, target culture.

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Introduction

A set of definitions of culture concept has been offered by a variety of scholars from the disciplines of social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, and linguistics. Despite the fact that theorists and scholars have not yet reached a satisfactory consensus on the definition of the culture, there are two perspectives suggested to be focused; one is functional, and the other one is social and anthropological (Kramersch, 2000). Educational sciences have paid attention to the importance of integration of culture into the FL/SL teaching and learning since the early 1990s. Since then, recognizing the culture as a key element in teaching and learning FL/SL, scholars and researchers have attempted to define it from constructivist paradigms regarding its meaning in context “in both the objective and subjective sense of the term” (Bennett, 2009, p. 3). The second notion of Kramersch (2000) in terms of understanding culture from social and anthropological perspectives becomes the focus area of FL teaching and learning to help students communicate cognitively and socially appropriate ways.

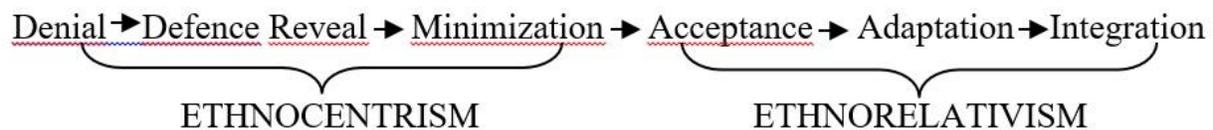
Before the last decades of the 20th century, foreign language teaching was primarily teacher-fronted and confined to the set of linguistic rules. The culture was taught isolated and traditionally from a touristic view of language apprehension (Byram, 1989). However, with the advance of internet and the rapid increase in mobility, integration of culture in the field of language teaching goes beyond the objective realities of “Big C” culture to the means of comprehension of “little c” culture for “a process of socialisation” (Wendt, 2003, p. 93). Bennett (2009) accepts “Big C” culture as an elite culture which can be defined by the products of art, literature, architecture, and the features of geography and history and opposes it to “little c” culture which explores a cultural group from anthropological and sociological perspectives engaging in behaviours, thoughts, and daily routines of a certain cultural community (Storey, 2015). Changing configurations of ideas in terms of integrating culture into the language teaching could be explained through the influence of sociolinguistics on the FL/SL teaching and learning.

The influence of sociolinguistic theory has contributed communicative perspective to the language teaching accepting the language as a social context, which is grounded on Hymes’ (1972) ideas who explains the language by analyzing it in cultural settings and regarding it as a social

construction (Creese, 2008). This communicative perspective is important for teaching and learning a foreign language in that it argues the fact that the communication is not merely transmitting information or construction of correct sentences, rather it concerns appropriate language use within a variety of social settings. Hence, in order to improve the dialogues between cultures, FL instructors should perceive languages as “culturally created signs” and improve students' comprehension and interpretation of discourse behaviors (Kramsch, 2009, p. 21). When it is a major aim of communities to develop mutual understanding and mutual respect, then a foreign language is to be studied regarding its social and cultural meanings in thoughts and actions. As the world is increasingly getting globalized and shrinking as well, the need for communication calls for action in that we should tolerate and respect the *other* to make the world more liveable and peaceful place.

Bennett (1993, p. 23) introduces his *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) in order to explore one’s “stages of personal growth” (p.22) in accordance with explaining “how cultural difference is comprehended” (p.22) in the ethnocentric level and the ethnorelative level.

Figure 1. Orientations of the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 424).



In the stages of ethnocentrism, Bennett (1993, 2004, and 2009) asserts that people accept their cultural realities are superior to all the societies and tend to discover similarities and cover differences. On the other hand, people in ethnorelativist stages widen their perspectives embracing diverse thoughts and behaviors by developing their self-awareness and cultural awareness. The model of intercultural sensitivity suggests all these developmental stages in order to achieve intercultural competence, a qualification suggested by influential scholar Michael Byram (1997). With his model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Byram covers competencies such as linguistic, discourse, and sociocultural all together. The model consists of skills, namely *savoirs*, of comprehension, interpretation, communication, and comparison (Byram, 1997; Sellami,

2000). The one who acquires these skills is called as “intercultural speaker” who becomes a qualified user of both the mother tongue and the target language in diverse social settings (Byram, 1997, p. 31). Considerations above require accounting for the role of instructors to deal with intercultural phenomena in practice. Most importantly, instructors need "to change the conception of their own role from that of a transmitter of knowledge to that of a multi-role educator" (Littlewood, 2014, p. 352) who provide students with interactive and intercultural practices.

For the mean of combining culture and language in order to develop students’ intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity, instructors can enrich classroom tasks and activities with computer-mediated lesson plans, and comparative and experiential teaching approaches designed according to constructivist and sociocultural paradigms which, in turn, make students motivated to participate in cultural discussions. The important point worth noting here is that instructors should avoid imposing a particular thought or behavior of a target culture to the students to accept, rather they should make students aware of “the validity of the target culture” (Madjarova, Botsmanova, & Stamatova, 2001, p. 244).

Literature Review

The importance of culture in the field of foreign language teaching has been recognized since the last decades of the 20th century. However, there can be some problems concerning how to integrate culture into the language classroom in practical ways. Instructors may have problems in dealing with cultural issues as there is limited literature to guide them in deciding which culture to teach with which materials and tasks and which role to put on. Research studies carried all around the world provide the concluding idea that teaching language and culture is interrelated and should be the inclusion of multiple thoughts, ideas, and behaviors of a variety of cultures.

Clouet (2006, p. 56), suggesting some practical techniques to be applied in the EFL classroom, emphasizes the significance of exposing "learners to different cultures through one single language" with comparative and contrastive perspectives. It is suggested that new values and meanings of a foreign culture could only be comprehended by an in-depth comparison with the students’ native culture (Byram, 1997). Instructors should avoid teaching a particular culture, rather they should address multiple cultures by combining home culture to achieve a greater

understanding of both target cultures and the home culture. Kramsch (1993, cited in Clouet, 2006, p. 58) offers four aspects of teaching culture as the following:

Establish a sphere of interculturality (between the target culture and the native culture).

Going beyond the presentation of cultural facts and moving towards a process of understanding foreignness.

Teaching culture as difference (regarding aspects like age, race, gender, social class, for example).

Teachers need to have some understanding of a wider range of subjects such as sociology, ethnography, and sociolinguistics.

By this way, instructors can prevent the students' stereotypical assumptions, oversimplifications, and generalizations towards the other cultures. Romanowski (2011, pp. 368-69) collects intercultural teaching approaches under three titles and presents a wide range of techniques in order to direct instructors for intercultural practices in FL classrooms:

Table 1. Teaching approaches to intercultural teaching and learning

Experiential	Ethnographic	Comparative
- personal journals, diaries	- use their own experiences	- make learners reflect on how their own language, linguistic and cultural identity are perceived by others
- portfolios, projects	- observe cultural phenomena	- analyze stereotypes and distinguish individual traits
- reflective personal essays and thought questions	- be a participant-observer of their own and the other's culture	- discuss tolerance, xenophobia, acculturation and sustaining one's identity
- role plays, drama activities	- question in order to obtain information about culture	- activate previously gained knowledge and experience
- games and simulations	- search for the most useful sources of information	- distance from one's own cultural norms
- personal stories and case studies	- take notes during field trips	- shape one's curiosity and critical attitude instead of developing prejudices
- visualizations and imaginative activities	- collect, analyze, present, evaluate and distinguish quantitative data	
- empathy-taking activities		
- discussions and reflection in cooperative groups		

In an experiential project, Kourova and Modianos (2013, p. 60) carry out "an international partnership called the Connecting Classrooms Project" with American and Russian exchange classes. By using social media tools and video conferencing the authors aim to enable students to develop their cultural and intercultural awareness, critical thinking, interpreting and evaluating

skills, and to make them familiar with technological tools. With the premises of educational and pragmatic goals the authors provide students with the exchange of personal information via letters, e-mails, videos, and with ethnographic research opportunities such as interviews by the two-year-long project. Kourova and Modianos (2013) demonstrate in their research that students when given chance to discover the target culture and re-discover their home culture learn about perceiving matters from a multi-dimensional point of view.

Another digital project by Galante (2014) shows how international students and newcomers move from ethnocentric stages to ethnorelative levels by applying Bennett's (1993) DMIS model. Including five steps the project requires students to complete "reflective discussion, script writing, video recording scenes, editing, and final reflection" (Galante, 2014, p. 53). As it is described by the author the project has many benefits for students, but most importantly it helps learners develop their self-awareness and relate and interpret other cultures with their own cultures.

In her article Carel (2001) explores a multimedia software package, *The Virtual Ethnographer* including a fieldwork module and a coursework module. The author presents the technological opportunities to use with FL teaching which has, most of the time, very limited opportunities to contact with the presenters of the target culture. The article ends with the authors' list of lessons learned during the case study. These lessons suggest instructors to use materials and teaching methods designed by sociolinguists, anthropologists, and communication scientists; to explore ways of using creative technology tools; to equip the classroom with technology; to receive training which addresses topics such as ethnographic techniques, sociolinguistics, and communication sciences; to provide students opportunities to shape their own learning process by trusting and listening to them (Carel, 2001).

As we are experiencing an era of communication with the help of technological developments and easy accessibility of the Internet, instructors are required to enrich classrooms with Web 2.0 tools and provide students more socially interactive tasks. On the other hand researches show the necessity of teachers' training on the issues of understanding intercultural communicative competence, sociocultural competence, and on the use of technology-mediated tasks, interdisciplinary approaches, and the ethnographic research in terms of classroom tasks and

activities, assessment and evaluation of intercultural awareness (Aktuna, 2005; Trede, Bowles, & Bridges, 2013; Tarozzi, 2014; Jokikokko, 2016). Current studies on the concept of intercultural awareness from teachers' point of view carried out in Turkey are either limited to high school teachers or participated by a very few university instructors that it is difficult in a sense to make generalizations (Karabinar & Guler, 2013; Yucel, 2016; Yeşil & Demiröz, 2017). All these studies come to the conclusion that although teachers and instructors are aware of the significant role of integrating culture into the language classroom, there are some obstacles that prevent making students familiar with the target culture and raise their intercultural competencies. By conducting a questionnaire and an interview the present study aims to demonstrate insights of instructors and their classroom experiences on the problems of teaching intercultural awareness.

Methodology

In this research paper, quantitative and qualitative measures were used to collect the data. First, a questionnaire was conducted to 163 instructors of EFL working at preparation schools in six state universities in Turkey. Participating universities included Atatürk University, Hacı Bektas Veli University, Cumhuriyet University, Erciyes University, Karabük University, and Karadeniz Technical University. Demographic data of the participants such as gender, age, educational background, and working experience was also collected through the questionnaire. Distribution of the number of participants in relation to demographic data is shown in the following Table 2:

Table 2. Demographic data of the participants of the questionnaire

	<i>N</i>
GENDER	
Male	72
Female	86
AGE	
23-30	75
31-40	59
41-50	19
51+	10
EXPERIENCE	
(years)	5
0-1	56
2-5	

6-10	40
11+	62
EDUCATION	
BA	100
MA	50
PhD	11

The questionnaire was used to get information about to what extent instructors incorporate aspects of teaching culture by providing learners with similarities and differences between home culture and target culture, and to what extent instructors help learners eliminate stereotypes and prejudices about other cultures. For the purpose of gaining more insights about instructors' classroom practices about dealing with learners' stereotypical assumptions, an interview was conducted. Audio-recorded semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes including 4 questions. Interview questions are as the following:

- What are the problems that you encounter while teaching the target culture?
- Do you encourage your students to make comparisons between the home culture and the other cultures?
- How do you deal with stereotypes and prejudices?
- Do you think that the textbook provides enriched cultural perspectives and help learners develop their intercultural awareness?

Participants of the interview were selected according to a voluntary basis and it was carried out at participants' offices. The language of the interview was optional, but only two of the participants preferred using English language. Later, the researcher transcribed the records into English. For the anonymity, the participants were given nicknames.

Findings and Discussion

The study serves the findings of the data collected by quantitatively and qualitatively. The questionnaire was used to reveal instructors' classroom practices through which they provide students similarities and differences between the target culture and the home culture and eliminate

students' stereotypes and prejudices. By conducting a semi-structured interview, the study aims to understand the results of the questionnaire by revealing insights of the instructors.

Results of the questionnaire shown in Table 3 and Table 4 reveal us to what extent instructors incorporate the aspects of teaching culture and to what extent they receive the intercultural goals in the classroom.

Table 3. Incorporating the aspects of teaching culture

<i>To what extent do you incorporate the following aspects of 'teaching culture' in your EFL classroom</i>	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>To little extent</i>	<i>To some extent</i>	<i>To a moderate extent</i>	<i>To a large extent</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>1. Familiarizing your learners with the target culture (habits, customs, literature, music, art etc.)</i>	3.1	12.3	42.9	26.4	14.7	99.4
<i>2. Developing learners' awareness of the similarities and differences between their home and other cultures</i>	1.8	11.0	31.9	39.3	15.3	99.4
<i>3. Helping learners understand their own societal and cultural behaviors better</i>	1.8	17.8	33.1	31.3	14.1	98.1
<i>4. Preparing learners to live in a society that is founded on cultural and linguistic diversity</i>	4.3	26.4	39.9	20.9	8.0	99.4

According to Table 3, the highest means of statements 1, 3 and 4 are 42.9 %, 33.1 % and 39.9 % for “to some extent”; and the highest mean of statement 2 is 39.3 % for “to a moderate extent”. The results show us that as the highest means gather around “to some extent” and “to a moderate extent”, only 8.0 % of the participants prepare learners to live in a society founded on cultural and linguistic diversity “to a large extent”. Looking at Table 3 we can conclude that the instructors do not incorporate teaching culture in terms of providing similarities and differences between the target culture and the home culture in the EFL classroom as much as they should do.

Table 4. Goals achieved after intercultural practices

<i>Now think about the outcome of your EFL practices. To what extent have you achieved the following goals up to now?</i>	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>To little extent</i>	<i>To some extent</i>	<i>To a moderate extent</i>	<i>To a large extent</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>1. to help your learners fight prejudices and stereotypes about foreign cultures</i>	3.7	2.9	37.4	27.6	13.5	0.6	95.7
<i>2. to bridge the cultural gap between Turkish and foreign learners</i>	1.2	4.1	33.7	31.9	11.7	3.1	95.7

3. to implement the intercultural teaching goals and objectives	4.3	6.6	39.3	26.4	8.6	1.2	96.3
4. to help learners develop a commonly shared identity as citizens of the world who share English as a common means of communication	8.0	6.6	38.7	23.3	8.0	1.9	96.3

Table 4 shows us that to all the statements, the highest means are in “to some extent”; and to statement 4, participants have the same answers as the mean is 8.0 % for both “not at all” and “to a large extent”. According to Table 4, we can conclude that the instructors have achieved the goals of intercultural awareness in terms of eliminating the students' stereotypes and prejudices about the other cultures only to some extent.

Findings of the quantitative data address to some issues to discuss. First, as the answers to all the statements gather around “to some extent”, we can clearly state that instructors are willing to facilitate the students to recognize similarities and differences between the target and the home culture and to fight stereotypes and prejudices towards the other cultures. Similarly, Sercu (2005, p. 131) points to instructors’ willingness to “interculturalise foreign language education” in his study which also reveals instructors’ uneasiness about teaching intercultural awareness for the fact that it “might entail a reduction of the teaching time that can be devoted to improving learners’ language skills” (Sercu, 2005, p. 138). The second point we can discuss according to the results is that none of the statements have the highest mean in “to a large extent”, which calls our attention to think about some problems that prevent instructors to engage in intercultural issues in the classroom to a large extent. Atay, et al. (2009) finds out in her research that teachers of FL are not familiar with the target culture and have limited information about the “Big C” culture of the target language. Atay, et al. (2009) grounds the teachers’ insufficient willingness to teach about other cultures on the fact that teachers are unmotivated to teach the target culture as well.

Bearing in mind the findings of the quantitative data, the present research paper tries to provide insights about the instructors’ classroom practices through the results of the interview. By asking four questions it was aimed to understand why instructors do not incorporate intercultural issues in the classroom to a large extent.

Analyzing the qualitative data, we come to the two main obstacles that block teaching about other cultures. First one is the fact that the students have very limited knowledge about other cultures, which, in turn, leads them to have stereotypical assumptions and prejudices towards foreign cultures and societies. And the second one is associated with the instructors and the curriculum designers, in that, instructors, mainly, use an instructional hour to teach language skills and have a restricted time to finish the textbook.

Having teaching experience in Germany, Okan points that in order to prevent misunderstandings and misjudgments, teachers should explain the different behaviors of the target culture in detail and well enough by stating:

'Some behaviors may make sound okay for one culture, but it may sound strange for the other one. For example, when you walk in the street in Turkey, you can see two men who are hand in hand and walking. That is very strange. Also, when we meet our male friends, we kiss each other on the cheek. But it is strange if you kiss a man on the cheek in Europe. So, you need to know about intercultural communicative competence. That's why there are some misunderstandings.'

From the same token, Aylin puts it 'This is, to some extent, related to the students' profile, I mean, are they open-minded? Do they show tolerance towards the differences?' She believes that learning a foreign language does not guarantee being developed in mutual understanding and showing empathy towards diverse thoughts and cultures. Also, Banu states 'We have some students who are not willing to learn about the target culture', which comes to the idea that FL students sometimes have misinterpretations about learning a foreign culture, such as feeling uneasiness of becoming culturally assimilated. Hasan, also, complains about the same problem by stating 'My students do not really like reading, at all, and unfortunately they are not open to different viewpoints. They say "weird" when they read about different cultural behaviours.' According to Olson and Kreoger (2001, p. 120) "individuals and groups notice specific differences and create specific defenses against these differences. These differences feel threatening to their sense of reality." By portraying different perspectives in a variety of context via new media and technological tools, instructors can help students interpret cultural behaviors without conflicts (Krajka, Marczak, Tatar, & Yıldız, 2013).

Almost all the participating instructors believe that the best way of eliminating prejudices is to live in a foreign country for a while and experience the target culture in its own boundaries. As being a multi-layered concept, culture is difficult to be learned without having direct experience

(Kearney, 2010). Also, Holliday (2016, p. 329) points the importance of students' mobility which provides opportunities "to engage positively, creatively and critically with the realities and the people" of the different cultures. When the instructors agree upon students' prejudices towards other cultures and students' being unmotivated to learn different cultures, they complain about the insufficient instructional time which is restricted to teach the textbook. Hence, they mostly neglect discussing cultural issues and focus their teaching objectives on language skills.

The participating instructor, Ayhan, puts it very clearly 'Certainly we can talk about many problems with teaching culture, because the course time is very limited, and we have a textbook to follow. Hence, we, primarily, teach grammar, and have to leave culture in the background.' Additionally, Aylin complains that 'the current teaching methods we apply in our classrooms are teacher-centered, and students are, most of the time, listening to the teacher and completing activities in the textbook.' On the other hand, Hasan states that there some speaking activities in the textbook which provide cultural discussion parts, but they prefer to skip these parts untouched because the students cannot speak fluently in the target language. Another participant, Ali points to the "us-otherness" reciprocity in the textbooks and asserts in his words:

'In my opinion, the textbook does not motivate the students to compare and contrast the cultures, rather it otherizes cultures apart from American or Western. And it gives almost no place for different cultures. For instance, we have some writing activities in which discussion topics are not appropriate to our culture because some topics are not openly discussed among the young in our culture. So, I try to reorganize a writing activity which takes a little time for me. I mean, these books are generally written by western point of view.'

The participating instructor, Ayhan, from the similar point states 'I think it is nonsense to wait the textbook to develop students' intercultural awareness because it is written by textbook designers who have just a little knowledge about various cultures.' However, as it is suggested in the literature, multiple materials for teaching FL such as new media, blogs, video recordings, magazines can help the instructors to overcome the one-dimensional view of the textbook. Ethnographic and experiential teaching and learning approaches, as mentioned before, enable students to put on an active role in their learning process and help them to develop their both intercultural and linguistic competences.

With the help of appropriate tasks and activities in terms of the students' age, interest and linguistic level, instructors can motivate and encourage students to interact in the target language. The point rising here is the idea that instructors merely follow the textbook and do not enrich their classrooms with a wide range of materials, because they do not give priority to intercultural teaching and learning. Similarly, in their research Tolosa, Biebricher, East, and Howard (2018, p. 228) point that intercultural awareness "was not constantly put into practice, mainly due to the fact that intercultural learning aims were not the foci of the teachers' lessons." This means the need for teacher training programmes for intercultural education and some shifts for the textbooks which could be possible by the policymakers' and curriculum designers' paying attention to these issues.

Conclusion

This study sorted out the instructors' perceptions of intercultural teaching in the EFL classroom collecting data through a questionnaire and an interview. Findings of the questionnaire suggest that the instructors use compare and contrast strategies and help the students free from prejudices and avoid stereotyped judgments in their classrooms to some extent. The interview was conducted to shed light on the obstacles that prevent the instructors to integrate intercultural teaching into the EFL classroom.

Interview results focus the major problems on the students' unwillingness to learn about foreign cultures and the instructors' complains about restricted course hour in which they have to follow the textbook and have little time for cultural issues. Instructors believe that, in general, students are not open to different thoughts and behaviors of other cultures and they are making generalizations and oversimplifications by covering and rejecting differences. Additionally, the textbook is insufficient to familiarize students with a variety of cultures and widen their perspectives on the life of different societies as it often presents western cultures, mainly British or American cultures. Instructors agree upon the fact that the textbook for EFL teaching should be multicultural and present diversities in gender, race, ethnic groups, age, and social status.

Taking the reality of instructors' significant role in combining language and culture in practice, it comes notably important for instructors to be trained about intercultural awareness. The textbooks and the instructors are accepted as the main source of information about the target culture by the students. This being the case, the instructors should open their eyes to innovative teaching approaches and use the benefit of Web 2 tools and technology-mediated classroom tasks.

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