

# Language Teachers, Cultural Content and Intercultural Competence

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to investigate the teacher's perception of the objectives of language teaching and the cultural contents in the curricula. It also seeks to find whether developing intercultural competence among learners is among the teacher's perceived language teaching objectives and the extent to which their classroom practices reflect that objective. The findings have shown that most of the informants were linguistically oriented and that their primary objective of teaching English is to enable students to acquire communicative competence. They perceive teaching culture in terms of knowledge transfer and they favor teacher-centred mode of teaching to student-centred. Interestingly, most of the informants expressed their willingness to interculturalize their teaching although their classroom practices do not reflect intercultural competence teaching.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, cultural content, language teachers, teaching practices, culture teaching activities.

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## 1. SETTING BACKGROUND

Sudan is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country. It is in the heart of Africa and a member of the Arab and the Islamic world. The country's distinctive location, coupled with its political, social and religious ties with the neighboring countries has effects on the shape and the structure of the Sudanese nation across their successive national governments. Despite being an African country, the northern part of the country maintains strong and unshakable ties with the Arab world while the southern one remains tightly bound to its African origin. The different attitudes and tendencies each part has towards or against one side or the other, together with the protracted war in the south have spilt the country psychologically into northerners and southerners. The effects of the psychological division had continued for decades until it was finally culminated into a physical division when the country split into two states: the Sudan (northern) and the state of the Southern Sudan. The effects of the psychological division (Northerner vs. Southerners) and its various manifestations have continued in the northern part even after the separation and have taken on new forms (Arab vs. non-Arab, or Janjaweed vs. Toro Bora) and have trespassed the local regional boundaries to the different ethnic groups' relationships and ties within single states or localities. The numerous political parties have also contributed to fraying social fabric by siding with one of the conflicting parties or the other. The educational institutions have not been spared. Schools and universities have become the battle grounds for the conflicting parties.

In short, the country's ethnic, religious, linguistic and ecological diversities have contributed to shaking its integrity. To reverse the negative effect of the multiplicity and diversity that characterizes the Sudanese nation and empowering its positive side so that it can be a unifying and strengthening factor, an intervention has to be made at both political and educational levels. At political level, laws and regulations that protect and guarantee the rights of every member of the community, irrespective of his or her cultural background have to be made and put into effect. At educational level, peace education has to be part and parcel of every educational discipline.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Sudanese society was once perceived as being pleasant and peaceful. But, during the past three decades, there has been a significant shift in the way that society as a whole and educational institutions—particularly schools and universities—act as micro-societies with regard to issues of peace and stability. A confluence of internal and international forces appears to have a general inclination toward violence and instability. As a result, the idyllic, long-standing image of a cordial society starts to disappear. Universities and schools are no longer the serene settings dedicated for obtaining information, education, and guidance. There, the culture of violence has quickly spread and is now pervasive wherever students hold divergent opinions. Then, it won't come as a surprise to learn that the culture of violence is pervasive in society at large when university students—the elites, the leaders of tomorrow—adopt the logic of power to resolve their problems rather than the power of logic. All of the aforementioned points show that steps have been taken to ensure that future generations receive high-quality education that will give them the knowledge and skills they need to be aware of the negative effects of a violent and extremist culture and to acquire and develop the processes and abilities needed to promote understanding, tolerance, and goodwill in their communities and around the world. It is the duty of educators in general, and specifically language teachers and syllabus producers, to increase youth awareness of the negative effects of violence and to inspire youth to choose a culture of peace through the resources they use to improve learners' linguistic competency.

### 1.2. Research Questions

Considering all the above, the present study investigates the following:

1. How do teachers of English language perceive their goals of teaching the language ?
2. Is developing intercultural competence among learners one of the teacher's objectives of teaching English?
3. How do they perceive cultural contents in the language curriculum?
4. To what extent do the teachers' actual classroom practices reflect intercultural teaching features?

### 1.3 Research Assumptions

1. Language teaching is one of the effective tools for spreading and promoting the targeted culture among learners who in turn help in promoting it in their societies at large
2. The cultural contents in the curricula can be used for developing intercultural competence, an essential component for promoting the culture of peace.
3. Due to lack of training in peace education, secondary school teachers are not expected to consider developing intercultural competence as one of their objectives of teaching English language in the classroom
4. Being aware of cultural components in the curriculum of English language and adopting the objective of interculturalizing their teaching practices in the classroom, language teachers can help in developing intercultural skills and promoting the culture of peace.

### 1.4. The Scope of the Study

Culture of peace is a very complicated and contested issue. The study investigated the teachers perception of the objectives of teaching English language as a foreign languages as reflected in their real time teaching practices .The emphasis was on how teachers perceive their role in the classroom, how they prioritized the objectives of English language as a foreign language, how they divided their teaching time between culture and language ,what cultural topics they dealt with in the classroom and how ?, the extent to which they were familiar with the cultures associated with the English language, and the attitudes they hold towards the intercultural teaching practices.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Redefining the objectives of language learning

The goals of learning a foreign language are frequently redefined in language education literature. Language learning goals have changed from acquiring communicative competence in a foreign language to acquiring other competencies, such as interacting with a foreign culture, self-awareness and self-evaluation from the outside, seeing the world through the eyes of the other, coping with uncertainty, acting as cultural mediators, assessing others' points of view, consciously using culture

learning skills, and reading the cultural contents, according to Sercu et al. (2005, p. 2). Some educators and linguists even advocate widening the objectives' focus to include social issues. Van Dijk (1993, p. 131) proposed paying more direct attention to the presuppositions and consequences of speech analyses that are sociopolitical and cultural. "Critical" discourse analysis, according to Fairclough (1993, p. 135), "aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes; to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships affects the analysis of such practices and events.

Critical discourse analysis examines how power, domination, hegemony, and inequality are enacted, concealed, legitimized, and reproduced through discursive processes (see van Dijk, 1993, p 132).

As one of the most significant characteristics and objectives of critical discourse analysis, Wodak and Matouschek (1993, p. 227) list the discovery of inequality, power relations, injustices, etc. by examining language behavior in natural speech situations of social relevance for social and political practice. Findings of the research include suggestions for practical implementation in educational materials, training seminars for teachers, doctors, and attorneys, among other things, in addition to their suggested success in the academic sector.

Halliday (1990) urged applied linguists to use their knowledge of social and ecological issues to draw attention to them. highlighting how language shapes the ideology supporting the social institutions and behaviors that lead to these issues. To replace "war discourse with peace discourse," he challenged linguists to demonstrate "how the grammar promotes the ideology of growth and growthism."

According to Sonia (2009), social relationships and political realities are at the center of the educational process and that, learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces where it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers. This is essence of the assumption on which the Sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives are based.

## **2.2 Language and social problems.**

Language, according to other linguists (e.g., Wertsch, 1987; Connor-Linton et al., 1987; Urban, 1988; Mehan and Wills, 1988), is a factor that needs to be looked into in order to gain insight into important social issues. Their study demonstrates the function of language in social interaction. It draws attention to social practices that obstruct the establishment of peace, such as social prejudice and the use of physical and psychological violence to resolve disputes amongst people. The study demonstrates how language functions through discourse to spread ideas that justify the use of war as a means of settling international disputes as well as unequal and discriminatory societal structures and practices. The Seville Declaration against Violence is supported and shown by these linguistic findings (1986). The claim mocks notions that assert human aggression is inbuilt. One of the results mentions how social structures and acquired abilities, including language, play a part in grooming people to commit violence (1986). If language may socialize people toward violence, it can also socialize people toward peace. These arguments bring up an additional aspect of the social value of research projects motivated by critical linguistics. The findings of the study and the conceptual framework that underlies it can serve as a foundation for improving peace education and language education (see Wenden, 2005, p.218). The sensitive role that language plays in the formation and solidification of beliefs needs to be made clear to all language users. People must be aware that by participating in social discourse, they could unintentionally support the continuation of these ideals and, in some circumstances, social activities they find objectionable. Wenden, (2005, p.216) (2005, p.216). In addition to fostering students' personal growth, educational institutions have traditionally been tasked with preparing them to comprehend and even solve the challenges of their society (see Smith, 1950; Taba, 1962). Today's educational goal is qualitatively different, though, as it must equip students to participate as citizens and professionals in a world that is increasingly interdependent on one another. Students of all ages must be given the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes they will need to participate actively in the formation and processing of what Boulding (1988) has referred to as the emerging civic culture. This term refers to the interactions that establish and uphold the common good, which in turn creates the framework within which each person can pursue his or her private life with his or her own interests. The above-discussed urge by linguists and educators to reexamine the role of languages in social issues is a global trend. The researcher considers it necessary to redefine language's function in Sudan in order to address societal issues.

### 2.3 Previous Studies on Intercultural Language Teaching

A large volume of research on intercultural education has been conducted in FLT in which only small space has been spared for teachers' perceptions of intercultural language teaching. A summary of a few chosen studies, the majority of which are in English, is provided below.

Byram and Risager (1999) used questionnaires to study 212 English and 653 Danish teachers, and some of the subjects were also interviewed. Their research revealed a lack of profound and intricate understanding of the idea of "culture," which is crucial to understanding for language education in the future. The emphasis was on "national" culture, with little thought given to other cultural facets not covered in textbooks. The informants frequently become upset while attempting to take the cultural dimension seriously because of the constraints placed on linguistic proficiency to provide quantifiable outcomes. A rising understanding of the importance of the cultural dimension and a definite willingness to teach both language and culture were identified among the informants with regard to the teachers' willingness to interculturalize education.

A comparable poll was carried out by Sercu (2001) among 135 English, French, and German teachers in Flanders, in the Flemish region of Belgium. According to her findings, the majority of respondents see FLT culture as a classic paradigm without any mention of advancing ICC. She claims that foreign language teachers' opinions of professionalism tend to align more with those of teachers working for CC than with those working for ICC.

Two investigations on English teachers' attitudes toward the intercultural component were done by Lazar (2000, 2001). In the first, 393 teachers participated in a quantitative survey that was conducted simultaneously in Estonia, Poland, Iceland, and Hungary. The latter, a qualitative investigation conducted in Hungary, might be considered as a continuation of the former. The majority of teachers in Hungary rarely or not at all incorporate "culture" into their lessons. According to Lazar, intercultural communication will need to be linked to enhanced knowledge of dealing with cross-cultural understanding as a part of teacher education.

In the US, Diaz-Greenberg and Nevin (2003) have illuminated how critical pedagogy and multicultural education can assist in overcoming the difficulties that culture-teaching foreign language teachers encounter. They wanted to gain insight into student teachers' reflections in order to understand some of the aspects that affect cultural teaching. To find out how well three graduate students who were in their final term of the teacher preparation program understood the differences between the "Five Cs method" and the "Four Fs approach," interviews with them were conducted. The "Four Fs approach" (Food, Fashion, Festivals, and Folklore) trivializes the complexity of culture, while the "Five Cs approach" (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) integrates all five topics in a systematic manner at all levels of language instruction, claim Diaz-Greenberg and Nevin (2003, 215). The researchers ask two questions in order to elicit the students' conscious and unconscious beliefs about the nature of their understanding: the first concerns how the concept of culture is addressed in the textbook the subjects are using during their student teaching, and the second concerns how the concept of culture in the textbook compares to or differs from what they have learned in the teacher education program or how concepts of culture were taught in the language classrooms. The findings showed that even when their textbooks might present the "Four Fs strategy," language student teachers can integrate the teaching of culture utilizing the "Five Cs approach." The fact that the instructor, not the textbook, should direct the teaching of culture was well-known to all three responders. One of the issues raised in the interviews related to the textbooks' focus on Spain, despite the fact that the majority of American foreign language students are more familiar with Mexico and Central America than Spain. The researchers come to the conclusion that the cultural background of the teacher frequently influences (unconsciously) how the other culture's cultural norms are perceived and then presented.

It was discovered in Spain [Castro et al., 2004] that secondary school EFL teachers support the new culture-and-language teaching objectives in the curricula to a greater or lesser level. They based their study on studies on educational innovation, which has demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of innovation play a significant role in the innovation's success. The results reveal that although teachers are willing to embrace the new goals, they run into issues when forced to choose between putting culture and language instruction first. The study is a component of a quantitative comparison study that includes questionnaire responses from instructors in seven nations (Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Spain and Sweden). Data regarding instructors' perceptions of the cultural component of FLT, their perceptions of their students' knowledge of and attitudes toward TL countries, their own teaching, and the importance of study abroad and exchange programs are the main topics of this study. Sercu et al., 2005 revealed the overall findings. The authors of this ambitious report find that there are two distinct FL instructor types that can be identified: the positively inclined teacher who is eager

to teach IC and the negatively inclined teacher who has a much more reserved and even dismissive attitude. Regarding the prerequisites that must be satisfied before one can begin teaching IC, as well as the best technique to teach IC, both groups frequently have their own unique, but clearly grouped, perspectives. In terms of actual instruction, none of the seven countries seem to stray from the classic information-transfer methodology, yet, intriguingly, different subjects seem to be given precedence in each one.

Research on teachers' perceptions of culture in EFL instruction was conducted by Larsen (2005). Her research tries to increase understanding of how EFL teachers view culture. Interviews with 13 teachers were carefully chosen. The cognitive orientation, the action orientation, and the emotive orientation were used to present the findings. The teaching strategies used to give pupils background knowledge about English-speaking nations are informative and mediating in nature in the first orientation, when "culture" is conceptualized as factual knowledge. The training in the second orientation focuses on preparing students for future interactions with members of the target language and culture by viewing "culture" as social and sociolinguistic abilities. The third approach views the concept of "culture" in EFL education as involving a bi-directional perspective. Pupils are encouraged to examine their own familiar culture from a different angle and learn to respect and empathize with those who are different from them in general, not simply those who are from English-speaking nations. The third strategy is not well represented by her informants. In her research, Larsen discovered that many teachers felt they lacked the necessary knowledge and abilities to effectively teach about culture. Some also criticize the teaching methods and materials used to train language teachers, claiming that they do not give adequate consideration to this aspect of FLT.

A Chinese researcher, Jiang (2010) has studied the cultural aspects of college English instruction in China. His research tries to determine how much textbooks support intercultural learning. He employed four techniques: interviews, content analysis, questionnaires, and content-based analysis. Jian utilized the questionnaires to learn how teachers and students felt about culture. 200 students from eight universities and five provinces, as well as 41 Chinese English professors, answered the questionnaires for this study. Among the teachers, 23 were spoken with. His research has revealed that both Chinese teachers and students concur that it is crucial to teach culture when teaching and learning English. Unfortunately, it appeared that the teachers were relying on textbooks for direction and instruction because they did not fully understand how to teach culture. Jian concludes that there is a big gap between what the government wants and what is really done, as well as between what English learners need and how English is taught in China.

Gubair (2022) studied the cultural contents of the Sudan National Curricula of English and the extent to which such contents contribute to developing intercultural competence. His findings showed it the curricula rich in a variety of cultural theme potential of promoting intercultural competence, but their distribution across the curriculum may questions their contribution on developing intercultural competence, specially if other factors such as teachers' roles are to be considered.

## 2.4 The Current Study

The review of the previous studies presented above, shows that almost all of the studies in the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching were on either teachers' perception of culture in language learning or teachers' cognition. Like most of the above reviewed studies, the current study investigated the teacher's perception of his objective of teaching a foreign language and his conceptualizing of culture teaching. The cultural dimension can be understood as consisting of three components: the conceptions about what culture in FLT is, the beliefs about the cultural objectives of FLT and the teaching practices aimed at reaching the desired objectives. The conceptions about culture and beliefs about the cultural objectives are seen as interacting and together influencing classroom practices. The interest of the study can consequently be summarized as: teachers' perception of the objectives of foreign language learning, his perception of cultural contents and his beliefs about culture teaching. These three points constitute the core of the current study, and the researcher hopes to find out about patterns within teachers' conceptions of culture and intercultural teaching. Culture is taught with the aim of promoting intercultural understanding, tolerance and empathy; qualities which are the bases upon which the culture of peace can be promoted. "Promoting a culture of peace" is used in the current research refer to developing intercultural competence. Intercultural competence teaching requires the appropriate curricula, teachers' willingness to interculturalize their teaching practices and empowering learners, adopting the appropriate methods of teaching which consider learners' needs, tendencies and individual differences. All this features the need for a more focused, in-depth debate concerning the content and methodology of intercultural foreign language teaching in the future.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, descriptive methodology was adopted and a questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was administered to 74 secondary school teachers. They were randomly selected from a pool of 875 teachers in Khartoum state. The questionnaire consisted of six sections each section was concerned with yielding specific data. The sections include: the teachers' perceptions of the Objectives of English Language, their perceptions of culture teaching in the classroom, their familiarity with English culture, their Contact with English cultures while at home, their culture teaching practices in classroom, and their opinions on intercultural competence teaching. The data were collected and statistical package was used for processing the data. The means and percentage were calculated.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1. The Profile of the Participants of the Study

The informants of the study were secondary school English language teachers. A group of 74 teachers were randomly selected from a pool of 875 teachers of English at secondary schools in Khartoum state (both males and females). About (73%) of the informants were bachelor degree holders, (24.3%) were master degree holders and (2.7%) holders of post-graduate diplomas. Moreover, most of the informants have long teaching experiences. About (66.2%) of the teachers have more than ten years of experience in teaching English language at secondary, (21.6%) have between five to ten years of experience, and (12.2%) have between zero to five years. Furthermore, the majority of the informants teach at more than one level. Also, almost all of the informants were native speakers of Arabic language. As for the professional training, (51.4%) of the participant teachers did not receive professional training of any kind.

#### 4.2. Language Teaching Objectives

The informants perceive their goal of teaching English to students in the classroom as to provide linguistic knowledge. 70.3% of the participants said they aim to fulfill the curricular requirements, 64.9% to provide the knowledge their pupils need in English language proficiency and 78.4% to pass on the knowledge regarding their subjects to their pupils. Of the three possible foreign language teaching objectives: culture, language and skills learning, the informants ranked "culture" the least of importance. When asked to categorize the possible culture teaching objectives: knowledge, attitudes and skills, the data showed that the informants perceive culture education in terms of passing knowledge to their students. This is a clear evidence of the teacher's linguistic orientation.

#### 4.3. Culture Teaching Time Amount

Regarding distributing their time between teaching language and teaching culture, the majority of the teachers designated 80% of their time for teaching language and only 20% for teaching culture. This finding goes in line with the teachers' linguistic orientations.

#### 4.4. Familiarity with the Culture Associated with English Language

Nearly all participants say that they are familiar with aspects of 'literature, education and professional life. These findings suggest that the teachers feel well-equipped for culture teaching in the traditional sense of passing on knowledge about the target culture. Their knowledge is stronger in the cultural domains normally addressed in English language textbooks. This finding may indicate the cultural contents of textbooks as a determining factor in the teachers' familiarity of culture, though other sources of the foreign culture, such as the media, need to be considered. When asked how frequently they get in contact with the culture(s) associated with English language while at home, the participants appear to have frequent contacts with the English culture(s) at home through media and frequent contacts with people originating from the English culture (teaching assistants or foreign visitors) inside the participants' schools or institutes.

#### 4.5. Culture and Classroom Teaching Activities

Apart from finding out about how often the participants include culture learning activities in their teaching, the researcher also wanted to know which culture teaching approaches the informants prefer: a teacher-centred approach or a pupil-centred one. Furthermore, the researcher sought to find out whether participants practise only teaching activities that target cognitive objectives, or they also use activities that address the attitudinal and skills dimensions of intercultural competence and whether they identify intercultural competence teaching with passing on information, or they also aim to enhance their learners' ability to explore cultures independently, compare cultures or explain aspects of their own culture. The findings showed that the informants most frequently employ teacher-centred activities over pupil-centred activities. These findings confirm the expectations based on the teachers' beliefs on the objectives of foreign language education and culture teaching presented earlier.

#### 4.6. Opinions on Intercultural Competence Teaching

Teachers' opinions on intercultural competence teaching were explored by asking them to score a number of opinion statements on a 'agree, disagree' scale. The findings show that the participants seem not to differ significantly in their opinions and convictions on the different facets of intercultural competence teaching. About 40% of the participants think that language and culture can be integrated in teaching, 16% disagree and 43.5% undecided. Most of the participants (80%) are convinced of the effect of the intercultural education on the students' attitudes. Half of the informants (50%) are undecided on acquiring intercultural skills at school and half of them also 50% believe in the necessity of acquiring a high level of language proficiency before teaching culture. Furthermore, over 60% of the informants agree that teaching culture is as important as language teaching, and that only when there is a limit of time, a priority is given to teaching of language. Finally, more than 70 % of the teachers agree that more cultural awareness makes pupils more tolerant towards other cultures and peoples; that foreign language teaching should help pupils deepen their understanding of both foreign cultures and their own culture; and that a realistic image of the foreign culture should be provided. Regarding 'willingness to teach intercultural, most of the participants are in favor of teaching intercultural competence. The findings suggest that the participants perceive an approach that focuses on enlarging pupils' knowledge regarding the foreign culture.

### 5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The current research findings have shown the teachers' linguistic tendency. The teachers perceive their job in the classroom as to enable their students acquire communicative competence. Their reordering of the objectives of teaching English has shown that they prioritize linguistic knowledge acquisition as well as general skills acquisition to cultural competence acquisition. Teachers appear to perceive culture teaching in terms of passing knowledge. Their distribution of time between language teaching and culture teaching emphasizes these findings. The majority of the teachers in the study spare 80% of their time for language teaching and 20% for culture teaching. This may be due to the fact that almost all of the participants appeared to be fairly familiar with the cultural aspects of the culture(s) associated with English language. The only aspect of the foreign culture that the teachers are unsurprisingly familiar with is literature as it is the cultural aspect that has the most presence in text books. The teachers' unfamiliarity with the foreign culture was also reflected in their real time teaching practices. Teachers appear to favor teacher-centred approach to pupil-centred approach. Adopting teacher-centred approaches to culture teaching, teachers seem to take little account of their pupils' abilities, needs and interests; while teachers' familiarity with the foreign culture, proved to be a factor affecting the extent to which they deal with different aspects of the foreign culture in their foreign language classroom.

The informants primarily used linguistic concepts to define the goals of foreign language instruction. They frequently view culture instruction as primarily imparting knowledge about the foreign cultures connected to the foreign language they teach. This can be as a result of their own personal experience learning a foreign language. The heart of teachers' beliefs that influence how they approach teaching the language and culture are communicative concepts of foreign language instruction. Even while teaching intercultural competency is seen as a significant innovation suggestion, it is also seen as unimportant in comparison to the generally acknowledged linguistic objectives of foreign language instruction. The fact that the majority of participants show a willingness to interculturalize foreign language teaching may be due to their shared belief that educators must educate students for life in an increasingly heterogeneous society where they will need to be multilingual and interculturally adept.

### 6. CONCLUSION

The current paper investigates the teachers' perception of the objectives of the foreign language, their perceptions of culture teaching and their opinions on the different cultural facets. The findings of the study have shown that most of the participants were linguistically oriented. They feel their primary objective of teaching English is to enable students to acquire communicative competence. They perceive teaching culture in terms of knowledge transfer. Although most of the informants expressed their willingness to interculturalize their teaching, their real time practice does not reflect intercultural competence teaching.

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