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Teacher Perception of Cultural Difference in L2 materials: Is Filtering Culture the Right Approach?

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Abstract

With the emergence of the intercultural approach to L2 teaching, several studies investigated teachers' attitudes and beliefs concerning the cultural dimension of L2 teaching in different foreign language settings. This study explored teachers' perceptions of the relationship between teaching English and culture in Tunisia, an EFL setting where the culture of L2 teachers is assumed to be distant from the "English" culture. It also enquired into Tunisian teachers' approach to culturally different teaching materials. The study revealed that although most Tunisian teachers thought that English cannot be taught without culture, some of them approached cultural content with apprehension to the point that they expressed a readiness to filter and drop any aspect of the "English" culture that is incompatible with the local culture. In practice, the teachers in the study had varied understandings of intercultural communicative competence on the one hand and the socio-pragmatic and the socio-semantic dimensions of communicative competence on the other. In light of these results, it can be argued that teacher attitudes and beliefs concerning the cultural dimension of L2 teaching and their approach to culturally different content are a function of two factors: (1) distance between L2 culture and teacher culture defined in religious, moral and political terms and (2) teacher awareness of the intercultural approach to L2.

Keywords: EFL, Teacher Cognition, Culture, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Teacher Education

Introduction

Byram (2008) argued that Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) has an educational dimension that consists of developing a capacity for the acceptance of "otherness" in L2 learners. Since the advent of communicative language teaching with its focus on "skills" and "competences," this educational dimension of FLT has been forgotten (p. 145).

However, it has come back to the fore in FLT with the advent of the intercultural approach and the elaboration of the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 2014). In the intercultural approach, FLT is seen as a cultural encounter that broadens the mind through exposure to difference in cultural practices, perspectives, and products. Such exposure is believed to ultimately affect the way L2 learners see other cultures as well as their own.

In spite of the extensive literature on ICC and the intercultural approach, language curriculum designers and L2 teachers in many FL settings seem to be either unaware or unconvinced of the educational breadth of FLT (See Sercu, 2005, Byram, 2014, and Hermessi, 2017). As a result of this, pedagogical assumptions and practices in these settings are not in line with the prevalent theories of intercultural communicative competence. In fact, although educationalists in these settings accept FLT as an indispensable instrument for integrating global economy and having access to scientific and technological progress, they approach it from an instrumental, utilitarian perspective rather than an educational one. Accordingly, curriculum designers and L2 teachers treat FLT as a “necessary evil” with concomitant culturally “alienating” “side-effects” (See Hyde, 1994 and Cortizzi & Jin, 1999).

Many studies situated within teacher cognition research explored L2 teachers’ attitude towards the cultural dimension of FLT (Borg, 2011). Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990), for instance, surveyed decisions on the cultural content of a secondary school English course in Morocco and recommended that such content be based on “prevailing attitudes towards foreign culture among teachers of English” (p. 3). They contended also that language could be taught without considering the “English” culture, noting that neither countering stereotypes and prejudices, nor comparing Moroccan culture to other cultures was relevant to “the case of secondary education in Morocco” (Adaskou et al., 1990, p. 3). In a similar vein, Hyde (1994) explored the cognition of Moroccan teachers concerning teaching English and reported that they believed that the cultures behind the English language should be “contained” and their “side-effects” reduced.

Gray (2000) explored how 20 teachers of English (most of whom were British) handled culturally different content in global course books. He found that “[o]f the twelve teachers consulted, six said they dropped material they felt uncomfortable with, and one teacher left this question unanswered. The remaining five said that they adapted material, or would now do so” (Gray 2000, p. 277). Likewise, Hermessi (2016) used a quantitative design to study the cognition of 70 teachers on the place of culture in English education in Tunisia. He found that such cognition was governed by L2 teachers’ “professional” “co-culture” (the culture shared by L2 teachers worldwide regardless of their socio-cultural, ethnic or religious background) more than the distance between the Tunisian culture and the “English” culture. He found, also, that Tunisian teachers of English are still oriented towards the communicative approach to language teaching rather than the intercultural approach. Drawing on Gray’s (2000) article and Hermessi’s (2016) findings, this study enquired into Tunisian teachers’ perceptions of the relationship between English instruction and culture and examined the ways in which they deal with culturally different content in locally-produced English textbooks.

Background

This study is situated within two areas of research, namely intercultural communicative competence research and teacher cognition research. This section reviews literature on the way culture has been discussed in L2 teaching with a focus on the communicative approach and the intercultural approach to FLT. It also reviews literature on teacher cognition theory and research in general and teacher cognition regarding the place of culture in L2 education, in particular.

The first variable of the study is the cultural dimension of L2 teaching. Byram (2000, p. 9) contended that "... someone with some degree of intercultural competence is someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to society – and is able to mediate, that is, interpret, each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for others." The intercultural approach does not only recognize intercultural competence as an important component of language proficiency but also clearly distinguishes it from communicative competence.

Byram (1997, 2009) identified five components of intercultural communicative competence, which he labeled "savoirs." The first "savoir" is "savoir être" or "intercultural attitudes," and refers to readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and the ability to decenter and relativize one's own values, beliefs and behaviors to avoid stereotyping and stigmatization. The second savoir is "savoirs" or "knowledge" and refers to knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own culture and in the target language culture along with general processes of societal and individual interaction. The third "savoir" is "savoir comprendre," or "skills," and concerns the ability to put ideas, events and documents from two or more cultures side by side and relate, compare, and interpret them in a way that minimizes misunderstanding what people say, write, or do. The fourth "savoir" is "savoir apprendre/faire" or "skills of discovery and interaction" and pertains to the ability to optimally use the second and third components of ICC, that is, knowledge and skills, in everyday life cultural encounters. The last component of Byram's model is "savoir s'engager" or "critical cultural awareness" and refers to the ability to discern how one's culture can lead to the rejection of the perspectives, practices and behaviors of another cultural group and critically evaluate "the other" on explicit criteria (See, Byram, 2009, pp. 337-340). Byram (2009) argued that "Savoir s'engager" is related to the notions of "political engagement" and "education for intercultural citizenship" that represent the cornerstones of the educational breadth of foreign language instruction.

Kramsch (2011a, b), adopting a postmodernist conception of culture, argued that foreign language teaching is neither a question of approximating native speaker linguistic or pragmatic norms nor of nurturing empathy with and tolerance of cultures other than one's own. Rather, she considered foreign language learning to be a subjective, individual experience in the process of becoming bi- or multilingual, and struggling with another language, culture, power, and identity. It is a question of the profound unsettling, disturbing effects of L2 acquisition on learners' lives in the process of developing new identities and new subjectivities (Kramsch, 2009).

In teaching methodology, there are two turning points concerning the place of culture in L2 teaching. The first turning point occurred with the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching. The second occurred with the emergence of the intercultural approach to FLT and the elaboration of the concept of ICC. The communicative approach to language teaching has been theoretically grounded within discourse analysis theory, speech act theory, conversational analysis theory and sociolinguistic theory (See, Richards and Rogers, 2001). It emphasizes the socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic potential of language as defined by Hymes (1974), Widdowson (1978), Halliday (1978), Canale and Swain (1980), and Bachman (1990), among others. Such potential is substantiated in the notions of sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Sociolinguistic competence can be defined as the knowledge of the sociocultural rules that underlie the ability to use language appropriately in context. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to appropriately and effectively use language in different communicative situations in order to achieve specific communicative purposes. It is related to the appropriateness of communication formats, verbal and nonverbal behaviors and interactional norms as defined in Hymes (1972) model, speech act theory as well as discourse analysis theory. Such formats, behaviors and norms are assumed to be culture-specific. As a matter of fact, both pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence are assumed to require sensitivity to cultural difference in communication conventions. It is worth noting that pragmatic competence subsumes sociolinguistic competence in Bachman's (1990) model and overlaps with discourse competence in Canale and Swain's (1980) framework.

The proponents of the communicative approach vividly expressed their discontent with the audiolingual method of teaching on the grounds that it produced "structurally competent" L2 learners, that is, able to form correct sentences, convert active sentences into passive ones and distinguish parts of speech, but "communicatively incompetent" ones, that is, unable to transfer such knowledge to real life situations (Johnson, 1981). The proponents of the intercultural approach, in turn, argued that becoming communicatively competent in a particular language is meaningless if the cultural perspectives of the language in question are not interpretively and critically mediated in relation to the culture of the L2 learner. In this vein, Seelye (1993), for instance, argued that "[no] matter how technically dexterous a student's training in the foreign language, if the student avoids contact with native speakers of that language and lacks respect for their world view, of what value is the training? Where can it be put to use? What educational breadth has it inspired?" (p.21). Similarly, Kramsch (2009) criticized the realm of foreign language instruction for being "still" dominated by psycholinguistic and sociocultural L2 research that views language use as the successful exchange of information and fulfillment of communicative competence. Kramsch (1993, p. 1) argued 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 from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.

Likewise, Byram (2008, p. 145) argued that there is a need to adopt an 'appropriate methodology' beyond that of the communicative approach to develop "a better cognitive understanding" of "self" and "other."

Teacher cognition, the second variable of the study, refers to the beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes held by teachers about FLT or one of its aspects. Such beliefs, thoughts and attitudes are assumed to drive teaching practice and behavior. They are also believed to serve as a filter through which teachers mentally appraise syllabi, material, procedure and learner needs (Phipps & Borg, 2007; Borg, 2011). An attitude can be defined as a conscious mental orientation that underlies the evaluation of a given situation, person, idea or object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). A belief can be defined as a consciously or subconsciously held proposition that is "...accepted as true, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment" (Borg 2001: 186). Teacher cognition, in this study, refers to the attitudes and beliefs held by teachers about the cultural dimension of English language teaching.

Several studies investigated teacher cognition on the cultural dimension of FLT. Sercu et al. (2005), for instance, conducted a large-scale study on 424 European and Mexican teachers' beliefs concerning intercultural communicative competence and probed the profile of the "intercultural teacher." They found that the vast majority of their participants believed themselves to be familiar with the culture associated with the foreign language they teach. However, they found that the participants' profiles did not correspond to the profile of the "intercultural" foreign language teacher. Likewise, Sercu (2005) evaluated the extent to which the teaching practices of 78 high school Flemish teachers of English, French and German were oriented towards teaching language from the ICC perspective. Although it is intuitively assumed that teachers are moving already towards the ICC perspective and supporting its objectives, Sercu (2005) found that Flemish teachers have not yet left the communicative competence approach to FLT in favor of the intercultural approach.

In a similar vein, Tran and Dang (2014) explored the impact of the beliefs of 38 native and nonnative Vietnamese teachers about the cultural dimension of ELT on classroom practice. They found that although Vietnamese teachers hold positive attitudes towards culture teaching, there was a mismatch between the objectives of such teaching and classroom practice. They also found that local teachers explain the importance of teaching culture in language classes by socio-semantic and pragmatic reasons pertaining to "using language appropriately" and acquiring the skills for interpreting documents in English. Luk (2012) used interviews to explore the beliefs of 12 local and native secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong concerning how to integrate "popular" culture in English language teaching. Although she found that all participants, in her study, supported integrating culture with TEFL and considered such integration to be a motivating factor for learners, some local teachers expressed apprehensions about the inclusion of "popular" culture in English classes. In fact, local teachers did not want students to be exposed to what they called "bad" "negative" "pop culture" such as "materials that are sexual or violent." Some of them, even, reported that they might "screen out" "bad" popular cultural material before deciding on what is suitable for teaching in Hong Kong schools (Luk, 2012, p. 257).

The study

This study, exploratory in nature, opted for a qualitative design to gain insight into how Tunisian EFL teachers (a) perceive the relationship between language and culture and (b) approach culturally different content in the EFL classroom. Regarding the relationship between language and culture the study intended to see whether Tunisian teachers believe in the feasibility of teaching language without culture. It also aims to see whether Tunisian teachers are still oriented towards the communicative approach to culture or they have adopted the intercultural approach. As for approaching culturally different content, the study set out to explore whether the participants have ever felt uncomfortable with certain cultural aspects associated with the English language and the extent to which they would opt for censorship as a strategy to screen out such aspects from the English curriculum.

Setting

The setting of the study is Tunisia, a North African, former French colony with complex linguistic characteristics. The educational system in Tunisia is composed of three stages: Basic Education (from ages 6 to 15), Secondary Education (from 16 to 19) and Higher Education (from 19 on). The mother tongue, in the study setting, is Tunisian Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the official language of Tunisia, is, technically speaking, its first foreign language as it is not the medium of everyday communication. It is learned at basic school starting from age 6 and serves also as the medium of instruction of several school subjects in the three stages of education. The second foreign language, in Tunisia, is French, which is taught starting from age 8 and like MSA serves as a medium of instruction, mainly in higher education. The third foreign language is English and it is taught starting from age 12.

In an evaluation of the official curricular documents pertaining to the place of culture in English language education in Tunisia, Hermessi (2017) found that Tunisian policy-makers and textbook writers did not have any a priori ideological objections to the inclusion of “English” culture in the English language curriculum. The study also found that a substantial amount of culturally-loaded material was present in the locally produced English language textbooks, including topics such as generation gap, violence at schools, living without parents, attitudes and values, rights and duties, equal opportunities and roles for men/women, male/female relationships, and tolerance and respect for others. In spite of such a substantial amount of cultural material, culture was far from being approached explicitly and systematically (Hermessi, 2017).

Participants and procedure

The study population is made up of Tunisian EFL teachers, who are recruited from the holders of the Maîtrise in English (a four-year undergraduate degree) or the Licence in English (a three-year undergraduate degree, which replaced the Maîtrise in 2008). The holders of the Maîtrise or the Licence take the “Certificat d’Aptitude au Professorat de l’Enseignement Secondaire (CAPES)” examination to qualify for the position of basic school and high school teachers.

Teacher education curriculum, in Tunisia, is designed and implemented by ELT basic and high school inspectors. It is organized by an official curricular document that does

not clearly specify the content of pre-service and in-service training; rather, it only provides ELT inspectors with general guidelines on the topics to be covered at the national and regional levels. In light of the examination of such guidelines and a series of email exchanges with three ELT inspectors, I can claim that teacher education in Tunisia seems to promote the socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic views of culture more than the intercultural communicative competence views. In fact, Tunisian teachers do not have systematic exposure to ICC and to the intercultural approach during their formal pre-service or in-service training. This situation does not, however, reflect an ideological position towards addressing culture in English classes; rather it stems from the fact that curriculum developers, in Tunisia, do not approach the cultural dimension of L2 in a systematic, principled way (Hermessi, 2017).

Teacher cognition research has traditionally used self-reports, such as structured or unstructured questionnaires or interviews, to scrutinize the attitudes, beliefs and thoughts held by L2 teachers regarding FLT. This study used a questionnaire consisting of three open-ended questions to explore the perceptions of Tunisian teachers of the link between L2 teaching and culture. The three questions addressed to the study participants were:

1. Can English be taught without considering the culture(s) representing it? Explain.
2. Have you ever felt uncomfortable with particular cultural content when teaching English? If yes, Specify.
3. Are you for a form of censorship of English cultural materials? If yes, which aspects of culture should be censored?

The questionnaire was sent to ten basic and high schools located in different regions in Tunisia and 70 male and female EFL teachers with different lengths of teaching experiences agreed to complete it (See Table 1, below).

Table 1. Distribution of the study participants in terms of teaching experience and gender

TEACHING EXPERIENCE	LESS THAN 10 YRS	10 TO 20 YRS	20 TO 30 YRS	30+ YRS
	38.6%	44.3%	11.4%	4.3%
GENDER	MALE		FEMALE	
	35.71%		64.29%	

The responses obtained from the 70 study participants have been analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis technique, “a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p. 5). Thematic analysis aims at identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes as well as interpreting or comparing them in light of prevalent theoretical paradigms or previous research. “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to

the research questions, and represents some level of response or meaning within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). There are two approaches in thematic analysis, namely the semantic approach and the latent approach. With the former, patterns are identified and summarized within surface semantic meanings and then interpreted in search of “broader meanings and implications... often in relation to previous literature.” In contrast, with the latter, analysis goes beyond surface meanings to identify “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations--and ideologies--that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13).

The present study relied on both the semantic and the latent approaches of thematic analysis. Accordingly, the participants’ responses have been analyzed at the surface semantic level and synthesized in relation to the three questions of the study [1]. Following this analysis, two themes have been identified: (a) the feasibility of teaching English without culture and (b) the sensitivity of cultural content and censorship of culturally different material. The identified themes have been further analyzed in more depth in relation to three parameters, namely the findings of previous research, the contrast between the communicative and intercultural approaches to language teaching, and theories of culture.

Results and Discussion

Feasibility of Teaching L2 without Culture

The analysis of responses to question 1 revealed that 63% of the study participants think that it is impossible to teach a L2 without considering the culture associated with it. This viewpoint is illustrated in R1 and R2 [2] (See Appendix). Three reasons have been put forward by Tunisian teachers to justify the necessity of including culture in the English curriculum: (1) centrality of culture to teaching socio-pragmatic competence and socio-cultural competence as defined in the communicative approach to language teaching, (2) its importance to teaching the structural aspects of language, and (3) its motivating impact on learners.

The importance of culture to socio-pragmatic competence and socio-cultural competence is illustrated in this response:

No of course [we cannot teach language without culture]! Just because Culture and Communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. Culture is the foundation of communication.

In another response, a participant clearly refers to the fact that not considering culture “would produce speakers with pragmatic deficiencies who can hardly communicate in the target language” (See also R3, R4, and R5). In addition to considering culture to be central to communicative competence, the participants of the study seem to conceive of culture as no more than a frame for the presentation of the structural and functional aspects of language.

For me, I teach language but I teach about culture. I cautiously use the cultural aspects for the sake of facilitating the access to certain linguistic forms. I make out of culture a good servant to language.

I think that culture is part and parcel of ELT, thus, disconnecting them would be harmful. However, the teacher in a 'different' community must be careful enough to make culture no more than a tool to facilitate L2 learning.

The development of intercultural competence as extensively defined in the intercultural approach to FLT does not, therefore, seem to be a priority for the majority of the participants in this study. For them, the cultural dimension of L2 teaching is either squared with the socio-pragmatic and socio-semantic norms of language use in context as defined in the communicative language teaching approach or treated as a frame for teaching language structures. This finding confirms Sercu's (2005) and Byram's (2014) claims that foreign language teachers often lack understanding of the significance of intercultural competence and its relationship to linguistic competence. Actually, only 5 (two are cited below and 3 are included in Appendix, See R6, R7, and R8) out of the 70 participants evoked intercultural communicative competence, without labeling it as such. The most interesting statement on the importance of intercultural competence was formulated by one of the respondents as follows:

I believe that any language history or background is in fact related to its culture, thus teaching would be incomplete if we focus only on the linguistic aspect. Teaching a language is not just reading texts [whose] main themes are friendship, education or environment and providing pupils with literal translation of some words. I believe the term EFL should be replaced by the term EFCL (English as a Foreign Culture and Language).

The fact that most of the participants did not mention the concept of ICC can probably be (given that "not to mention" does not necessarily mean "not to know") accounted for by their lack of awareness of the intercultural approach to foreign language teaching. The participants of the study seem also to lack familiarity with the "English" culture as well as training on how to address culture. The importance of familiarity with L2 culture and of adequate training in teaching culture was highlighted by one of the study participants in these words: "They [culture and language] are intertwined. A teacher needs sufficient knowledge, direct contact with the English language and the efficient training to be able to convey the message to his/her students." This situation is similar to that reported by Adasko et al. (1990) about Moroccan teachers of English who found themselves "uncomfortable in the role of presenters of alien cultures with which they may not identify and which they perhaps have not themselves experienced" (p. 8). Cultural exchange and study abroad programs might be one possible approach to familiarizing L2 teachers with the "English" culture. The positive impact of cultural exchange and study abroad programs on EFL teachers is obvious in the reaction of one of the study participants, who served as a teaching assistant in an American university, to the question of the link between language and culture:

I believe teaching some aspects of the culture helps students enjoy learning the language. It makes the students more motivated and eager to discover, to know and

to learn. A language teacher should be a cultural ambassador too. I think that language and culture are interrelated. I taught Arabic to American students at a University in the USA. The dean asked me to teach Cultures of the Middle East though it was not mentioned in my contract. I was reluctant at first but he said 'As an Arab, you are a true carrier of the Middle Eastern culture. I think you will do better than any American professor.' I really enjoyed the experience and I felt that I helped break the stereotypes that existed in my students' minds.

In addition to considering culture important for communicative competence and for teaching the structural aspects of language, the study participants think that culture can be a key to motivating L2 learners as illustrated in the following three responses:

From my experience, I have noticed that pupils become more motivated to learn English when they learn about some cultural aspects.

I believe teaching some aspects of the culture helps students enjoy learning the language. It makes the students more motivated and eager to discover, to know and to learn.

Yeah, this will be possible [teaching language without culture], but not enjoyable I meant boring and learners will not be so interested in their learning.

Sensitivity of Cultural Content and filtering Culturally different materials

The study participants seem to hold an ambivalent attitude towards the place of culture in EFL teaching. This ambivalence lies in that although they recognized the centrality of culture for the development of linguistic and communicative competence, they, at the same time, adopted a suspicious attitude towards “English culture” and held prejudices and stereotypes about it. Furthermore, the study participants reported that they felt uncomfortable with certain aspects of “English” culture and showed a readiness to filter them.

In fact, 26% of the study participants have a suspicious attitude towards the consideration of culture in their classes. The suspicious approach to L2 cultural content is obvious in the following responses:

We have to try to be selective. We don't have to teach all aspects of L2 especially values and attitudes related to religion.

Culture must be integrated in language teaching to fully assimilate meaning but this integration must be limited. BUT I do think that knowing other culture without putting our culture at risk will be great.

Of course not, but what cultural aspects are to be taught? All languages are vehicles of culture but not all cultural aspects are beneficial to their bearers”; “An L2 should consider all the aspects of culture that may be taught within the Tunisian schools.

The gravest tone in apprehending the cultural dimension of ELT was, however, expressed in the following words:

I believe it is vital to learn a foreign language still our cultural identity should never melt under the highly heated fire ash of the English language. Open your ears, perfect your tongue and filter with your mind.

In addition to apprehending cultural content, the study participants reported also that they felt uncomfortable with what they label as “embarrassing,” “obscene,” and “taboo” topics included in the English curriculum in Tunisia. In this respect, one of the study subjects referred to “a text where teenagers meet to dance in a closed room” and added that “[t]he region where I teach can’t accept ethically this cultural aspect in English people. So I felt embarrassed and I don’t teach that particular text at all.” Another participant argued that “our oriental, Islamic culture would not allow our pupils to be exposed to cultural materials that are seen as obscene in our culture, (for example some artistic works).” A third participant referred to “TRUE LOVE a short story in the 3rd year book, I really find it hard to convince my students to find an end to a romantic story like this.” Similar reactions have been reported by Luk (2012) among Hong Kong teachers of English and Tang and Dan (2014) among Vietnamese ones.

The suspicious attitude led 39% of those who felt uncomfortable with cultural material to believe that all the aspects of the “English” culture that are not compatible with the local culture should be censored. A deep analysis of the participants’ responses to the topics with which they felt uncomfortable and the topics they would filter indicates that “compatibility with the local ‘oriental, Islamic culture” can be defined in religious, moral and socio-political terms. The religiously incompatible topics refer to “any aspect of culture that contradicts/goes counter to religious beliefs” (R20, R21, and R22) or “deal[s] with other religions.” Such topics include Christian religious feasts and celebrations such as “Easter,” “Christmas,” and “Halloween” (R10, R17, and R19). The morally incompatible topics pertain to sex and sexuality, body and nudity, having children outside marriage (“single mothers” and cohabitation, R9), relations between different sexes (R15 and R22), and “in vitro fertilization” and “artificial insemination” (R16). It pertains also to dress code (R13), “artistic works,” and even “dancing” and “love stories,” for some of the respondents. It is worth noting, here, that it is quite difficult to disentangle religious compatibility from moral compatibility given that morality is assumed to be based on religious teachings. The socio-political compatibility refers to social problems such as drugs or alcohol addiction, parent/teen relations, generation gap, and violence (R14), which seem to be considered by some of the study participants as taboo. It refers also to politically “sensitive” topics related to the Jews and “the Jewish exodus” (R11). Interestingly, the aspects of culture that the participants would censor are very close to the list of international English textbook publishers’ proscribed topics that fall informally under Gray’s (2002) acronym of PARSNIP (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork).

In addition to feeling uncomfortable with certain aspects of culture, some Tunisian teachers did hold prejudices and stereotypes about “English” culture, mainly concerning sex, sexuality, sexual freedom, gender relations, and parent/teen relations. One of the study participants, said that “[w]hen we talk about sex it is a taboo topic in our culture while it is ok in American culture.” Another participant, argued that we should not teach “[a]spects [of culture] telling our pupils about sexual freedom and the freedom to leave

parents' house at the age of eighteen because it may impact badly our learners who are still teenagers." The study participants also believed that certain social and health problems such as drug addiction, and AIDS are "characteristic" of British and American societies and a result of their "ways of life." In fact, a participant argued that: "British and American ways of life, addictions, social values and leisure time--It was a time when I tried to avoid covering lessons about drugs or AIDS."

Implications, limitations and future research

This study explored Tunisian teachers' perceptions of the relationship between language and culture along with their approach to culturally different material. It also revealed that the study participants, in general, hold an ambivalent attitude towards the cultural dimension of English language teaching and openly show apprehension towards addressing culture in the L2 class. That is, they feel uncomfortable with any aspect of the "English" culture that is not "compatible" with the Tunisian culture, which would, in turn, cause them to filter and drop culturally different materials in their teaching.

The ambivalent attitude of the study participants is reflected in the fact that although there is a general agreement among them about the importance of culture to FLT, almost one third are suspicious about culture and believe that culture remains a sensitive issue that could bring with it alienating, harmful values and norms. This suspicious attitude could be a function of the distance between the teachers' (and their students') culture and the L2 culture. This result is not in line with the findings of a previous study, which investigated teacher cognition on the place of culture in English education in Tunisia (Hermessi, 2016). In that study, I found that "co-culture" (the intersection between cultural sub-groups belonging to different cultures, the co-culture of L2 teachers, as a case in point) determines teacher cognition on the cultural dimension of FLT more than cultural distance. The different findings can, however, be accounted for by the fact that teachers tend to approach the overall cultural dimension of FLT as members of L2 teachers' "co-culture," but perceive culturally different material, in particular, as members of a specific cultural group.

In addition to their ambivalent attitude, some of the study participants proved to hold prejudices and stereotypes about "English" culture. It would, therefore, be unrealistic to expect them to "interculturize" their classes and help their students to get rid of similar stereotypes and prejudices. To remedy this, a course on the intercultural approach to FLT and intercultural communicative competence should be included in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Such a course would allow Tunisian teachers to become aware of their prejudices and stereotypes and realize that there are alternatives to the "essentialist," "deterministic," "static," and "homogenizing" conceptions of culture that consider all members of a given cultural group to have the same perspectives, practices, and behaviors (Atkinson, 1999). In this respect, the "Tunisian" culture, for historical and geographical reasons, is as difficult to define as the "English" culture. Furthermore, topics deemed inappropriate or even offensive by local teachers might generate intra-cultural debate, that is, debate among sub-cultural groups in Tunisia (urban vs. rural, lower class vs. middle class, conservative vs. liberal, etc.). As a matter of fact, topics like "single mothers or artistic freedom," for instance, that have been considered by some of

the study participants to be “sensitive,” have been the subject of heated debates, between conservatives and liberals, in recent years, in Tunisia.

Because of the prejudices and stereotypes they hold, some of the study participants approach the cultural load of English with apprehension and suspicion to the extent that they would filter and most probably drop any aspect of culture that is not compatible with Tunisian culture. They, actually, seem to firmly believe that filtering and dropping “English” culture would either totally or partially “contain” some “side-effects.” This belief is not typical to Tunisian teachers as L2 teachers and curriculum designers, mainly in settings where the L2 culture is deemed incompatible with the local culture, endeavor to make of FLT no more than teaching the structural aspects of language. Such endeavor is based on two assumptions: (a) language can be separated from culture in light of the teachers and students (group and personal) socio-political and historical identities and (b) if a cultural component is needed to, say, contextualize the presentation of the structural aspects of L2, the local culture could serve as a frame of reference (Cortizzi & Jin, 1999). Filtering and dropping cultural content, however, might not be the right approach to cultural difference given that language can hardly be disentangled from culture and culture will always be present in L2 curricula even if it is not explicitly set as a teaching/learning goal or if language is emptied from its cultural load, if that is ever possible.

Although the study has yielded interesting results, it still has some limitations. The first limitation is inherent to its qualitative design, which makes any attempt to generalize the findings to the whole population of Tunisian teachers of English or that of Arab, Islamic teachers unwarranted. The second limitation concerns the lack of background, biographical information about participants and their schools. Such limitation made any attempt to enquire into the relationship between holding particular views on the link between language and culture and handling culturally different material, on the one hand, and, say, gender, social milieu, or stay in an English speaking country, on the other, impossible. Therefore, more studies on teacher cognition concerning the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching, mainly in settings where the teachers’ culture is distant from the L2 culture such as the Arab, Islamic setting, is of paramount importance to changing L2 teaching practice and giving it an educational breadth. A large scale study (similar to that conducted by Sercu, et al. (2005)) on how L2 teachers perceive the cultural dimension of foreign language instruction in the different Arab, Islamic countries could be one interesting avenue of research. Probing the effect of a course on the intercultural approach to FLT on teaching foreign languages in the Arab, Islamic setting could also be another interesting research topic. Finally, the identification of the profile of the “intercultural teacher” in terms of professional and biographical characteristics could be the focus of future research on the cultural dimension of L2 teaching.

Conclusion

The ambivalent attitude towards culture and readiness to censor culturally different material can be explained by the fact that most Tunisian teachers of English are not cognizant of the intercultural approach to FLT and the notion of ICC. L2 teacher education programs should, therefore, set as one of their aims to bring teachers to

discern the cultural dimension of L2 education beyond the communicative approach to FLT. In fact, being inter-culturally competent and becoming an “intercultural speaker” or an “intercultural citizen,” to use Byram’s (1997, 2008) terms, goes beyond sensitivity to the socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic norms that underlie, say, complimenting, apologizing, leave-taking, turn-taking, proxemics, and so on. Being inter-culturally competent means acquiring the “savoir” and “savoir faire” that would enable the L2 learner to “savoir comprendre,” “savoir s’engager,” and, ultimately “savoir être.” In other words, it is being able to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one’s own by relying on ICC knowledge and skills for discovering, interpreting, and objectively evaluating cultural perspectives, products, and behaviors intra-culturally and inter-culturally (Byram, 2009).

To create intercultural L2 teachers, as Sercu (2005, p. 90) argued, “professionalism in foreign language teaching” should no more be only defined in terms of linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and pedagogical knowledge and skills. Furthermore, L2 teachers and L2 curriculum designers should discern the educational breadth of FLT and assume their critical “mission” as “educators” rather than mere “instructors” of linguistic and communicative competence. Accordingly, they should treat FLT as a grave issue given that, depending on how it is approached, it can either reinforce ethnocentrism, provincialism, prejudices and stereotypes or infuse cultural understanding, tolerance, empathy, and acceptance of “otherness.”

Notes

[1] The participants’ responses that most illustrate the theme at hand will be presented in-text; the other significant responses will be cited in-text but will be included in the Appendix.

[2] The study participants’ responses are presented as quotations without any modifications or corrections for language, punctuation, spelling...In addition, responses are numbered as R1, R2 and so on.

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Appendix

R1: I think that English language teaching cannot be complete if we omit the cultural aspect of the language.”

R2: In many Arab countries in the Gulf, English is taught in an Arab context. But, how efficient is that? That’s the question. Thank God, in Tunisia the choice has been made to teach English while respecting the culture(s) representing it.

R3: It [teaching language without culture] is difficult because culture represents a context for the learner to grasp the language and be able to use it properly.

R4: No, we cannot [teach language without culture] simply because it will lack the communicative value which is the aim of any language teaching. You cannot communicate with native speakers without being familiar with the cultural references that they will certainly make in their utterances.

R5: We can’t teach English without giving an idea about the target culture as it is highly recommended. Knowing [the] culture of the target language is needed to understand the meanings and the situations in which language was used such as when we talk about Idiomatic expressions. We cannot understand the meaning unless we have an idea about the target culture.

R6: If cultural components are completely removed from the English programs in this country, this will develop narrow-mindedness in educators and learners alike, and the overall aim of creating citizens that are able to think for themselves will be thrown into the sea of forgetfulness.

R7: Absolutely No, a de-contextualized language is soulless and may make people able to exchange certain superficial discourses but never allow them to enrich their own cultures and knowledge of themselves.

R8: A second language can never be taught without considering the culture representing it. Any language teacher should be aware of the importance of cultural component. While teaching the language, a teacher has to raise students’ awareness about diversity, openness, and the acceptance of others. By immersing young learners in a new culture, the teacher could easily succeed in making his students excel at learning a language.

R9: Some topics like single mothers and cohabitation are considered as taboos by my pupils

R10: Christmas – Halloween

R11: Teaching about the Jewish exodus (Fourth year)

R12: Some pictures that make students feel shy

R13: Clothes

R14: Teaching generation gap and English teenagers reaction towards it

R15: Mainly related to gender relationships

R16: Genetic engineering, in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination ...(Third year secondary)

R17: EASTER, not easy to explain to pupils

R18: Any aspect that contradicts with our religion”

R19: Celebrations and festivities such as Christmas

R20: Those which deal with religious topics mainly

R21: Those that go counter our religious beliefs

R22: Those which are not accepted in our culture, mainly religious or gender related.

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