


Teachers' Perceptions of English Culture in Secondary School EFL Classes in Adrar Les perceptions de la culture anglaise chez les enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère au secondaire à Adrar

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the perceptions of some EFL teachers on the integration of culture related activities in the secondary schools in the wilaya of Adrar. Two instruments of data collection (questionnaire and interviews) were used to achieve the aim of the study and 20 EFL teachers participated in it. The findings of the research reveal that the participants are aware of the interrelationship that exists between culture and language though their current classroom activities do not depict their perceptions; the teachers believe that their students are highly motivated when incorporating culture-based activities. However, due to time restraints, overloaded curriculum and scarcity of didactic tools, they underuse such activities; some teachers are reluctant to teach the cultural aspects of English and state that the official course books' contents do not represent the foreign culture appropriately.

Keywords : teachers, perceptions, culture, EFL classes, communicative competence

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer les perceptions de certains enseignants d'ALE sur l'intégration des activités liées à la culture anglaise dans les écoles secondaires de la wilaya d'Adrar. Deux instruments de collecte de données (questionnaire et entretiens) ont été utilisés pour atteindre l'objectif de l'étude et 20 enseignants d'ALE y ont participé. Les résultats de la recherche révèlent que les participants sont conscients de l'interrelation qui existe entre la culture et la langue, même si leurs activités actuelles en classe ne reflètent pas leurs perceptions ; les enseignants estiment que leurs élèves sont très motivés lorsqu'ils intègrent des activités culturelles. Cependant, en raison de contraintes de temps, d'un programme surchargé et du manque d'outils didactiques, ils sous-utilisent ces activités; Certains enseignants sont réticents à enseigner les aspects culturels de l'anglais et affirment que le contenu des manuels scolaires officiels ne représente pas de manière appropriée la culture étrangère.

Mots- clés : enseignants, perception, culture, classes ALE, compétence communicative

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Introduction

To integrate culture in English language teaching or not has long been a controversial issue among educators and practitioners. Over more than 20 years ago, a considerable amount of literature was published on culture and second language teaching (Kramsch 1993, 1998, Valdes 2001, Language and Paige 2003, Peterson 2004, Brown 2007). In his article "*Culture - the fifth language skill*", Tomalin (2008) argued that the teaching of culture alongside with the linguistic features of English become an inevitable matter due to two major reasons: the international role of the English language and globalisation. In the Algerian context, this issue has been officially highlighted in the syllabus. Thus, the incorporation of the cultural aspect of English language into the FL classes has been favoured. For instance, among the overall objectives targeted in teaching English in the secondary school are

«stimuler la curiosité de l'apprenant et contribuer à son ouverture d'esprit en l'exposant à divers contextes de civilisation et de culture véhiculés par la langue anglaise; de considérer l'anglais comme un outil réel de communication en prônant l'utilisation de la langue en cotexte signifiant» (Programme National, 6 : 2005).

However, a small number of teachers consider the cultural aspect of English language in their teaching. The main objectives of this research are investigating some secondary school teachers' attitudes towards culture and English language teaching; finding out whether they favour the integration of culture-based activities in their teaching or just design lessons that are based on linguistic competence objectives only. Additionally, we will attempt to reveal the teachers' awareness of the importance of culture in teaching and learning English, and to find out the frequency of teachers' use of culture-based activities. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1- Do teachers favour the integration of culture-based activities in EFL classes?
- 2- Are teachers aware of the importance of culture integration in EFL classes?
- 3- How often are culture-based activities integrated in EFL classes at secondary schools in Adrar?
- 4- What conclusions can be drawn from the study?

This paper is written according to the IMRAD format.

1. Language and Culture: Exploring the Scope of their Interrelationship

1.1. Definition of Language

Nowadays language is not viewed as merely a set of rules and norms which identify how words should be connected together to get well formed sentences, but it goes beyond this and is defined as the best means of communication used to express feelings, needs, attitudes ... etc among the members of a given community while interacting with one another. Thereby, language can be seen as a social practice. Language is defined as "a vehicle for the expression or exchanging of and transmission of experience and knowledge. It is based on cognitive processes; subject to societal factors. Then, knowing the grammar and vocabulary of a language is not enough for learners to use it effectively as its use highly depends on the context and situation of use.

"Constructing a speech event means not only having a choice of grammatical and lexical features, but also deciding which to choose from, depending on one's assessment of the whole situation of communication, and on the expectations raised in the speaker and the listener by that situation (Kramsch, 1993, p. 35)"

Indeed, that situation's assessment, speaker's and listener's expectations are partly shaped by the culture embedded in the spoken language.

1.2. Definition of Culture and the Interrelation between Language and Culture

Culture has long been a concern of anthropologists, Sapir and Worlf were among the pioneers who studied the interrelationship between language and culture. They came with the 'Sapir Worlf Hypothesis' or 'Linguistic Determinism' which entails that the world view (way of thinking) is determined by a language's structure; i.e. people perceive the world differently because of the different languages they speak. Matsumoto (2000) defined culture as:

"A dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviour shared by a group but harboured differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable with the potential to change across time (Douglas, 2007, p. 24)"

As for culture in English Language Teaching and Learning, it is referred to as:

The set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group: the sum of a nation or group's most highly thought of works of literature, art, music, etc. A difference is sometimes made between "High" culture of literature and the arts, and small "c" culture of attitudes, values, beliefs, and everyday lifestyles. Culture and language combine to form what is sometimes called "Discourses", i.e. ways of talking, thinking, and behaving that reflect one's social identity. (Richard, 2010, p. 160)

From this definition, we can rank culture into two main categories: The high culture or what is called big-c culture and the small-c culture. On the one hand and according to Chlopek (2008), the big-c culture is easy to study since it comprises broad elements of the fine arts such as literature, music, dance, paintings, sculpture, theatre, and film. On the other hand, the small-c culture constitutes a wide range of elements which are tightly interrelated such as "*attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, customs, celebrations, rituals, politeness conventions, patterns of interaction and discourse organisation, the use of time in communication, and the use of physical space and body language.*" (chloped, 2020, p. 11) The small-c culture includes two types of aspects: invisible cultural aspects and visible ones. Whereas the former includes people's opinions, preferences, and tastes, the latter represent aspects like body language, hobbies, food, clothing style etc, .

Indeed, it is claimed that unlike the visible cultural aspects that are easy to study, the invisible ones are implicitly found in any language because they are internalised in the human psyche right from the childhood. They are hidden and one cannot notice them unless the culture they represent is contrasted with another different one. "It is mainly these non-tangible cultural aspects that have an enormous influence on people's way of thinking [alongside their] linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour" (Chlopek, 2008, p. 11). For instance, whenever one is in contact with an alien culture, he/she might well find himself/herself in misunderstanding communicative situations because of the tacit cultural knowledge he/ she lacks, and cannot understand what particular linguistic and paralinguistic behaviours may convey.

More than this, due to such knowledge lack, one may even find himself/ herself in embarrassments and conflicts with others. Knowing a language does not imply knowing its linguistic knowledge only but its extra-linguistic knowledge too. Thereby, the pedagogy of learning a second or a foreign language requires both types of knowledge so as to guarantee an effective teaching and learning i.e. in learning a language, it is primordial, for teachers, to stress

the fact that the linguistic forms of a language alone do not convey meaning but it is its cultural context which creates meaning. It is very important for them to focus on the impact that the cultural aspects have in any communicative situation. Thereby, Culture and language are two facets of a single coin, we cannot teach language without culture and we cannot teach culture without language. The cultural context of language should not be ignored, it is all the time present in most of the language lessons not just as a fifth skill which may be taught separately but as an integral part of the other productive and receptive skills as well. It is argued that:

“Culture in language learning is not an expandable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from the day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations for their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1)”

Van Ek (1986) extended Swain and Canale’s communicative competence by adding two other components which are the socio-cultural competence and the social competence.

2. Aims of Teaching Culture

A considerable number of scholars suggested relatively the same aims of integrating culture in ELT right from the 1970s, (Seelye 1974, Lafayette 1978, Byram & Buttje 1991, Tomalin & Stempleski 1993, Krasner 1999). Tomalin (2008), for instance, argued that due to two main reasons: the international role of the English language and globalisation, teaching culture in ELT becomes inevitable. i.e., English is the Lingua Franca and is used as a common means of communication between people globally and the fact that the world becomes a small village, and the mobility of people worldwide becomes easier than it used to be many decades ago. He, too, highlighted the saliency of integrating culture in ELT as a fifth skill, and suggested that its teaching is primordial.

Indeed, integrating culture into English classrooms opens new horizons for learners. It makes them aware of other foreign cultures and their peoples’ specifications. It helps them understand their native culture more by contrasting it with other target ones. It makes them more tolerant with foreign people and prepares them for effective participation in real life communication with foreigners. Additionally, it minimises their ‘culture shock’ mainly, those who intend to travel to pursue their studies or look for business opportunities abroad.

3. Methodology of the Study

This section describes the methodologies used to collect data (the questionnaire and interviews) and gives detailed information about the participants who participated in the research.

3.1. Participants

For selecting the schools and the participants, a convenience sampling is applied. 20 secondary English language teachers from 10 secondary schools in the wilaya of Adrar are selected randomly.

3.2. Data Collection

This study is positioned in a mixed methods approach in which the qualitative and the quantitative methods are combined together. “*The strengths of one method can be utilized to overcome the weaknesses of another method used in the study*” (Dornyei, 2007, p. 45), both methods complement each other in a way that, as he stated, words can add meaning to numbers and numbers can add meaning to words.

3.2.1. Questionnaire

The questions in the questionnaire (taken and modified from Messerehi, 2014), its aim is to elicit the teachers' perceptions of culture integration in EFL classes; it is composed of both open-ended and close-ended questions. It consists of two main parts: the first part is about the demographic information of the informants such as gender and professional experience, the second part is composed of 8 questions. 30 questionnaires were administered to teachers and only 20 were filled and turned back.

3.2.2. Interviews

To explore the attitudes of the teachers about the matter under investigation further, 5 teachers have been interviewed. The interviews are based on open-ended questions which give the respondents the opportunity to express their opinions in "a free response in their own terms, to explain and qualify their responses." (Cohen Louis, 2005, p. 248) The interviews have been analysed qualitatively and new themes of discussion have emerged. The interviews have not been recorded but the researcher has taken notes only.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results Related to Demographic Data

As can be seen from table (1) below, more than half 60% of the participants are females and 40% are males. As far as their working experience is concerned, around 35% of the teachers have from one to five years of experience, 25% of them have from six to ten years of experience, 20% of the others have eleven to fifteen years of experience, and the remaining 20% have over fifteen years of experience. Concerning pre-service or in-service training, despite the fact that 45% of the participants said that they received either pre-service or in-service training, the core of such training was linguistic, pedagogical based and no official culture-based training was mentioned.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	8	40%
	Female	12	60%
Teachers' professional experience in years	1-5	7	35%
	6-10	5	25%
	11-15	4	20%
	Over 15	4	20%
Pre-service or in-service training	- Yes	9	45%
	- No	11	55%

Table 01. Demographic data of the teachers

1.2. Analysis of the Questionnaire

This section presents the results of the questionnaire. It aims to answer the questions of this study.

1. What do you think should be the overall objective of teaching English at secondary school?

From the data in figure 01, it is apparent that the majority of the participants 80% have shared the same opinion about the overall objective of teaching English language at secondary

school. An objective that enables the students to communicate using English in different real life situations. This finding aligns with Messerehi’s results which showed that the “*teachers see developing the learners’ communicative competence as the overall aim of instruction*” (Messerhi, 2014, p. 173). 15% of the teachers believe that English language teaching aims at enabling students to interact effectively and appropriately with members of its culture. Only one teacher 5% thinks that the objective of English language teaching is the development of students’ accuracy i.e. using correct English structures.

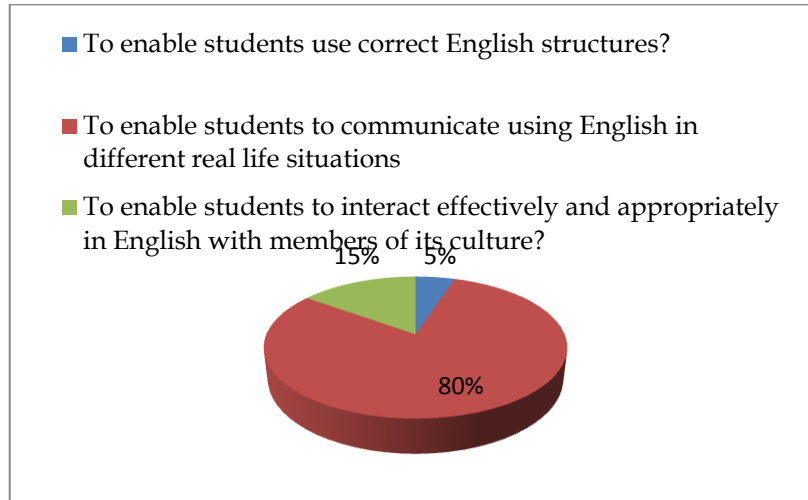


Figure 01. Overall objective of teaching English at secondary school

2. How do you rate the importance of integrating culture-based activities in EFL classrooms?

Concerning this question, more than half 55% of the teachers rate the culture-based activities in EFL classes as important; 40% consider such type of activities as very important and the remaining 5% rate them as being not important. (See figure02)

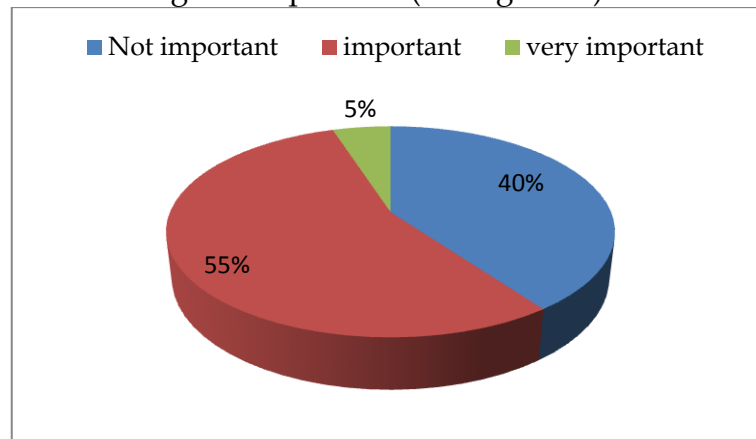


Figure02. Teachers’ rating of the integration of culture-based activities in EFL classes

3. How do you rate the importance of developing students’ communicative competence?

The data gathered reveal that 85% of the informants rate the importance of developing students’ communicative competence as being very important. 15% of them rate it as important;

such result implies that the teachers are highly aware of one of the targeted aims in ELT and which is elaborating students' communicative competence. (See figure 03)

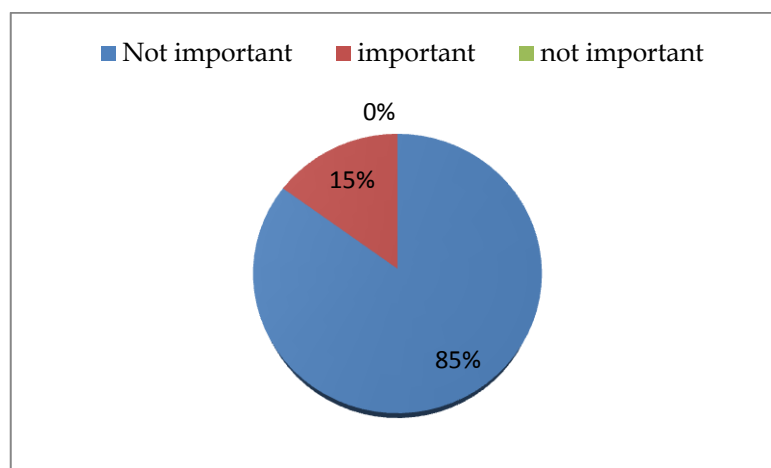


Figure03. Teachers' rating of developing students' communicative competence

4. To what extent are your students motivated when incorporating some background knowledge of the English culture?

On the one hand, more than half 60% of the participants think that the incorporation of some background knowledge of the English culture in their lessons has a positive impact on the students' motivation. On the other hand, 40% of them believe that their students cannot be motivated due to the integration of the English cultural aspects. This finding is consistent with Ait Aissa (2015) and Talbi (2011). The former, for instance, concluded that the teachers he surveyed "considered that their learners held positive attitudes towards the English cultures and the learning about the English speaking countries" (AitAissa, 2016, pp. 424-425)(See figure 04)

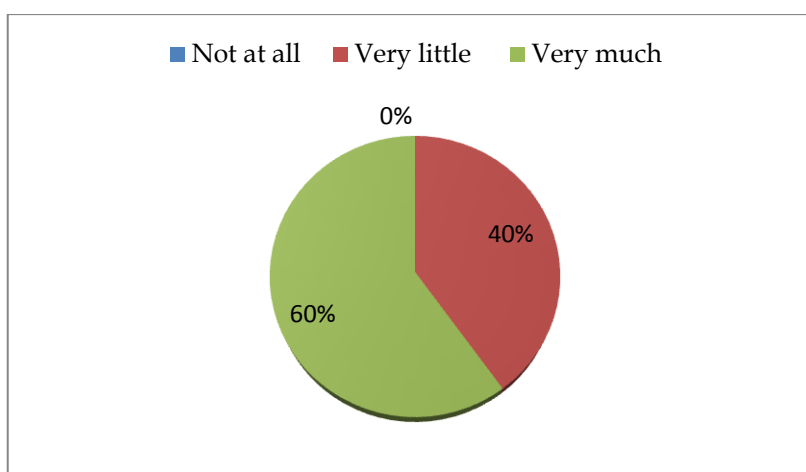


Figure 04. Students' motivation and culture-based activities

5. To what extent do you consider your current classroom activities as offering opportunities for students to use English in its cultural context?

Surprisingly, despite the fact that the majority of teachers 85% rate the development of the students communicative competence as being very important and regard the integration of culture-based activities as primordial in ELT (See details in question 02 above); only 60% of them believe that their students can be highly motivated whenever English cultural aspects are tackled in their teaching. More than three-fourths 85% of them state that their teaching offers very little opportunity for their learners to use English in its cultural context. 10% and 15% of the informants said that their teaching does not offer any opportunity for their students to use English in real life situations at all and offers them much space to speak English in context respectively. (See figure05)

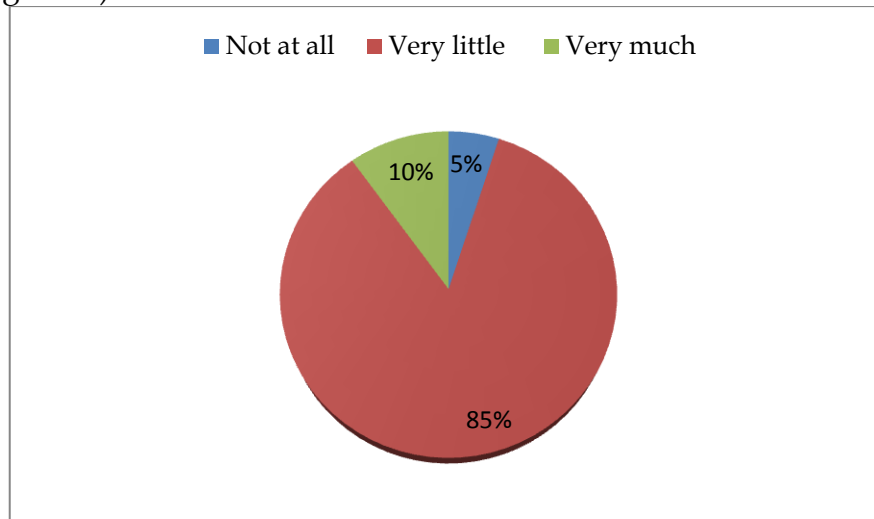


Figure05. The extent to which classroom activities offer opportunities for students to use English in its cultural context

6. To what extent do you think that the course books help you to teach culture based activities?

Concerning this question, almost all the teachers 95% agree on the very little possibilities that the course books provide regarding culture based activities. Only one teacher, 5%, believes that the course books help him very much in the matter of tackling cultural points in his teaching. (See figure06) This result, again, aligns with Talbi (2011) who analysed the Algerian course book *New Prospect* (designed for the third year level) cultural contents and found out that very little attention is paid to the inclusion of cultural elements in this textbook. She, further, highlighted that the book's content emphasised grammar, vocabulary, writing and pronunciation without devoting more space to cultural aspects such as food, body language, customs and life style of the English speaking countries. The mentioned cultural aspects reckoned with in this textbook are those represented in big-c culture such as unit one which theme turns around the ancient civilisations of the world such as the Egyptian and the Greek ones. Additionally, the focus of unit four is food, advertisement and consumerism in Great Britain and the United States of America.

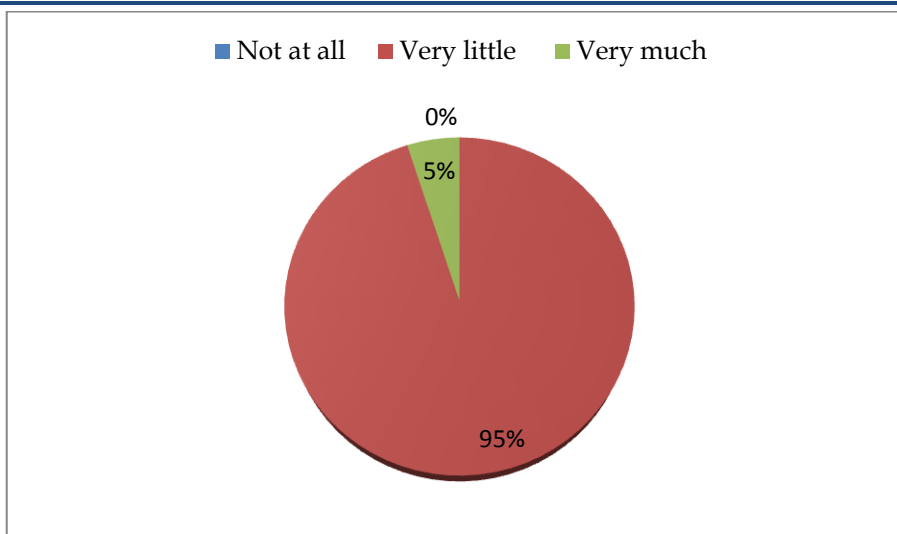


Figure06. The extent to which the course books' contents provide culture-based activities

As far as the open-ended questions are concerned, when asked to define culture, almost all the teachers conceive it as the big-c elements of traditions, history, way of life, beliefs, literature and have ignored or have not mentioned any of its small-c aspect though the latter should be given priority if the foreign culture is favoured in ELT. For instance, one teacher defines culture as *"the shared characteristics and knowledge in a particular group of people such as religion, social habits, music and arts."* Another one provides us with the following definition: *"culture represents customs, traditions, lifestyle and attitudes of any community."* When asked to define communicative competence, all of them refer to it as the ability of a person to communicate effectively in a given language without mentioning the elements which may make that communication effective.

4.3. Analysis of the interviews' questions

Concerning the interviews, the interviewed teachers' working experience ranges from 5 to 28 years. The overall conclusions that are drawn from the interviews are that:

- though the teachers are highly aware of the salient role culture has in ELT, they avoid it or limit its frame in their teaching due to some reasons, such as:

- The overloaded curriculum, teachers are all the time required to provide the administration with the programmes' achievement rates, the thing that makes them focus more on the linguistic (grammar, vocabulary, phonetics...) contents at the expense of any cultural based ones.

- Scarcity of materials, even if teachers want to break the routine and provide the learners with motivating culture-based activities via films, videos, songs etc..., they do not find the necessary means such as data shows, lap tops and speakers.

- Lacks of training, the teachers are sceptical of how to introduce the cultural aspects, and what aspects to tackle (big-c or small-c aspects). All the teachers mentioned that the training they held was based only on pedagogical objectives such as how to manage classrooms, how to plan lessons and how to design exams.

- Some students are conservative and do not accept the foreign culture easily. Therefore, their teachers are reluctant on how to introduce it.

- The teachers, too, stated that the official textbooks' contents do not really depict appropriate cultural aspects and no clarifications have been provided on how to teach them.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the current study, we have attempted to reveal some teachers' perceptions on the integration of culture related activities in their teaching. Though it is based on a small sample of participants, the findings show that the teachers are highly aware of the important roles that culture has in ELT classes, such as the positive impact it has on students' motivation, alongside the linguistic points. They knew well that the overall objective of English language teaching is to enable the students to use English in real life situations. Their teaching did not really reflect their perceptions concerning culture since their classroom activities under-portrayed the cultural aspect of the English language. The teachers are not trained on how to integrate culture in their teaching and even if they want to do personal efforts, lack of didactic tools, time restraints and the overloaded curriculum prevent them from doing so. Finally, it is important to point out that one cannot take some of the participants' perceptions at face value and the following recommendations are offered:

- Though the textbooks' contents do not really stress the cultural aspects of English, teachers are recommended to invest some elements that may help, such as the pictures, poems, songs and the proverbs found in the textbooks.
- To try to integrate very simple activities such as quizzes and role-plays.
- To use authentic materials and make the best use of personal technological devices such as smart phones, tablets and lap tops.
- To raise learners' awareness of the worldwide role the English language has and therefore, to attract them to discover and accept its culture.

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Appendix 1
Questionnaire

Dear colleagues,

This questionnaire aims at investigating teachers' perceptions of integrating culture-based activities in the EFL classes at the secondary level in Adrar district. I would be very grateful if you could cooperate with us and answer the following questions. Your responses will be strictly confidential and anonymously used in my paper.

Please, choose the answer you find appropriate, or make full answers whenever necessary.

Part One: Demographic information of teachers

1. Gender

Male

Female

2. How long have you been teaching English?

.....

3. Have you received any pre-service or in-service training about culture teaching alongside linguistic training? - Yes - No

Part Two

1. What do you think should be the overall objective of teaching English at secondary schools?

- To enable students to use correct English structures.
- To enable students to communicate in different real life situations.
- To enable students to interact appropriately in English with members of its culture.

2. How do you rate the importance of integrating culture-based activities in EFL classrooms?

- Very important
- Important
- Not important

3. How do you rate the importance of developing students' communicative competence?

- Very important
- Important
- Not important

4. To what extent are your students motivated when incorporating some background knowledge of the English culture?

- Not at all
- Very little
- Very much

5. To what extent do you consider your current classroom activities as offering opportunities for students to use English in its cultural context?

- Not at all
- Very little
- Very much

6. To what extent do you think that the course books help you to teach culture-based activities?

- Not at all
- Very little
- Very much

7. How would you define culture?

.....
.....
.....

8. How would you define communicative competence?

.....
.....
.....

Thank you for your cooperation

**Appendix 2
Interview Questions**

Q1. Do you think that the teaching of English cultural aspects is important? Could you please justify your answer?

Q2. Do you think that the teaching of culture-based activities an easy task? Why or why not?

Q3. We have noticed from the data gathered from the questionnaires that the majority of teachers do not deal with the foreign culture in their teaching. What do you think is the reason or are the reasons of that?

Q4. How do you think is the foreign culture portrayed in the official course books?

Q5. What do you think are the drawbacks that are teachers facing in their teaching

Thank you for your cooperation

Author's biographies

Sadia MEZIANI has been a permanent high school teacher since 2007. She holds a Ph.D. in Didactics. She worked as a part-time teacher at Ahmed Draia University of Adrar from 2015 to 2018. She participated in many national and international conferences at different Algerian universities. Her areas of interest include English Language Teaching and Learning, Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, Culture and Language and Research Methodology.

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