

## Anti-Essentialist Culture Conception for Better Intercultural Language Teaching in EFL Contexts

**Mohamed Toufik Ghaffour**

Laboratory Study of Gender, Languages and Sociolinguistic Diversity  
Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages  
Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University Mostaganem, Algeria  
Email: [ghaffourmoh@gmail.com](mailto:ghaffourmoh@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Culture is a crucial facet in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. (TEFL) Hence, we shall in this paper discuss the theories underpinning this concept and how we can utilize these epistemological and ontological understandings to promote the TEFL field and the higher education task. Henceforward, we have answered the following question: How to move from the essentialist view of culture to the non-essentialist view of culture, and why it is essential to do so in 21st century English as a Foreign Language context? To answer the proposed question, we have discussed the essentialist and non-essentialist dichotomy of the culture concept and how both frameworks affect TEFL and intercultural language teaching (ILT) differently. In this regard, we aim to help EFL policymakers, EFL teachers, and students alike shift their attention towards the merits of adopting a non-essentialist understanding of the culture concept in the ILT. First, this article covers the theories of culture to understand this concept from different anthropological perspectives. Second, we relied on Byram's Model (1997) critiques to demonstrate how a misunderstanding of culture as a concept can be damaging. Third, after critically discussing the relevant literature, we recommended an anti-culturalist perspective in the EFL context to improve the ILT experience. This article concludes with recommendations for EFL and ELT policymakers and EFL teachers and students alike. The proposals mainly focus on shifting the attention towards a non-culturalist approach towards culture.

**Keywords:** Culture theories, English language teaching, English as a foreign language, intercultural communicative competence, global citizenship education, Byram's Model

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## Introduction

In the current globalized world, English has become a lingua franca. As a response, it called for the internalization of higher education to cope with the dramatically changing global academic environment. The foreign language teaching field has witnessed a fair share of alterations. Indeed, nowadays, an essential aim of English language teaching in the EFL context is to train EFL learners to communicate effectively and appropriately in English. Hence, this dictates a need for innovative and adequate pedagogical approaches in the EFL classroom to remain on the same page with the complex necessities of today's world. To respond to such a need, researchers around the globe shifted their attention towards the integration of cultural and intercultural dimensions in foreign language education. It has become evident that being fluent in English is no longer the goal, but rather, how not to be a fluent fool (Bennett, 1997). In other words, how to use English appropriately according to context and purpose. (Byram, 1997) In that respect, Byram works in 1997 and 2008, as well as Kramsch (1995), Corbett (2003) and Deardorff (2006) works, and many others, expanded different theoretical frameworks for the integration of culture and intercultural language teaching in the FL education since the 1990s, to equip learners with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes "to interact effectively with people of cultures other than one's own." (Byram, 2000, 297)

In the same vein, a significant issue prevailing in cultural and intercultural studies, since post-modernism in the late 20th century, is defining the culture concept and how such conceptualization can affect the intercultural language teaching process. On this premise, this article will first lay down the theories of culture its related epistemological and ontological understandings. Second, we shall provide an example of how a misunderstanding of culture in intercultural language teaching can affect the entire process. Third, we will discuss what an EFL practitioner may consider following as an anthropological trend to conceptualize the concept of culture and ground their experimental teaching. Considering these critical discussions, we shall conclude the article by providing solutions and future recommendations. Therefore, in the present paper, we will address one central question: How to move from the essentialist view of culture to the non-essentialist view of culture, and why it is essential to do so in the 21st century EFL context?

## Theoretical background

### Theories of Culture

One of the difficulties we EFL practitioners encounter is defining concepts such as culture. (Geertz, 1973) The literature offers a variety of definitions of culture since there is no consensus definition of this concept. As Morillas (2001) has asserted,

the major stumbling block for success in culture teaching theory and practice and progress in this area of applied linguistics has been the very notion of culture. But this pervasive presence is precisely what makes the concept of culture nearly unmanageable. (p. 297)

Thus, we shall discuss the anthropological theories of culture and make our way through the interrelation between cultural concepts and how it dictates our intercultural language teaching.

Rohner (1984) has put forward the split views in the conception of culture, wherein anthropologists fall into two main categories: behavioural and ideational theorists. Apart from the few agreements between these two distinctive theories, such as the agreement that culture is the primary and central concept of their science and that it is a learned phenomenon (Rohner, 1984), countless contentions points exist. Nonetheless, we will focus mainly on the behavioural theory of culture concept as it serves the best needs of the present paper.

Two groups emerged in the school of behavioural anthropologists, mainly driven apart by their perceptions of culture's ontological reality. To begin with, cultural realists argue that culture has a concrete reality: it exists *sui generis*. In contrast, cultural nominalism designates those who hold that culture holds no ontological reality; it is mainly an abstraction by man; it exists as a set of abstractions made by the investigator and drawn from observable uniformities in behaviour sequences within a population. (Rohner, 1984)

Aside from this debate *vis-à-vis* the substantive nature of culture, Keesing (1974) has put forward three different ways ideational anthropologists approached the concept of culture up to the 1970s. These include cognitive anthropology, structuralist anthropology, and symbolic anthropology.

Symbolic anthropology, also referred to as interpretive anthropology, was followed in the 1980s by the national-driven conceptualization of culture. The shift towards postmodernism in the social sciences allowed the critical research approaches to refute the national-driven conceptualization of culture in the mid-1990s as it was too vague, inaccurate, and inconsistent with Academia.

Thus, this essentially leads us to the "essentialist view of culture" and the "non-essentialist view of culture" dichotomy.

### ***Essentialists vs Non-Essentialists Overview***

Essentialists, also known as culturalists, and non-essentialists, referred to as non-culturalists, perceive cultural concepts differently. For essentialists, culture is deemed a homogeneous group that is bound, static, and holistic, wherein diversities between people, time, and space, are all neglected. Therefore, identity is permanent and fixed, reinforcing national stereotypes (Holliday, 2011; 2013) and cultural determinism based on behaviour. Albeit this determinist and national-driven conceptualization of culture was heavily criticized, scholars seem to still fall into this category unwillingly. According to Baumann (1996), despite scholars acknowledging diversities within nations, they are still bound to the fixed, determined cultural identity, contradictory and essentialist-like.

Non-essentialists, however, claimed that "cultural groups are always internally heterogeneous groups that embrace a range of diverse practices and norms that are often contested, change over time and are enacted by individuals in personalized ways". (Barrett et al., 2013, p. 13) This citation indicates the perceptions of non-culturalists that cultures are not homogeneous but rather heterogeneous, changing and dynamic. Barrett et al. (2013) also asserted,

All cultures are dynamic and constantly change over time due to political, economic, and historical events and developments resulting from interactions with and influences from other cultures. Cultures also change over time because of their members' internal contestation of their meanings, norms, values, and practices. (p. 15)

This quote seems keener to be used in cultural and intercultural studies. It acknowledges cultural diversity within a nation (Holiday, 2011) and rejects the notion that cultural identities are static, as argued by the essentialists. (Hall, 1996) Barrett et al. (2013) said that "all people belong simultaneously to and identify with many different cultures" (p. 14), which means cultural affiliations are dynamic and fluid as a response to people's changing perspectives over place and time.

### ***What are the all "abouts" of foreign language teaching?***

Before tackling the effects of the approach one takes to conceptualize culture and its impact on intercultural language teaching in the classroom, we first shall answer the following question: how can one define foreign language teaching and identify its aims in today's world? Kramersch (2009) answers in the goals of traditional language teaching have been found wanting in this new era of globalization. Its central tenets (monolingual native speakers, homogeneous national cultures, pure standard national languages, instrumental goals of education, functional criteria of success) have become problematic in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world. (p. 190)

We can grasp many understandings from this quote. First and foremost, it seems like English is now used by non-native speakers worldwide more than in native countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Moreover, this presents a question mark. We will come back to this soon. From this quote, we can also grasp that foreign language teaching is eventually about providing competent intercultural speakers that can communicate in this era of globalization and keep pace with the ongoing dramatic changes around the globe.

Additionally, Kramersch (1993) claimed that "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one". (p. 1) This quote is open to different interpretations as well. However, the most important question regarding this saying is, what culture are we addressing here? Is it the native speaker's culture or the target language's? Either one, how do we pin down this "culture" to integrate it in the classroom? As we discussed earlier, culture is quite a vague term. What are the facets we should emphasize and deemphasize? Additionally, Berret et al. (2013) asserted earlier that people belong to different cultures simultaneously. We should address all these concerns shortly.

### **Byram's essentialist stance and how it backfired**

To understand how the approach to conceptualizing culture affects intercultural language teaching, we shall take Byram's Model (1997) as an example. This Model is arguably one of the most used frameworks globally in ILT.

### ***Byram's Model***

Michael Byram has designed an intercultural communicative competence model in 1997, which is arguably the most well-known ICC model around the globe. As Dasli (2011) stated, "One often-cited approach on which intercultural communication, as a discourse of tolerance and flexibility, is grounded was offered by Byram in 1997" (p. 26). Byram's famous ICC model was initially proposed for foreign language education for secondary school students to acquire ICC. However, a few years later, scholars and researchers also adopted it in the higher education context to adequately prepare university students for the 21st-century world. In that regard, many universities in Algeria emphasize Byram's Model (1997) in their EFL curriculum to train EFL secondary school teachers in their noble task of cultivating competent foreign language speakers. Byram's Model of ICC is a harmonizing Model as it has introduced a competence that was absent in its previous counterparts. (Hymes 1972; Halliday 1975; Van Ek, 1986) Byram's Model is essentially composed of the three competencies: communicative competence, linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and finally, intercultural competence, which Byram (1997) introduced to move from the notion of the "native speaker" to the notion of the "intercultural speaker."

The explication of the five Savoirs in Byram's Model (1997) designates the qualities an intercultural speaker should possess. Additionally, it allows foreign language teachers to design their syllabus, plan their teaching, and assess the ICC development of their learners. The notion of ICC in the Model originates from the inseparable link between a set of qualities that allow students to function effectively in intercultural contact and maintain relationships with foreigners. These qualities range from tolerance and flexibility, as Dasli (2011) stated above, to relating and interpreting other cultures' conventions, as well as other skills, critical attitudes, and knowledge.

Intercultural competence comprises five distinctive savoirs, which Corbett (2003) declared as "the most fully worked-out specification of intercultural competence, which involves the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to mediate between cultures." These five savoirs include critical attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoir*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), critical cultural awareness, also known as political education (*savoir s'engager*)

### ***Critiques of Byram's Model***

Despite such a detailed account and significant impact on the FL and ELT field, criticism, rightfully, cease not to stop. Byram has followed the essentialist approach of culture conceptualization, which led to some critics. For instance, Dervin (2016) discussed the issues regarding the culture conceptualization in the savoirs (knowledge) in Byram's Model. This critique mainly emanated from Byram's association of the culture concept to the country concept in the description of this Savoir. As a result, this has ultimately led Byram (1997) into the national-driven conceptualization of culture, that very same one we critiqued and refuted earlier, and so did many other scholars. To illustrate, identifying individuals merely on their nationality is the determinism essentialist view that people have one fixed and permanent identity. This culturalist perspective can be damaging as individuals identify themselves according to different cultures, constantly changing, as discussed earlier.

Moreover, this certainly reinforces generalizations and stereotypes based on nationality. These perspectives damage the mission of global citizenship education; it defeats the entire purpose of the one « global village » wherein people are all equal. Nonetheless, one may also question the actual impact of artificial boundaries on the map, which supposedly separate people. Indeed, people of different nationalities are living all around the earth, and nationality in itself is a questionable identity affiliation in today's world. One may also raise the issue of the dominant and less dominant cultures within one nation, which the essentialist culture seems to dismiss.

Moreover, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living Together As Equals in Dignity" (2008) has called for the task of "living together amid growing cultural diversity while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms has become one of the major demands of our times and is set to remain relevant for many years to come." (p. 51) Despite Byram's Model (1997) development with the Council of Europe's project to construct the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the late 1990s, the original model framework does not abide by the later aims of the Council.

## Discussion

### *Adopting one of the Paradigms*

One of the main points we need to tackle in this article is the cultural conceptualization approach we recommend to EFL teachers and students and the reasons behind such preference. Byram's Model (1997) critique is exemplary that essentialism may lead to a determinist and static view of cultures, which we demonstrated before as a negative aspect of intercultural language teaching. Therefore, adopting such a perspective in one's teaching grounding may raise issues and concerns in today's society. That is to say, an essential part of developing intercultural competence requires learners and teachers to examine and challenge generalizations and stereotypes as research suggests that overcoming prejudice is a top priority for language learners. (Byram et al., 2002) To avoid bias and stereotypes, Byram and his colleagues (2002) suggested teachers tackle feelings and thoughts, as these stands are usually based on subjectivity rather than objectivity and rationale. However, if one decides to avoid the prejudice and stereotypes, as expected from teachers in today's world, which conceptualization of culture sounds more relevant and appropriate?

EFL teachers should consider a complex view of culture, wherein people are perceived to be diverse, and identities intersect all the time. Thus, the EFL students understand that ethnicity, culture, or nation does not determine one's behaviour or ideas, and vice-versa. This perspective avoids any prejudice, generalizations, or stereotyping of other people and cultures. Indeed, promoting intercultural speakers requires « a framework that allows for the expression of and recognition of cultural difference. These procedures should be based on human rights – equal dignity and equal rights. » (Byram et al., 2002)

We also recommend a non-national-driven conceptualization of culture. It does not contradict the inward aims of internalization of higher education and the main goals of global citizenship education. (Berrett et al., 2013) Training native English speakers like students is outdated; the current globalized world needs competent intercultural speakers that possess the required knowledge, skills and attitudes to live harmoniously with others in today's diverse world. This entails teaching students about global concerns such as racism, inequality, politics,

etc., which is crucial and mandatory. More importantly, teaching EFL students to look beyond country flags and skin shades is vital. People no longer necessarily affiliate solely with their nations but a range of other affiliations within the country. Anyhow, EFL students around the globe most certainly hold some responsibility for the current global issues, and they are expected to take part in solving them.

### ***How to Embrace Non-Essentialism?***

We shall now come back to the main research question that we raised earlier, "How do we approach culture concept from a non-essentialist view in the EFL context, and why is it important to do so in the 21st century EFL context?"

### ***Third Place and Non-Essentialism***

We have discussed above how globalization turned the tables. It seems like English is now used by non-native speakers worldwide more than native countries such as the US or UK, which may or may not detach it from the "English speaking countries" and turn it into a "public property". This is an issue as we need standards to make sense of the language and its related cultural contexts. Moreover, we also raised the issue of which culture we integrate and emphasize in the FL classroom since people are diverse within and out of nations.

We suggest that this is where non-essentialism culture conceptualization occurs and where the "Third place" by Kramersch (1993) can be handy. First, to make sense of the sociocultural contexts of the English language as a global lingua franca and detach it from the native speaking countries, culture as a concept is to be approached in a non-essentialist manner. Culture is dynamic and changing, and we should perceive English as a lingua franca this way in the foreign language classroom. We suggest relying on Kramersch's (1993) third intercultural language teaching and learning approach to achieve this. The third culture can be defined as an intercultural sphere where people from different cultural identities can bond and work together searching for a hybrid place. The third culture belongs neither to the learners' home culture nor the target language's culture. It is also noteworthy that cultural identity is not strictly limited to the home culture and the target language's culture, as this is an essentialist view of culture. Instead, as Berrett et al. (2013) argued, cultural identity can be compromised of multiple identities that an individual takes part in concomitantly. For instance, one can identify as a loving and caring husband at home, reserved and timid person at work, and perhaps risk-taker and adventurous in their friends' group.

### ***Teachers' Beliefs***

Since the third culture is an intercultural sphere characterized by diverse people, there are few prerequisites among the EFL learners and EFL teachers to utilize such an approach properly. First, there is a need for competent EFL teachers who are well-versed in intercultural studies and intercultural teaching. Several studies in the EFL context demonstrated EFL teachers' inability to identify the intercultural language teaching approach, how it is utilized, or how students can be assessed in ICC. (Bousslama & Benaissi, 2018; Mustapha 2014) We also need to raise EFL teachers' awareness of the anti-essentialist and essentialist views of culture as a concept -this article is our utmost endeavour to achieve that-. It is also essential to know that the concept of culture must be approached from a non-essentialist perspective in the third culture of Kramersch. (1993)

*Exploring One's Own Surroundings First*

Nonetheless, the EFL students should possess critical attitudes such as tolerance, respect, and curiosity for the other peoples and cultures to participate in the third culture sphere. Additionally, EFL students should be motivated to learn about all people and cultures and not stick mainly to English native speaking countries such as the US and UK. One way to encourage the students to learn more about other cultures is by instilling interest in exploring the local cultures first in their surroundings, including people from other ethnicities, people from different jobs, different social classes, or simply people with a different set of beliefs. Students feel more open and encouraged to enrol in discussions with people they share some ordinary bounds with, such as nationality and language, then shift their attention towards foreigners.

***Why are we recommending the Anti-Essentialist culture conception?***

In short, here are some reasons why we should adopt the non-essentialist approach to culture conception and how it can enhance our intercultural language teaching.

*Anti-Essentialism for better Intercultural Language Teaching*

First, if we perceive culture as dynamic and ever-changing, we will get rid of both; teaching "culture as a body of factual knowledge," which Bouslama & Benaissi (2018) tackled, and "teaching irrelevant and outdated cultural knowledge" which Mustapha (2014) argued. Non-essentialism entails that the culture is forever changing, and its people are diverse. Therefore, we cannot simply fill in our EFL students with a bulk of knowledge about a particular culture, as a) this knowledge will be irrelevant in a short period due to constant cultural change. And b) it would be generalized knowledge at the expense of the diversity within that culture. Therefore, we rely on promoting the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to guide our students towards autonomous foreign language learning.

Moreover, we have discussed the primary goal of teaching English as a foreign language and intercultural language teaching in today's world. In that respect, Byram and his colleagues (2002) argued that teachers are not mere professionals but are human beings, which means they have acquired a set of prejudices and stereotypes in the past, as any other human being. Additionally, teachers are most likely to be included and concerned in the classroom when cultural issues are debated. This is why the anti-essentialist view of culture enhances the quality of intercultural language teaching. Adopting this perspective, teachers become more cautious of their ideas influencing their teaching and how it affects the entire teaching process, including their students' development towards global citizens. Moreover, teachers become more aware of how they deal with and challenge their learners' prejudices in the classroom.

*Intercultural Communicative Competence Assessment*

A prevalent issue in the ELT field is the assessment of intercultural communicative competence. As Mustapha (2014) has argued, evaluating EFL learners in ICC can be more complex than teaching the foreign language culture.

Adopting a non-essentialist view of culture aids the EFL teachers to assess their students ICC more accurately and consistently. The old fashioned native speaker ideal is now replaced by the intercultural speaker ideal, which is a far more reasonable and attainable goal. That is to say, in the native speaker model perspective, the EFL teachers assess the student according to the rules and laws of the native speaker and the native speaking country, and it is unfair and illogical



to expect a foreigner to perform and know as much as a native speaker. Nonetheless, this native speaker model is now deemed to be old-fashioned and unattainable in the world of Academia. In a parallel perspective, adopting a non-essentialist view of culture entails that the focus of the ELT and EFL teachers is to achieve an attainable and reachable goal. The 21st century ELT should train competent intercultural speakers who can communicate effectively and appropriately in today's multicultural world. Additionally, this non-determinist and complex view of culture guarantee the EFL students a more profound and humane training. It leaves no room for generalizations and stereotyping based on ethnicities, cultures, or countries. This certainly avoids students committing prejudice, racial, or stereotyping of others, mistakes which occur quite often and are more often neglected in the assessment by the EFL teachers. (Mustapha, 2014)

### *Global Citizenship Education*

In response to the Council of Europe (2008) invitation towards "living together amid growing cultural diversity," (p. 51) non-essentialist approach towards culture and intercultural language teaching asserts a convenient training of EFL learners for international citizenship and a globalized world. In this regard, Zahabioun et al. (2013) argued that global citizenship means to have a global mind and the prerequisites to tackle the issues in the current world as one race, the human race, and move beyond the nation-state sense of identity. We argue that this can be done only by adopting the non-essentialist view of culture and perceiving others as individuals of the human race rather than individuals who belong to this or that nation.

Indeed, the current Covid pandemic has brought people of different nations together, as we were all harmed in one way or another, which raised people's empathy towards one another. The mission of Global Citizenship Education serves to solve such issues and is more significant, like social inequality or racial discrimination and democracy around the globe. In fact, what is required from students worldwide, including EFL students, is beyond perceiving other people from a non-essentialist view but to take part in challenging decisions for a better world. We can only train such students by particular teaching philosophies, such as perceiving culture from a non-determinist view, and perhaps, this is the least we can do.

### *Do we reject essentialism, then?*

One may ask, do we reject essentialism then? Do we stick with neo-essentialism? or do we essentially embrace non-essentialism? We would answer that it depends on our ability rather than our preferences. We will discuss this point at the end of the article.

The short answer is that we cannot. According to Baumann (1996), the long answer is, despite scholars acknowledging diversities within nations, they are still bound to the fixed, determined cultural identity, which is contradictory and essentialist-like. Holliday (2011) has documented this and labelled it as neo-essentialism. Albeit we recommend EFL teachers adopt a pure non-essentialist view of culture, we still acknowledge how difficult it is to completely avoid the essentialist view of culture in the intercultural language teaching process.

### **Recommendations**

Apart from the most vital recommendation in this critical discussion, adopting a non-culturalist understanding of culture concept in intercultural language teaching, we reckon few

recommendations for EFL policymakers in Algeria and worldwide, and EFL teachers too. Regarding the theories of culture and its impact on the outcomes of the ILT in the EFL classroom, we are faced with another issue, as the intercultural language teaching approach in itself should be appropriately introduced.

The policymakers should focus on proper training of the EFL teachers and grant them access to the necessary tools to do so. To begin with, teachers should get to know the importance of culture in the EFL classroom and the development of ICC of their learners. It is believed that the beliefs and philosophy of teachers determine their practices in the classroom. Therefore, the teachers should be encouraged to research and become experts in intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, Mustapha (2014) has tackled the issue of teaching culture as a bulk of outdated and irrelevant knowledge, which has to change. Teaching mere culture literature and ancient civilization does not meet the main goals of intercultural language teaching. The objective is not to fill in students with bulk knowledge about other cultures but to help them become intercultural speakers and acquire different attitudes, skills, and knowledge, which sets them for autonomous learning of foreign cultures and languages.

Moreover, EFL teachers' neglect of intercultural language teaching, as both a pedagogical practice and field of expertise, maybe due to the inherent negligence of intercultural competence within the curriculum. (Mustapha, 2014) Therefore, we insistently ask the concerned policymakers to include intercultural competence in higher education and assert its development, as it is due great significance in today's world.

Additionally, teachers should take the assessment of intercultural communicative competence more seriously. As Mustapha (2014) stated, we are unaware of EFL teachers' fundamental reasons to refrain from assessing ICC. Thus, a few things can be done, including providing teachers with more time in the curriculum to cover the cultural dimensions in their teaching session and enough time to assess the students' test and exam sheets to cover the ICC mistakes. The ICC mistakes include what scholars deem to be "negative qualities" of the intercultural speaker, ranging from prejudice, intolerance, stereotyping, culture-national driven generalizations, etc.

## Conclusion

This article has critically discussed the culture concept and its related theories and understandings. We reckon culture is a crucial facet of teaching English as a Foreign Language, and thereby, we discussed how different interpretations of this concept could lead to further teaching outcomes. Byram's Model critiques exemplify why we should avoid the essentialist view of culture and instead rely on the non-essentialist conceptualization in ILT. Despite the apparent flaws in the essentialist view of culture and EFL teachers awareness of that, avoiding determinism is somehow an impossible task, as argued by scholars. Thus, we proposed a logical pattern towards embracing the complex view of culture by the EFL teachers and why it is essential to do in the 21st century.

This paper is mainly dedicated to EFL policymakers and EFL teachers and students alike towards the merits of adopting an anti-essentialist conceptualization of culture in their teaching. In this regard, we also discussed the possibilities of matching the global citizenship education

needs. We recommend further research on the possibilities of incorporating a syllabus within the EFL context, following an anti-essentialist conceptualization of culture to study further the ideas we proposed here.

### About the Author:

**Mohamed Toufik GHAFfour** is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in didactics of foreign languages and cultures at Abdel Hamid ibn Badis University (Mostaganem, Algeria). The author's interest areas include didactics of foreign languages and cultures, and intercultural studies. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3966-3026>

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