

## PROBLEM OF CULTURE: ELT IN A PAKISTANI CONTEXT<sup>94</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper reports on a comprehensive study conducted in investigation of perceptions and practices of integrating an important aspect of language teaching—culture—in Pakistani EFL classrooms. It involved both qualitative and quantitative investigation into the issue in order to understand the phenomenon in totality. The results revealed a highly positive attitude of teachers in favor of incorporating culture teaching along with language teaching, but at the same time the dominant opinion was to adapt language teaching materials in order to suit local audiences.

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**Keywords:** Culture, Language Teaching, Pakistani Teachers, Perception and Practices

### Introduction

Language teaching experts and anthropologists dealing with acquisition of human languages unanimously opine that learning a new language is not merely mastering a few phrases and patterns of communication; it also involves developing the ability of correct use of language in specific social and cultural settings. It is the ‘use’ that lays the very concept of the word, language. In order to develop this ability awareness of target language culture is a must. On the relation between language and culture, Kramsch states that they are ‘inseparable and constitute a single universe or domain of experience’ (1993: 217). Therefore, foreign language teaching is seen as acquiring the abilities as intercultural consciousness and intercultural discovery (Byram and Morgan, 1994: 5).

Having stated the value of cultural element of language learning, it implies an increased importance to the teachers in the whole learning-teaching process. There is no denying that despite having the perfect infrastructures and theoretically well designed mechanisms, it is the teachers who materialize these aspects, in class. Teachers’ teaching practices are intentionally or un-intentionally are determined by the set of belief system they carry with them in relation to certain practices. In case of language teaching or specifically English Language Teaching (ELT) they are moderators between two cultures, that is home culture and target language culture. So, the perceptions and beliefs of them are significantly salient for the learning output of students. A sound knowledge of culture as a concept and positive outlook towards target language culture can instill increased interest and motivation to acquire language, while a disdain to it might prove a deterrent to better language learning outcome.

The rationale which lead to this project is, one, the fact that with growing globalization, people and cultures are coming closer to each other, studying the cultural perceptions of an important segment of society, teachers, can yield great benefit in understanding our social behaviors besides doing a service to ELT. Second, the study of culture is interdisciplinary in nature; it is not confined to ELT. Pakistan being an ideological, Islamic, state associates a great value to its cultural elements (products, processes, values) and albeit, lately, there is a favorable trend in Pakistanis to learn English language, yet they are not

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very welcoming towards foreign/English cultural understanding, let alone assimilation. Therefore, this study on the whole aims at finding answers to the following research questions:

How do teachers define culture? And what values do they associate with the teaching of culture in classroom?

What are teachers' opinions about some core concepts of intercultural competence (cultural differences, shared cultural values, interaction between cultures, tolerance, teaching in multicultural classrooms)?

What aspects of culture associated with English language do they consider it important to teach?

What resources do teachers use to teach culture in language classes?

How do teachers feel about the effectiveness of their initial teacher training in helping them understand the cultural dimension of language teaching?

### **Interculture Competence**

Culture is a multidimensional term that is defined in a variety of ways focusing on one or more shared elements of a group and the range of these shared elements is vast. I define culture by taking into consideration their binary of nature vs. Nurture. Anything that is not nature but nurture is culture. Any aspect of our life where there is human involvement, it would be culturally determined and defined. Learning and understanding of culture has been described on three levels in cultural studies literature i.e. cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and intercultural competence. Cultural knowledge is generalised information expressed through words, whereas cultural awareness is built through direct interaction with target culture or through authentic materials (Pulverness 1999; Byram 1989). Competence in culture, which is also known as socio-cultural competence or intercultural competence is an umbrella term that covers both cultural knowledge and awareness.

Intercultural competence is considered to be an end goal of culture teaching by many cultural theorists. In literature there are various models/ set of theories that describe intercultural competence in their own way. According to Seelye (1993: 31) intercultural competence consists of six goals: interest in target culture (C2); realizing the importance of 'culturally conditioned' images (cultural products); recognition of social variables; recognition of situational variables; awareness of cultural patterns (cultural values); and the ability to organise and evaluate target culture information.

To explain intercultural competence Byram's (1997: 34) model presents 5 different types of knowledge which are concisely presented in Byram et al. (2002: 2). They consider knowledge, skills and attitudes as three important components of intercultural competence and regard attitude as the foundation of intercultural competence. By attitude (*savoir etre*), they mean ability and willingness to decentralise cultural values, beliefs, and behaviours; second, knowledge (*savoirs*) as awareness of own and interlocutors' social processes and products; and third, component skills of interpreting (*savoir comprendre*) enables speakers to remove misunderstandings and bring two cultures together. In addition to these, *savoir apprendre/faire* and *savoir engager* deal with discovering new culture and the critical awareness of various cultural elements (7-9). Byram's model is considered to be a comprehensive and easily applicable explanation of intercultural competence. But Moran (2001: 24-25) argues that there is an important dimension missing from it, that is, 'people'. Therefore, he adds two more dimensions in his model that are: communities and people. Communities include social contexts in which practices occur and people are those individuals who exemplify that culture in unique ways.

## **ELT and Culture Teaching Practices**

The use of cultural products as language teaching materials makes learners more confident and fluent in target language and culture. This is because the physical presence of cultural products creates an authentic target culture environment, which encourages learners to communicate (Tomlin & Stempleski 1993: 39-40). Moreover, their easy accessibility is an added advantage in teaching a perspective of intercultural competence. Therefore, learners can experience target culture without visiting the target country.

Fantini & Fantini (1997: 57-61) present cultural products in a sociological framework to teach intercultural competence. They argue that the integration of cultural products (artifacts) with sociofacts (cultural practices) and mentifacts (beliefs and values) encourage a language-culture exploration that goes beyond the superficial consideration of cultural items and makes them discuss their significance and social use. Brooks (1986: 123-129) lists some cultural products that are typically used in language teaching: childhood literature, games (with cultural content), films, music, personal possessions, cosmetics, gadgets, sports, books, meals, soft drinks, parks and playgrounds, and others.

An intercultural speaker is a mediator between ‘cultural knowledge frameworks’ and ‘cultural practices’ (Byram 1997: 64). In this regard, McConachy (2008: 43) presents the importance of conversational routines as a cultural practice. He argues that teaching the basis of values associated with conversational routines can serve the purpose of making learners interculturally competent. According to Roberts et al. (2001: 30) ‘culture is not given, but constituted in everyday practices of groups and individuals. So, an intercultural speaker is always alert to what is both patterned and predictable in these practices.’

Observation and an unbiased interpretation of practices are important parts in learning of cultural practices. So, the role of learner becomes crucial in developing an awareness of target culture practices (Byram et al. 2002: 4). Corbett considers ethnographic techniques as an important tool for detailed observation and analysis of target culture practices. He is of the view that conversational routines may provide information about aspects of everyday behavior, but ethnographic techniques inform us about minor details as what kind of body language accompanies basic greetings; ‘when handshakes or kisses are acceptable or unacceptable’ etc. (Corbett 2003: 105). So, making the learners aware of these subtle differences helps them have a better understanding of the target culture.

## **Cultural Syllabuses: topics for teaching culture**

After reviewing the available literature on the cultural theory of language teaching, it becomes clear that there is no fixed criterion for designing a cultural syllabus. Coursebook writers design the material based on the topics that have cultural significance associated with them. These include topics like popular figures, customs, national holidays, cuisine, habits, sports etc. Brooks (1986: 124-128) lists 62 potential topics of cultural interest. But he himself claims that the compiled list is not exhaustive, nor is it the best way of presenting a cultural syllabus because the selection of topics depends on various factors, and the learners’ age is important one of them. Chastain (1988: 303-304) also compiled a list with a focus on anthropological perspective. His list consists of 37 topics, including good manners and non-verbal communication. Chastain (1988) emphasized on a comparative approach while teaching these topics. Following the list pattern of designing cultural syllabus, Durant (1997: 31) presents a list with the topics such as: the legal and judicial system, housing and gardens, social attitudes and political expression. The distinguishing feature of his list is that it is linked with the freedom of a selection of topics considering students’ interests and suggestions.

The Common European Framework for languages (2001: 102-103) presents seven macro categories that encompass most of the characteristics of a European society and its culture: everyday life, living conditions, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes,

body language, social conventions, and ritual behaviours. Following Common European Framework (2001) categories, Hasselgreen (2003: 47-52) designed a list with a learner centered approach. His categories are: ability to cope with daily life activities, traditions and living conditions, confidence with the beliefs, values and attitudes of foreign language users, the ability to use verbal communication means, and lastly the ability to use non-verbal language. Similarly, according to Byram and Morgan (1994: 51-55), the minimum content of cultural training should cover at least the following broad analytical categories: social identity and social groups, social interaction, belief and behavior, sociopolitical institutions, socialization and life cycle, national history, national geography, cultural heritage, stereotypes and national identity.

### **Teachers' Beliefs and Culture Teaching**

The area of teachers' beliefs is a relatively new field, which dates back more or less to the mid-seventies (Freeman 2002: 2) in mainstream education but is even more recent in TESOL (Borg 2003: 84). Although previous research has produced a rather mixed picture of research investigating beliefs, Johnson (1994: 439) identifies three basic assumptions underlying this growing body of research. First, teachers' beliefs have an effect on what teachers do in the classroom because beliefs affect perception and judgment. Second, teachers' beliefs are fundamental in learning to teach, because teachers are the end user and propagator of any theoretical or practical advancement in language learning and teaching. Third, understanding teachers' beliefs has an important role to play in improving teachers education.

Kagan (1992: 74) explains that teachers' knowledge of his or her profession is situated in three important ways: in context (related to specific groups of students), in content (related to particular academic material to be taught), and in person (embedded within the teacher's unique thinking pattern). Teaching beliefs are also viewed as the 'culture' of teaching (Richards et al. 1992: 84) and a 'filter through which a host of instructional judgments and decisions are made' (Johnson 1992: 448). The practical aim of research on teacher beliefs, should be to empower teachers by helping them become more aware of their teaching practices and working patterns thereby allowing them to establish their own professional development.

Considering the profound effect of culture on various aspects of language teaching from selection of text books to the various aspects of classroom teaching practices, teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs in this dimension of teaching are of significant value. According to Pajares (1992: 324) it is important to know if teachers modify their views about language teaching, how much they understand the concept and significance of culture, and what meanings of culture they use in their particular teaching context. Even for students to achieve communicative competence and raise their cultural awareness, teachers themselves need to have the relevant competence and cultural knowledge.

There are a very few studies conducted in European context on teachers' cultural beliefs, but there is not much literature available regarding teachers' belief exploration in foreign language teaching or specifically about culture teaching in Pakistani context. In this present study, I want to investigate what are the beliefs of English teachers regarding culture teaching in my region, Pakistan. How do Pakistani teachers view various theoretical and practical aspects of cultural teaching with language teaching? Moreover, what are their perceptions about concepts related to intercultural competence?

### **Methodology of Research**

Questionnaires were distributed among the participants. The content was focused on finding out teachers' beliefs and knowledge of intercultural aspects of language teaching. It

had 29 questions in total, 24 Likert scale statements, two list questions and two open ended questions. The questionnaire was set with the aim of finding answers to the following questions:

How do teachers define culture?

What values do teachers associate with the teaching of culture in the classroom?

What aspects of culture associated with English language do they consider it important to teach?

What are teachers’ opinions about some core concepts of intercultural competence (Cultural difference, shared cultural values, interaction between cultures, tolerance, teaching in multicultural classrooms)?

How do teachers see the impact of cultural elements on language learning?

What resources do teachers use to teach culture in language classes?

How do teachers allocate their time both for language and culture teaching?

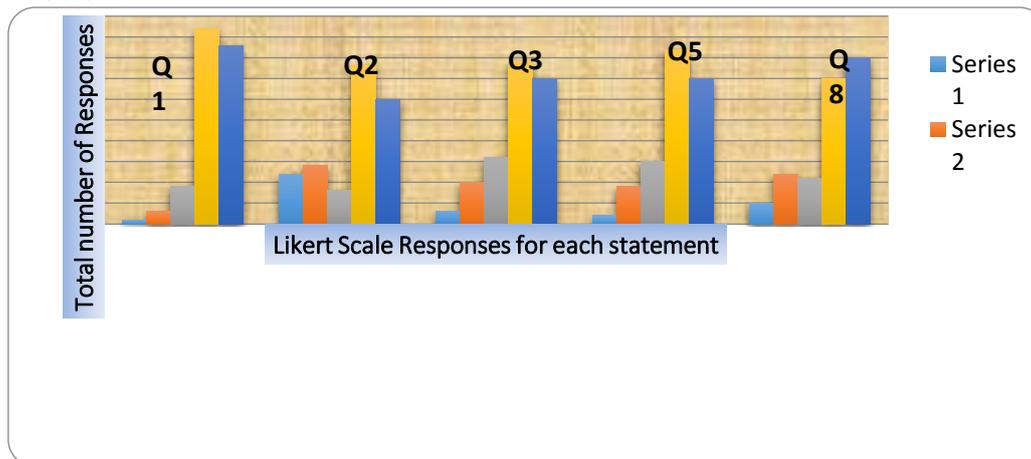
What do teachers feel about the effectiveness of their initial teacher training in helping them understand cultural dimension of language teaching?

The rationale for selecting these questions is that they directly address the research questions and cover most aspects of culture in language teaching and intercultural competence. It ranges from defining culture, materials for teaching culture, practices of teaching culture, values associated with culture and teaching of culture, and various key concepts of intercultural competence.

In this study two sampling techniques were used i.e. ‘convenience sampling’ and ‘snow ball sampling’ (Dornyei 2003: 72). All teachers selected for this research had a Masters degree in English (equivalent to UK Bachelors) and were currently teaching English as Foreign Language at least, for one year in Pakistan. They came from different parts of Pakistan’s Punjab province. Most of the teachers contacted for the research were enthusiastically willing to participate. Due to their keen interest, a fairly large sample of 103 valid questionnaires was gathered, including both paper and computer based versions.

### Findings & Discussion

Questions in this survey were grouped into various thematic categories to present findings and to answer the posed research questions effectively. An example of the grouping is shown below.



All questions in this group inquire teachers about their opinion of teaching language and culture together. The similar grouping was made for other questionnaire items. The results of the conducted survey to investigate Pakistani teachers’ perceptions of teaching culture can be summarized as follow:

(76.8%) of teachers participated in the survey consider it valuable to integrate language and culture in the teaching of English as a foreign language. They value culture

greatly but do not see the positive effects of culture on the motivation of learners, or culture helping to communicate effectively with the people of other cultures.

The average agreement value of all four statements in group (B) dealing with cultural difference is (80.25%). It shows that teachers consider cultural differences important to teach culture effectively, but they had relatively less knowledge of dealing with them as part of intercultural competence.

(73.67%) of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed upon the value of interaction with other cultures and exploring the shared cultural values. They are of the view that foreign language teaching should help learners understand their own culture and identity as well as foreign culture and identity.

The average agreement responses value of the group is (66%). Among the respondents (82%) agree with a realistic presentation of foreign culture and (52%) strongly agree. (72%) of the teachers perceive that learning about cultures promotes tolerance, whereas (39%) of teachers think learning about a culture reinforces stereotypes about that culture.

(50.3%) of the teachers accepted that it is the language content that is given preference over cultural aspects of language teaching. More than half of them (55%) valued teaching of culture as important as teaching of language. The results show consistency with the results of group A. On language and culture integration, (69%) teachers disagree with the statement saying language and culture cannot be integrated.

(52%) of the teachers agree and (26%) teachers strongly agree with the concept of teaching differently in mono-cultural and multi-cultural classes.

(52%) of the teachers strongly agree that native speakers can more effectively teach about the English culture, in addition to those (31%) who agree with this statement.

36% teachers said their initial teacher training was helpful in terms of teaching cultural dimension of language teaching, whereas, (33%) opined that it did not give any help. (20%) of the teachers were indecisive about the degree of helpfulness of their initial teacher training to teach culture.

(83%) percent of the participants agreed that home culture based texts are easy to comprehend, in contrast, (46%) participants were in favour of the statement that culture specific activities and tasks are easier to practice for learners. The overall agreement for these two statements is (66.5%).

The most common sources used to teach culture by Pakistani teachers are the school textbooks (63 responses), literature (60 responses), newspapers (49 responses), books on cultural studies (37 responses), and internet (34 responses).

(3%) of the teachers said that they fully integrate language and culture teaching. Most of them (42%) give (80%) time to language teaching and (20%) to culture teaching and (33%) teachers give (60%) time to language teaching and (40%) to culture teaching. (12%) teachers give more time to culture teaching than language teaching.

The cultural aspects they mostly focus in the classrooms are beliefs, customs, traditions, identity, and education and schools.

The teachers defined culture as a collection of values, beliefs, life styles, customs, and traditions, which belongs to a society, individual or a social group. Culture exhibits a social unit and is the part of its identity. It is adopted by the people who belong to or want to be a part of that culture and it is transmitted to next generations.

Bearing in mind the realities of language learning and teaching in Pakistan helps us understand the teachers' responses to the statements in various groups. From my personal experience as a teacher and as a learner in Pakistan, communication is not regarded as a significant part of language learning and teaching and teachers justify it by arguing that learners do not come across situations where they have to use English as a medium of communication, especially in communication with the people from other cultures. So,

awareness of culture for effective communication is not a top priority for them. Although recently there has been an increased attention given to the communication in the curriculum and teaching practices, English is still not seen as a source for cultural exchange in the Pakistani context, so the teachers in general do not consider the awareness of cultural concepts as very important. That is one reason why even coursebooks published by international produced have a very high percentage of content focused on home culture.

A pattern emerging from the responses shows teachers clearly understand and acknowledge the value of culture and they consider it important to integrate language and culture but they do not regard it as essential, or equally important to the learning of language. Moreover, their selection of cultural aspects for teaching in the classroom, suggests that they are not confident in engaging with English culture. In terms of the understanding of intercultural concepts (shared values, cultural differences, interaction, tolerance, stereotypes), in these questions they had to make a choice on the basis of their knowledge and awareness of cultural concepts. They did show agreement to the value of these statements for culture teaching and intercultural competence, but there were comparatively higher numbers of neutral responses to these statements. It implies that they had limited acquaintance with the ideas and concepts related to culture and intercultural competence.

### **Conclusion**

The study provided some valuable insights toward teachers' views and their current state of cultural competence. There was a consistency and a link between teachers' responses to various questions, which also reflects on reliability of responses. Moreover, I can relate and trace out the possible reasons behind the responses of teachers being a part of learning and teaching community in Pakistani culture, i.e. as a nation their world view is ideology driven— Islamic ideology. Therefore, any aspect seemingly not in alignment with Islamic perspectives is hardly given any integration space. To sum up, the inclusion of both theoretical and practical aspects of culture in teacher training programs could help teachers to effectively integrate culture into language teaching practices in Pakistan. This would not only make English language learning and teaching more comprehensive, but it would also have a positive effect on people's attitude, and approach towards life by making them tolerant and welcoming towards other cultures. The findings of the study can also prove helpful to further explore the issues related identity, social integration, and debates like near-nativeness, and world Englishes etc.

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