

ACCEPTING THE OTHER IN TEACHING FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: THE CONTEXT OF THE CEF

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Abstract

Researchers have always discussed the need for an efficient approach to teaching culture in languages. The intercultural approach is the dominant one today. This paper takes interest in the application of the intercultural approach to teaching French as a foreign language in Jordan. It presents a study conducted at the department of French at the University of Jordan and it shows the results of applying this approach in the classes of French civilization in two stages. It also discusses the position of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages towards this approach. The forthcoming findings of the study may be used to improve teaching/learning processes in teaching foreign languages in Jordan.

Keywords: Intercultural approach, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Civilization, Teaching French as a foreign language, Universality

Introduction

Researchers have always discussed the need for an efficient approach to teaching culture in languages. Risager cites four approaches to Foreign Language Teaching: the foreign-culture approach, the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach and the transcultural approach.¹ (Risager, 1998: p 243) The intercultural approach is the dominant one today. This paper focuses on the application of the intercultural approach to teaching French as a foreign language in Jordan.

Jordan is an Arab country where Arabic is the mother language, English is the second and French is the first foreign language. French is taught in private schools, some of the public schools and in some universities. The department of French language was established at the University of Jordan in 1998. During my experience as a professor of French civilization at the University of Jordan, I noticed through my research that students always judge the other culture according to their own values. This

encouraged me to apply the intercultural approach in my teaching. In this research, I will study the results of the application of the intercultural approach to see whether this approach can change the student's way of thinking of other cultures or not. The forthcoming findings can be used to improve the teaching of French civilization in schools as well as in universities where this language is taught. To do so, I have distributed a specially designed questionnaire to the students in the civilization course at two points of time: the first in the beginning of the course (pre-test) and the other at the end of the course (post-test). The questionnaire contained questions regarding the themes that were discussed in class; the number of students was 60.

In this paper, I will present the position of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages towards the intercultural approach. Then I will discuss the findings of the research and compare the imperial results that were conducted before and after the course.

The Search for Universality in Classical Culture

Denounced by Durkheim in the early twentieth century, he noted that the French people often show a clean collective shady love to excess, they are willingly close to foreign ideas and foreigners themselves. On the other hand, Clanet thinks that this enclosure has an origin in classical culture. The Literature of the XVII century concentrates on impersonal general types. What the authors depict are not specific individuals from a certain social and ethnic class or of a certain education, but rather have aspects of man in general, through the eternal human race. Anything that particularizes these characters, anything that can make individuals specific is omitted.² (E Durkheim, 1983: p 312)

A cultural anthropology that focuses on a "relativistic " interpretation of cultures as opposed to a social anthropology in search of the universal will tend to focus on the role of social and historical determinism. In criticizing the Universalist perspectives of classical culture, Durkheim introduced the idea of cultural relativism. However, there was no mention of what happens when different cultures come into contact. This failure was highlighted by E Leach: "*One of the weaknesses of Durkheim's model is particularly evident. The societies were treated as naturally occurring models, sufficient to themselves, with closed borders. But in real life when we use the word society, it implies that an individual can move from one society to another.*"³ (Leach, quoted by Mauvie M. 1984, p.75)

Maurice Mauviel highlights the first French cultural anthropology that focuses on cultural differences and is devoid of any racial prejudice. The precursors of cultural anthropology opting for cultural pluralism and intercultural communication have energized reflection on intercultural

relations. We can say that "*the current period could be where pluralism and cultural relativism are part of the institutional psychological relational and social reality*"⁴ (Clanet 1990: p 573). In our research, we are interested in situations of intercultural training and specifically the confrontation of the learner of FFL to two cultural codes: its own culture and the French culture.

The Common European Framework of Reference

The Common European Framework of Reference is a COE project that brings together cross-national institutions to achieve harmonization in Learning, Teaching Assessment (CEF) that could lead to a common view to European Citizenship⁵ (Glenn Fulcher 1999: p 254). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching Assessment (CEF) has a huge impact on the teaching and learning of languages around the world. It "*provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc.*"⁶ (The common European Framework of references: p1).

*"In order to facilitate both teaching and learning, we need a way to specify what our learners are able to do at certain levels. As teachers, we also need to know how these levels can guide our teaching and the way we select course books and resources. In short, we need a common language by which we can describe language learning, teaching, and assessment. In most countries there is general agreement that language learning can be organized into three levels: basic/beginner, intermediate, and advanced, the council of Europe developed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to establish international standards for learning, teaching, and assessment for all modern European languages. "*⁷ (Teacher's guide for the CEF, p4)

There have been many debates and discussions of frameworks and their limitations in the context of political mandates that promote harmonization of the kind being experienced within Europe, rather than guidelines for professional practice⁸ (Glenn Fulcher, 1999). However, this does not mean that the CEF may not play a useful role in teaching and learning languages.

The CEF fixes the following components for the realization of communicative actions:

- Communicative language competences
- Linguistic competences
- Sociolinguistic competences
- Pragmatic competences

In the CEF, the general competences include the following:

Declarative Knowledge

1) Knowledge of the world; it is the factual knowledge concerning the country or countries in which the language is spoken, such as its geographical, environmental, demographic, economic and political features.

2) Classes of entities (concrete/abstract, animate/inanimate, etc.) and their properties and relations.

Sociocultural Knowledge

This refers to the Knowledge of the society and culture of the community or communities in which a language is spoken. It includes, among other things:

1. Everyday living
2. Living conditions.
3. Interpersonal relations
4. Values, beliefs and attitudes
5. Body language
6. Social conventions
7. Ritual behavior

Intercultural Awareness

This includes the knowledge and understanding of the similarities and differences between the world of origin and the world of the target community. It is, of course, important to note that intercultural awareness includes an awareness of regional and social diversity in both worlds. *“In addition to objective knowledge, intercultural awareness covers an awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes”*⁹. (The common European Framework in its political and educational context, p 103). The achievement of learners to the intercultural awareness is a cognitive act. It is important that students learn to discern / discriminate similarities / convergences and differences / divergences between foreign culture and native culture and know how to use it for a better communication / interaction.¹⁰(Former les apprenants de FLE à l’interculturel)

Methods and Sample

I have practiced the intercultural approach in my teaching of French civilization in the department of French at the University of Jordan. Jordan is an Arab-ophone country and French is considered as a foreign language.

The Department started teaching French in 1987. Beginners and non-beginners were accepted in the program. Those who knew the language came from private schools and the beginners came from public schools. French is taught in most of the private and in few public schools in the country. In my

class, I try to build the intercultural skills of my students as described in the Common European Framework of Reference. These include:

- The ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- Cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- The capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- The ability to overcome stereotyped relationships

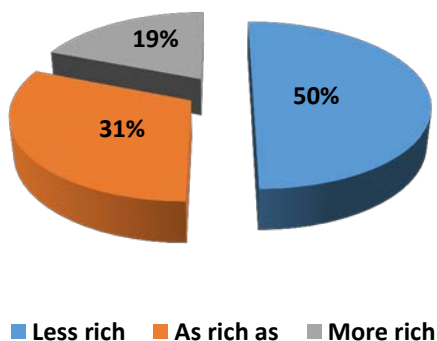
Our population consists of all social classes. To measure the efficiency of the intercultural approach that I practice in my classes, I have distributed a specially designed questionnaire to the students at two points of time: first, in the beginning of the course of civilization and then at the end of the course as a first stage of the research. The questionnaire contained questions regarding French civilization, French political system and women's rights in France. I have chosen topics that were discussed in class. In the second stage of the research, I distributed the questionnaire to the students of advanced civilization course with a total number of 60 students, but with two additional questions. The first question concerns the French law regarding the rights of women in marriage and the second is about the different modes of life for couples (matrimonial life) in France. The reason why I continued the research in its second stage is to cover all the important topics that are studied in the two courses of civilization.

Discussion of the Findings

In the first stage of this research, the answers showed a change of the students' opinion before and after the course.

Figures 1 & 2 illustrate the answers before and after the course:

Figure 4: Do you think that Arab culture is richer, less rich or as rich as French culture?
(Before the course: Arab culture is...)

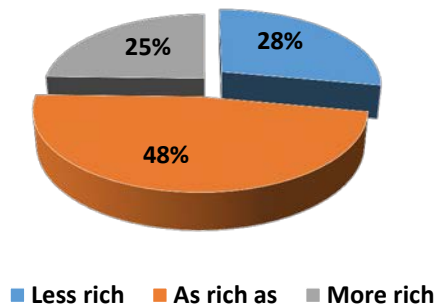


The answers show that most students are ethnocentric; they consider themselves superior to others.

In our class and by applying the intercultural approach, we tried to enable our students to understand French culture by noting the differences between French and Arab culture in relation to their social, historical and political contexts.

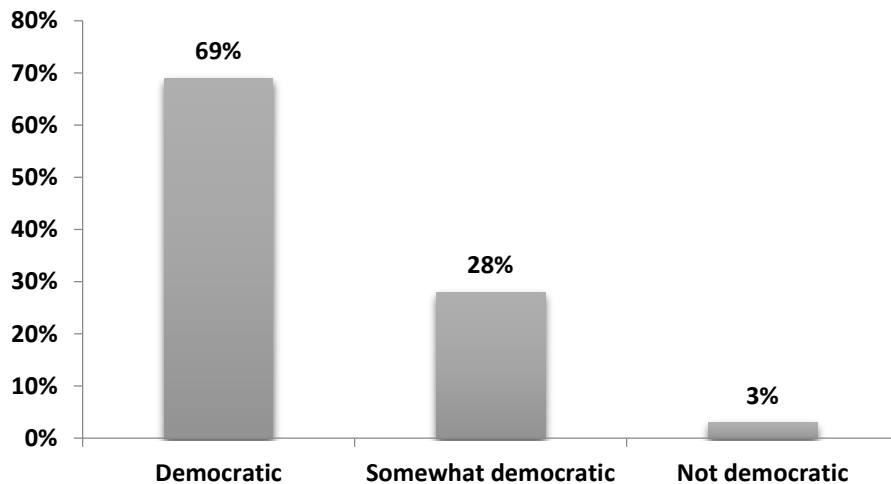
At the end of the semester, we asked the same question and the answers were as follows:

Figure 5: Do you think that Arab culture is richer, less rich or as rich as French culture?
(After the course: Arab culture is...)



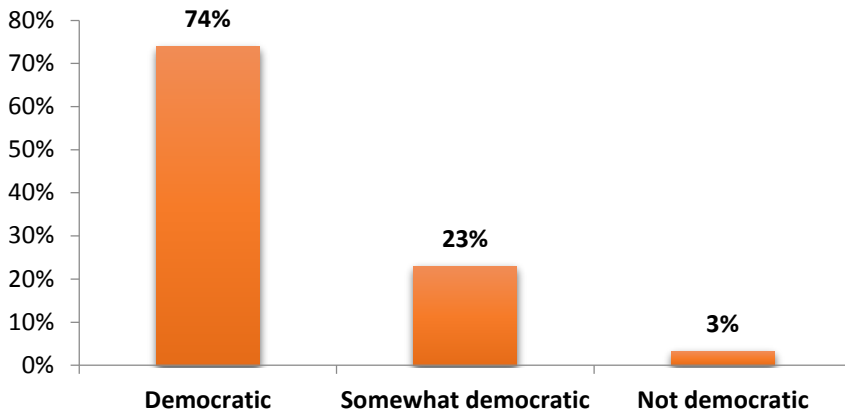
We noticed that the percentage of students who think that French culture is as rich as Arab culture has increased to 48%. The data reveal that there is a slight but important change in the students' perceptions. (Figure 3)

Figure 6: Do you think that France is a democratic country: (Before the course)



The answers showed that a majority (69%) think that France is a democratic country, 28% think that it is somewhat democratic and 4% think that it is not democratic. (Figure 4)

Figure 7: Do you think that France is a democratic country: (After the course)

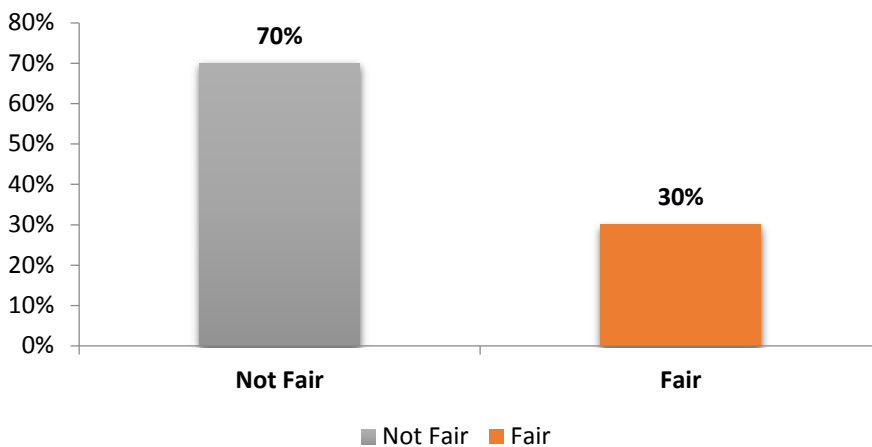


In the classes where we talked about the political French system, we discussed several issues such as: Who rules? Who legislates? (French elections and political parties). We compared the political systems in the two countries and we discussed how voting in France is based on the affiliation of candidates to the parties. On the other hand, in Jordan, people vote rarely for political affiliation, but rather on an individual or tribal basis.

This might have affected the answers of the students, and have contributed in the percentage of those who believe that France is a democratic country.³²

In the second stage of research, and during the course of advanced civilization, two questions were addressed to the students, the first one concerning French law regarding the rights of women in marriage:

Figure 8: Do you think that the French law is fair towards women regarding matrimonial issues? (Before the Course)



³² The results of the first stage of the study were published in *FDM* n 361.

The answers to this question showed that 70% of students think that French law does not give full rights to women. This comes from the perception that most Jordanians have towards women’s rights, i.e., that Jordanian law is very fair towards women since it is based on religious doctrine. (Figure 5)

In class, we discussed the matrimonial regimes in France. A matrimonial regime is a set of legal rules that spouses adopt to govern their financial relations during and after their marriage. (Notaires de France)

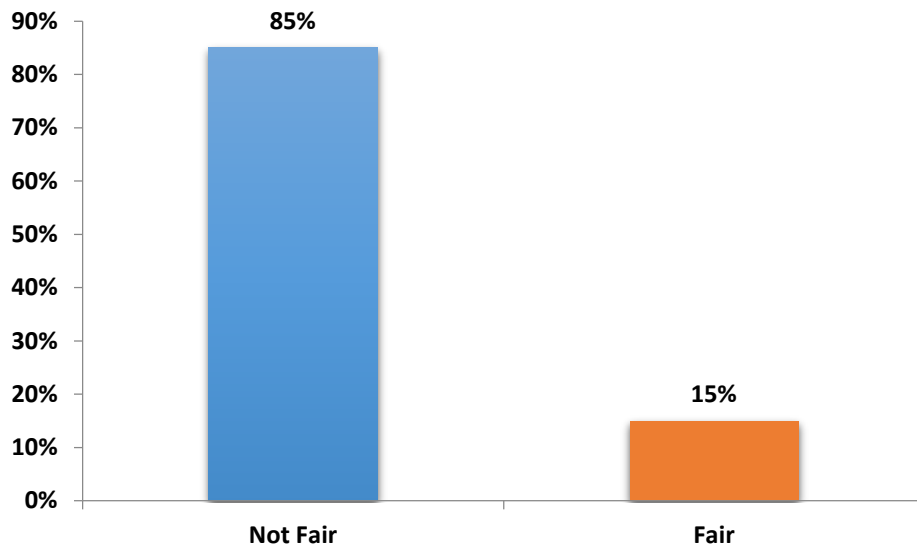
The matrimonial regimes are :

- Regime of universal community of assets
- Regime of separation of property
- Dividing property acquired after marriage

We also discussed the different types of divorce in France.

After the class, I asked the same question and the answers showed that 85% of the students think that French law is fair regarding the rights of women in marriage.(Figure 6)

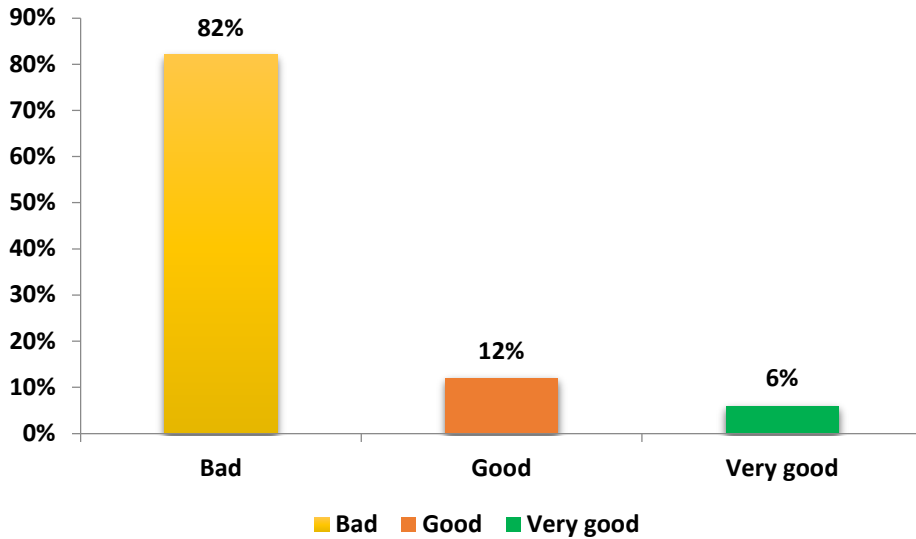
Figure 9: The French law is:



After being introduced to the French law that gives women many rights, the majority of students realised that French women enjoy more rights than Jordanian women, especially in personal status law (marriage, divorce, inheritance).

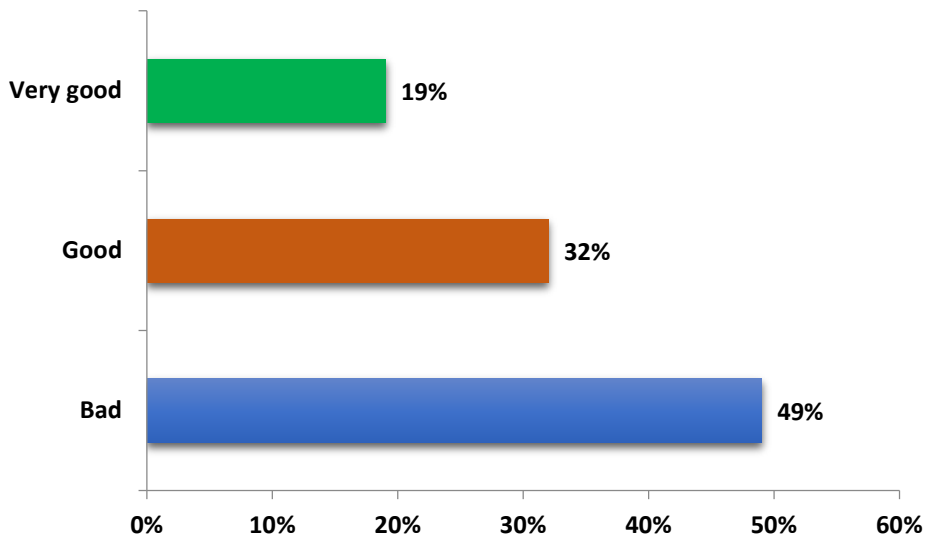
Before the course, we asked the students **what they think of the different modes of couple’s living styles such as couples living together with a marriage contract or without a marriage contract or with a civil contract in France.** (Figure 7)

Figure 10: What do you think of the different couple's living styles in France: (Before the course)



82% answered that it is bad, 12% said it is good and 6% gave the answer very good. The reason our students think negatively of the matrimonial life in France is because the percentage of marriage in France is low compared to Jordan, where the majority get married for social reasons. Jordanian society does not accept any relationship if it does not end with marriage. We asked the same question after the class and the answers were: 49% think that it is bad, 32% good and 19% very good. (Figure 8)

Figure 11: What do you think of the different couple's living styles in France: (After the course)



In the class we talked about the situation in France and we discussed the reasons behind the low percentage of marriage and the high percentage of divorce in France. After that, we talked about the situation in Jordan, and we also discussed the reasons behind the high percentage of marriage and the low percentage of divorce. We mentioned the social and religious aspects that prevent people from living together without marriage and from divorcing each other.

Nevertheless, we talked about new waves of marriages that are not accepted by the majority of Jordanians but are practiced in some Arab countries, such as the tattoo marriage, the week-end marriage, the passage marriage where a couple signs a paper that says I marry myself to you. All of these marriages do not give any kind of rights to women. Students reconsidered their viewpoint about matrimonial life in Jordan and the discussion allowed them to become more objective about their own culture.

Conclusion

As designated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (5.1.1.3), intercultural awareness is part of the general skills that the learner of a foreign language must acquire.

Applying the intercultural approach in the courses of French civilization helped students develop and adopt an objective opinion towards it and their own civilization. It also gave them the chance to reconsider their own culture and to put it in relation to their own cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system. The consistent application of this approach will help us educate students to accept the other, and appreciate cultural differences.

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