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Investigating Intercultural Awareness: Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Challenges

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Abstract

In recent decades, the importance of applying cultural dimension into language pedagogy has received extensive emphasis worldwide. The problem arises when EFL teachers are afraid of referring to cultural notions in their classes just because it seems that they lack sufficient cultural knowledge of the target language. This research study intended to inspect Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural awareness by evaluating their opinions about the importance of cultural teaching. Sercu et al. (2005) adopted questionnaire was used to gather the anticipated data. The participants were comprised of 102 teachers who were provided with questionnaires in person using hard copies. An interview was conducted as well with participants in order to explore the difficulties they encounter in the way of teaching culture. the collected data were analyzed via statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software. Content analysis was used for analyzing the qualitative data gathered from interview. The results showed that Iranian EFL teachers have favorable opinions about intercultural learning. They were unwilling to implement the intercultural approach to their teaching method because of time constraints, lack of suitable materials, and guidelines. Several implications are emergent from the findings including suggestions for educational policy-makers, material designers, language institutes, and teacher training programs.

Keywords: culture, English language classrooms, EFL teachers, intercultural awareness, language learning

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1. Introduction

Intercultural awareness plays a crucial role in English language classrooms, especially in diverse and multicultural environments. It is crucial for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to promote intercultural awareness among their students in the globalized world of today, where communication and interaction between people from different backgrounds and cultures are becoming more common (Almutairi, 2021; Civelek & Toplu, 2021). Ghavamnia (2020) noted that "Intercultural awareness refers to the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of different cultures, as well as the ability to navigate and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. It goes beyond language proficiency and encompasses the development of empathy, respect, and open-mindedness towards others" (p. 25).

By incorporating intercultural content and activities into their lesson plans, EFL teachers can expose students to different cultural perspectives, beliefs, and values. This not only enhances their language skills but also broadens their horizons, encourages tolerance, and reduces cultural stereotypes and biases. Furthermore, based on Dabou, Hammoudi, and Chibani (2021), promoting intercultural awareness in English language classrooms prepares students for the globalized world they will enter, where they will interact with people from diverse backgrounds in various professional and personal settings. It equips them with the necessary skills to communicate effectively, negotiate differences, and collaborate with individuals from different cultures.

Every language is rooted in cultural identity of the nation who speaks it. EFL teachers need to be aware of cultural facts revolving in the given foreign language they teach. This is a very delicate area of linguistic acquisition that paves the way for true/false learning of certain foreign language values, barriers, attitudes, habits and spheres of ease and difficulties. The problem arises when EFL teachers are afraid of referring to cultural notions and general background of any linguistic notion in their classes just because it seems that they lack sufficient cultural knowledge of the target language (Fantini, 2012; Galloway & Rose, 2015). Additionally, the learners may receive misconducted education during teaching act and stabilize false notions and concepts instead. This in turn will affect their linguistic behavior and produce far reaching habits that do not match the socio- cultural index of the foreign language e.g., English, that they are learning (Mudawe, 2020).

In the context of Iranian EFL classrooms, where students come from various cultural backgrounds, investigating intercultural awareness becomes even more significant. Iran itself is a culturally rich and diverse country, with multiple ethnicities, languages, and traditions coexisting within its borders. EFL teachers have a unique opportunity to leverage this diversity and create a classroom environment that promotes intercultural understanding and appreciation.

The same issue perhaps could be seen in Iranian EFL classrooms. The majority of Iranian EFL learners do not have the chance and opportunity to be exposed to English language learning environment (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020), nor are there situations for them to meet and communicate with foreigners as tourists or businessmen to improve their understanding of other cultures and their ability to speak English subsequently. Therefore, EFL learners are in urgent need of true realization of culture based linguistic patterns represented by their teachers (Estaji & Faraji Savarabadi, 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward the integration of cultural elements in English language teaching.

Specifically, it aims to assess the extent of teachers' familiarity with the target culture, examine how their academic qualifications relate to this familiarity, and investigate how much emphasis they place on culture teaching within their curriculum. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the key challenges teachers face in incorporating cultural content into their instruction and to determine whether there are any significant gender-based differences in their perceptions and teaching approaches. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of intercultural awareness in EFL contexts and inform educational policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers. The falsification of cultural elements of English language and the incapacity to get rid of them that might be the consequence of cultural clash with the Iranian culture might lead to weak and incompetent learning of English language. Thus, teachers are required to fill in the intercultural gap and raise EFL learners understanding of what cultural awareness is.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, cultural awareness is often overlooked, despite its significance in fostering effective communication and understanding among speakers from diverse backgrounds. While language proficiency is undeniably important, the incorporation of cultural elements in EFL classrooms is

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equally crucial, as language is inherently tied to the culture of the people who speak it. In Iranian EFL classrooms, the lack of exposure to authentic English-speaking environments presents a unique challenge. Students often have limited opportunities to engage with native speakers or immerse themselves in the cultural contexts that shape the English language. This lack of real-world interaction with the target culture impedes their ability to grasp not only the linguistic aspects of English but also the cultural values and norms embedded in it (Zarei & Khalessi, 2011). This gap can hinder their understanding of not only the linguistic aspects of the language but also the cultural nuances and values embedded within it.

Moreover, many EFL teachers may feel ill-prepared or lack sufficient knowledge of the target culture, which further complicates the integration of cultural content into their teaching. Teachers may hesitate to address cultural aspects in the classroom due to concerns about their own cultural competence or fear of reinforcing stereotypes. As a result, students may receive a distorted or incomplete understanding of the target language, leading to misconceptions and hindered language acquisition. An international study by Atay et al. (2009) found that even experienced teachers in Turkey, another non-native English-speaking context, expressed similar concerns revealing that this issue is not limited to Iran but is part of a broader global trend. In the Iranian context, where the population is culturally diverse, the role of intercultural awareness becomes even more significant. Teachers are faced with the challenge of balancing respect for local cultural values with the necessity of introducing students to the cultural dimensions of the English language. the need for cultural integration is compounded by the country's internal cultural diversity, which makes the task of navigating intercultural awareness even more complex (Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2017). However, there is a lack of comprehensive research that investigates the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers incorporate cultural elements in their teaching and the challenges they face in doing so.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and practices related to intercultural awareness in language instruction. Specifically, it seeks to understand the level of cultural knowledge among teachers, their perceptions of the importance of culture in language teaching, and the challenges they encounter in integrating cultural content. By identifying the obstacles teachers face and examining their practices, this research aims to provide valuable insights for improving EFL teaching strategies, enhancing teacher preparation programs, and promoting a more culturally inclusive approach to language learning in Iran.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Collaboration and Exchange Programs to Enhance Intercultural Awareness

Through collaboration and exchange programs, Iranian EFL teachers can develop a deeper understanding of diverse cultures, traditions, and perspectives. This exposure helps them break down stereotypes and assumptions, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic classroom environment (Tafaroji Yeganeh & Raeesi, 2015). By engaging in meaningful discussions and sharing experiences, teachers can challenge their own biases and preconceived notions while promoting intercultural understanding among their students (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011).

Collaboration and exchange programs offer teachers a platform to explore innovative teaching techniques and strategies. They can learn about new educational resources, technology integration, and classroom management approaches that can enrich their teaching practices. By collaborating with teachers from different cultural backgrounds, Iranian EFL teachers can also gain valuable insights into how language is taught and learned in different contexts, opening up new avenues for professional growth and development (Abbaspour, Rajaee Nia, & Zare, 2012).

2.2 Understanding the Perspective of Iranian EFL Teachers on Intercultural Awareness

Understanding the perspective of Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers on intercultural awareness is crucial in fostering a multicultural and inclusive learning environment in English language classrooms. Iranian EFL teachers bring a unique perspective shaped by their cultural background, experiences, and educational context. These teachers recognize the significance of intercultural awareness in language learning and believe that it goes beyond the acquisition of linguistic competence. They view intercultural awareness as a fundamental component of language education that promotes mutual understanding, respect, and empathy among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kiziltan & Zülal, 2020).

From the Iranian EFL teachers' perspective, intercultural awareness allows students to develop a broader worldview, appreciate different cultures, challenge stereotypes, and engage in meaningful intercultural communication. They

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emphasize the importance of exposing students to authentic materials, cultural events, and diverse perspectives to foster intercultural understanding (Tafaroji Yeganeh & Raeesi, 2015).

2.3 Cultural Challenges Faced by Iranian EFL Teachers in English Language Classrooms

Iranian EFL teachers face a number of cultural challenges in English language classrooms. As they strive to create a conducive learning environment for their students, they often encounter obstacles related to cultural differences and varying expectations. One of the main challenges is the influence of the local culture on language learning. In Iran, English is considered a foreign language, and students may face difficulties in relating to the language due to differences in cultural context and linguistic structures. Iranian EFL teachers must navigate these cultural gaps and find ways to bridge the divide, making the content and language more relatable and relevant to their students' lives. Another significant challenge is the potential clash between Western educational approaches and Iranian cultural norms. The traditional hierarchical structure of Iranian society, where the teacher is seen as an authority figure, can sometimes create barriers to interactive and collaborative learning experiences (Abbaspour et al., 2012). Iranian EFL teachers need to strike a balance between maintaining respect for authority while encouraging active participation and critical thinking among their students (Solgi & Tafazoli, 2018).

The use of English as a global language can also pose challenges. Iranian EFL teachers need to navigate the complexities of teaching a language that is not the students' first language, ensuring effective communication, and addressing potential language barriers. In the face of these cultural challenges, Iranian EFL teachers demonstrate resilience and creativity. They actively seek professional development opportunities to enhance their intercultural awareness and teaching strategies, finding innovative ways to adapt and contextualize their lessons to fulfill the various needs of their pupils (Estaji & Faraji Savarabadi, 2020).

2.4 Case Studies and Personal Experiences Shared by EFL Teachers

In order to comprehend the subject at hand more thoroughly, it is essential to explore the case studies and personal experiences shared by Iranian EFL teachers. These educators have firsthand knowledge and insights into the challenges and opportunities of fostering intercultural awareness in English language classrooms. By delving into these case studies, we can uncover unique perspectives and real-life scenarios that shed light on the intricacies of teaching English as a foreign language in Iran. These accounts provide valuable accounts of the teachers' experiences, highlighting their efforts to promote intercultural understanding among their students.

Sercu's (2006) study revealed that even though a large number of teachers are amenable towards integrating ICC into their curriculum, in reality, they believe the objective of language teaching and learning is communicative competence. Hence, the results of the study revealed that 'teachers' current foreign language and culture teaching profiles do not yet meet those of the envisaged foreign language and intercultural competence teacher' (Sercu, 2006). The close relationship between language and culture has long been emphasized in the field of language education. Brown (2009) asserts that teaching a foreign language in isolation from its cultural context is implausible, highlighting the inseparability of language and culture. This perspective is supported by Israelsson (2016), whose study in Sweden revealed that teachers often lack both a theoretical foundation and institutional guidance when it comes to integrating intercultural competence (IC) into their instruction. Similar concerns are raised by Karabinar and Guler (2012) and Yeganeh and Raeesia (2015), who argue that while incorporating culture into language teaching is widely recognized as essential, practical barriers, such as limited classroom time and rigid syllabus demands, prevent culture from occupying a prominent role in foreign language education. Sercu (2005) adds that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and conceptual understandings significantly shape their classroom practices, underscoring the importance of exploring these internal factors.

Castro et al. (2004), Atay et al. (2009), and Abbasi Shirsavar and Kiani (2023) found that although teachers acknowledge the importance of cultural instruction, they often prioritize linguistic objectives, focusing more on language acquisition for communicative or instrumental purposes. Similarly, Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak (2017) reported that Thai EFL teachers viewed culture teaching as feasible through the inclusion of more cultural content, but still tended to emphasize linguistic skills. Al-Amir (2017) advocates for promoting intercultural understanding through dialogic and collaborative activities that draw on students' own cultural experiences. In line with this, Amerian and Tajabadi (2020) highlight the potential of technology, such as virtual exchanges and online collaboration tools, to enhance intercultural awareness and connect learners globally. Collectively, these studies point

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to a complex interplay between beliefs, institutional constraints, and pedagogical practices that influence the extent to which culture and IC are integrated into EFL instruction.

In one study, Zamanian and Saeidi, (2017) examined the beliefs, methods, and issues surrounding increasing students' awareness of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) among 100 Iranian EFL teachers. The results, which were derived from a mixed-method design involving a questionnaire, observation, and interview, suggested that there was a discrepancy between teachers' opinions of ICC and the ways they were currently teaching. Teachers also noted and talked about the lack of resources—including time, training, and support—for raising language learners' awareness of ICC. The assertion that it is challenging for EFL teachers to incorporate culture into their instruction in order to foster students' intercultural competency is strongly supported by the empirical data presented in this study.

Isariyawat, Yenphech, and Intanoo (2020) conducted a mixed method study to examine how Thai EFL undergraduate students perceive literature and the impact of literary texts and literature on their language proficiency and cultural awareness. An abstract was used in an EFL class at Buriram Rajabhat University in Thailand, which had 100 English majors. The samples were chosen using a straightforward random sampling technique. Additionally, the participants were interviewed in semi-structured interviews by the analyst. The study's conclusions showed that the students' perceptions were consistent with one another. Every study participant underlined the significance of using literary texts to integrate students' language proficiency and cultural awareness.

Lastly, Soodmand Afshar and Moradifar (2021) found potential connections between 300 EFL instructors' job performance, institutional identity, self-efficacy, and reflective teaching in Iranian language schools and their cultural awareness. Convenience sampling was used to choose the study's participants, who then filled out scales measuring their reflective teaching, institutional identity, cultural awareness, and sense of self-efficacy. In addition, 1500 EFL students were chosen to take part in the study from the instructors' classes. After that, the results were analyzed using structural equation modeling, and the research showed that every predictor factor—aside from cultural awareness—predicted the job performance of EFL instructors. Nonetheless, it was found that the most reliable indicator of Iranian EFL instructors' performance at work.

Based on above-mentioned issues in second language classrooms, the researchers decided to investigate the Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural awareness through evaluating their perceived objectives of foreign language teaching, their opinion about the importance of culture teaching and the amount of time they devote to it, their perception of culture teaching and their degree of familiarity with target cultures. Taking into account the current study's goal, this investigation seeks suitable answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent are EFL teachers familiar with the target culture, and how does this familiarity relate to their academic qualifications?

2. How much emphasis do EFL teachers place on culture teaching in their curriculum, and what are their perceptions of its importance and objectives?

3. What are the primary challenges EFL teachers face in incorporating cultural elements into their teaching?

4. Are there significant differences in the perceptions and approaches to culture teaching between male and female EFL teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

The present study employs a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding the integration of cultural elements into English language teaching. Given the multifaceted nature of intercultural awareness and the importance of both subjective insights and measurable data, the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was deemed the most appropriate to address the research objectives. Furthermore, the study is cross-sectional in nature, capturing a snapshot of the participants' perceptions and practices at a single point in time. This approach is particularly suitable for identifying current trends, beliefs, and difficulties within the existing educational context without the influence of long-term changes. Overall, the design of this study provides both breadth and depth in understanding Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural awareness, allowing the researchers to draw well-rounded and evidence-based conclusions.

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3.2 Participants

The population consists of 102 EFL teachers (43 females and 59 male) who were selected randomly from 5 different private language institutes in Isfahan. Their age ranged between 20 and 60, with average of 40 years old. Their years of experience ranged between 1 and 27 years with average of 14 years. All of them are Iranian EFL teachers who teach only one language (English) in institute and their mother tongue is Persian. They were categorized based on their academic degree into higher educated group and lower educated group. Higher group consists of 55 teachers which 49 of them owned B.A degree and 7 of them owned M.A degree. The other 46 were assigned to the lower group which haven't obtained academic degree.

3.3 Instruments

The instruments used with the intention of data collection process were a questionnaire and an interview both of which were adopted from Sercu et al. (2005). The original questionnaire contains eleven sections dealing with different features of intercultural dimension of foreign language teaching programs. Nevertheless, only 5 sections of this questionnaire were utilized concerning the purpose of the study. The validity of the instrument used in this study was ensured through content validity. Content validity was established by adapting a well-regarded questionnaire from Sercu et al. (2005), which was reviewed by experts in the field to confirm that it covered all relevant aspects of intercultural awareness in foreign language teaching. To assess reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each section of the questionnaire, with values ranging from 0.72 to 0.88, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Test-retest reliability was also conducted, showing a high correlation ($r = 0.92$), confirming the instrument's stability over time. Additionally, for the interview, inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, which resulted in a value of 0.85, demonstrating high agreement between raters. These measures ensured that the instrument was both valid and reliable for collecting data on EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding cultural teaching.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study consists of five sections designed to assess EFL teachers' perspectives on culture teaching. The first section includes 12 statements on a five-point Likert scale, focusing on the importance of culture teaching. The second section contains 9 questions regarding teachers' perceptions of culture teaching, where participants rank items in order of importance. The third section asks about the time distribution between language and culture teaching and teachers' readiness to allocate more time to culture teaching. The fourth section includes 8 questions about teachers' perceived objectives of foreign language teaching, where participants rank the objectives. The final section contains 10 questions aimed at determining the level of teachers' familiarity with the target culture on a four-point scale.

3.3.2 Interview

An interview was executed in order to explore the difficulties the teachers encounter in the way of teaching culture. The interview questions were extracted from Sercu et al (2005). Interviewees were 25 male and female teachers which were randomly selected from those who had already answered the questionnaires and agreed to be interviewed.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

With the purpose of obtaining sufficient data, the research team implemented the subsequent procedure. Having adopted and prepared the appropriate questionnaire, the researcher distributed them among the educators who agreed to take part in the research in various institutes in Isfahan. The questionnaires were provided in hard copies and delivered to the teachers in person. They were instructed to take as much time as necessary to complete the questionnaire in the sincerest way possible. They were also required to be honest with the responses in order to gain reliable data and they were made sure that their identities will not be included in the inquiry. Although the first part of the questionnaire requires some information about their age, gender, years of experience in language teaching and their obtained academic degrees, but their names and personal information are not involved.

As the questionnaire was relatively time-consuming and regarding the high number of participants (154), it took about a month to finally collect the data. After gathering the questionnaires, it was transpired that 102 questionnaires were answered out of 154 distributed ones. Primary scanning of questionnaires revealed that only a few numbers of participants responded to the open-ended questions which served the purpose of uncovering the envisaged difficulties in the way of teaching cultural issues. Besides, those few answers were not helpful and credible for inferences to be

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made out of them. Therefore, the researchers decided to probe this item in the form of an interview so as to elicit reasonable data from the population. With this regard, 25 male and female teachers were randomly selected from the same participants who were willing to be interviewed.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Since the collected data is comprised of both quantitative and qualitative nature, the processes conducted for data analysis is two separate data analysis procedures. The techniques used for analyzing quantitative data is explained and then the process accomplished for qualitative data is described.

3.5.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

The data collected through structured interviews was qualitative in nature, as it consisted of textual rather than numerical responses. To analyze this data, content analysis was applied. Following Schilling's (2006) spiral model of content analysis, the recorded interviews were first transcribed into raw text. These transcripts were then condensed to create manageable summaries, which informed the development of a preliminary category system. This system was subsequently used to code the data, enabling the identification of patterns and themes. Finally, the coded material was interpreted to draw conclusions relevant to the research questions and the phenomenon under investigation.

3.5.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

Having been coded and prepared, the quantitative data elicited through group- Software called the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the administered questionnaires. Contemplating gender and academic degree as distinguishing variables, the differences between these groups in terms of their level of familiarity with the target culture and their views on the significance of cultural teaching were examined using the Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests. So far, teacher's perception of culture teaching was explored in order to spot any significant difference between higher educated group and lower educated group. Finally, teachers' perceived objectives of foreign language teaching were examined so as to realize any significant difference across gender.

4. Results

4.1 EFL Teachers' Familiarity with the Target Culture

Results showed that 12.8% of teachers were very familiar with target culture; familiarity of 26.54% is Sufficient, 44.14% is not Sufficient and 16.6% are not familiar at all. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of teachers' familiarity with the target culture

	frequency	Percentage
Very familiar	13	12.8
Sufficiently	27	26.5
Not sufficiently	45	44.1
Not familiar at all	17	16.6
Total	102	100

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The related chart is shown in Figure 1.

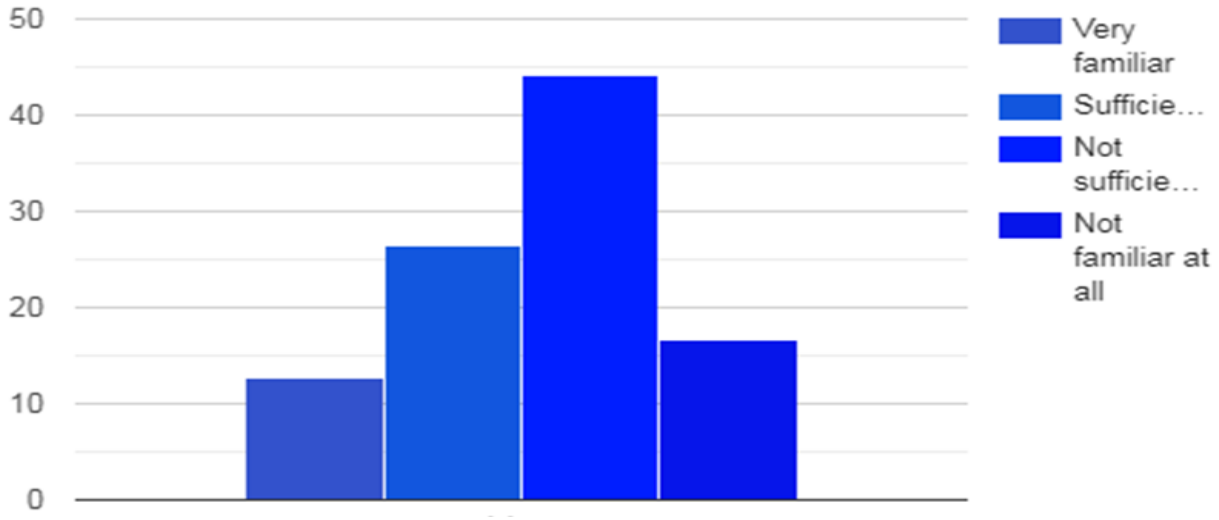


Figure 1. EFL teachers' familiarity with the target culture

4.2 Time Devotion

The questionnaire results show that 34.3% of teachers devote all of their teaching time to teaching languages and none to teaching cultures; 48.1% of teachers devote 80% of their teaching time to teaching languages and 20% to teaching cultures; 14.7% of teachers devote 60% of their teaching time to teaching languages and none to teaching cultures; and only 2.9% of teachers combine teaching cultures and languages at the same time. Table 2 displays the results.

Table 2. EFL teachers' time distribution over culture teaching and language teaching

	frequency	Percentage
100% language teaching–0% culture teaching	35	34.3
80% language teaching–20% culture teaching	49	48.1
60% language teaching–40% culture teaching	15	14.7
40% language teaching–60% culture teaching	0	0
20% language teaching–80% culture teaching	0	0
100% integration of language-and-culture teaching	3	2.9
Total	102	100

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The related chart is shown in figure 2.

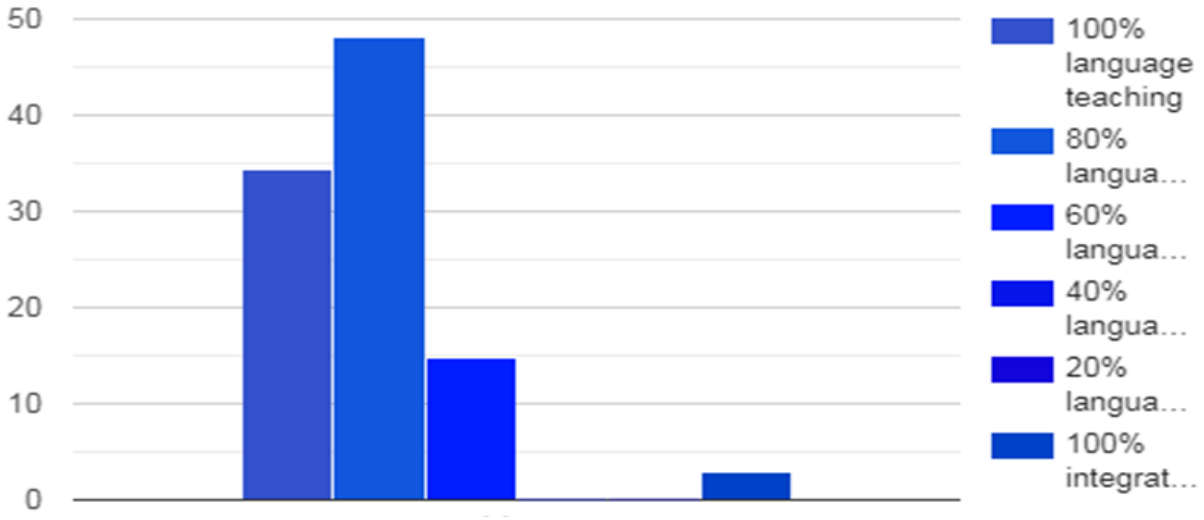


Figure 2. EFL teachers' time distribution over culture teaching and language teaching

4.3 EFL Teachers' Perception of Culture Teaching

The Results obtained from the questionnaire which reveals the EFL teachers' perceptions regarding culture teaching are presented in table 3 below.

Table 3. Percentage of each item as selected by the participants

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(1) Give details about the foreign culture(s)' history, geography, and political climate.	3.83	27.30	13.4 5	2.89	8.43	6.66	5.72	16.98	16.09
(2) Give details about your everyday activities and routines.	30.19	19.81	1.89	10.38	5.66	4.72	8.49	12.26	6.60
(3) Give details about common beliefs and values.	33.91	7.55	9.43	10.38	8.49	8.49	1.89	0.00	18.87
(4) Offer exposure to a wide range of cultural expressions, including music, theater, film, and literature.	28.30	15.09	0.00	2.83	13.21	2.83	24.53	5.66	7.55
(5) Develop receptive and tolerant attitudes toward diverse cultures and people.	26.42	8.49	4.72	9.43	9.43	17.92	5.66	3.77	14.15
(6) Promote reflection on cultural differences.	37.68	4.72	2.83	15.09	1.89	8.49	21.70	6.60	0.00
(7) Encourage a deeper comprehension of the cultures of the students.	30.19	16.04	13.21	2.83	6.60	10.38	5.66	11.32	3.77
(8) Encourage the development of empathy for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.	21.70	33.96	12.26	1.89	7.55	14.15	0.00	0.00	8.49

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(9) Promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations	39.57	13.21	7.55	12.26	0.00	4.72	6.60	2.83	12.26

Table 3 indicates that 39.5% of the respondents selected item 9, which deals with "promoting the ability to handle intercultural contact situations", as the most important objective of teaching culture. Items 6 and 3 are the next most unanimously selected items by 37.6% and 33.9% of the respondents, respectively. Item 6 deals with "promoting reflection on cultural differences" while item 3 emphasizes "Providing information about shared values and beliefs".

4.4 EFL Teachers' Attitudes Towards Culture Teaching

The results obtained from the questionnaire which reveals the EFL teachers' opinion about the importance of culture teaching (their attitudes towards teaching culture) are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentage of each questionnaire item selected by respondents

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Teaching culture in a foreign language classroom is just as crucial as teaching the language itself.	5.83	33.02	5.60	5.72	3.83
The best way to implement intercultural education is across curriculum.	23.64	42.40	27.30	6.66	0.00
A foreign language instructor ought to promote a favorable view of the foreign way of life and culture.	39.62	44.28	4.66	3.83	7.60
Students must be sufficiently proficient in the foreign language before you can teach culture or address the intercultural aspect of teaching foreign languages.	16.09	45.17	12.32	19.75	6.66
Intercultural competence cannot be taught in a classroom.	20.81	21.64	21.75	28.30	7.49
It is not possible to teach a foreign language and culture simultaneously.	12.21	24.58	14.26	34.02	16.92
Through my teaching, I hope to encourage the development of intercultural competence.	28.30	41.51	16.98	13.21	0.00
There is absolutely no impact of intercultural education on students' attitudes.	6.60	5.72	27.36	3.68	22.64
Students are more tolerant the more they understand about the culture of the foreign country.	16.09	31.96	23.64	25.42	2.89
Misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions result from language barriers just as frequently as from cultural differences.	32.96	32.13	15.92	13.26	5.72
Teaching foreign languages ought to deepen students' awareness of their own cultural identities.	26.30	47.23	6.66	5.60	12.21

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Intercultural competency should be learned by all students, not just those enrolled in classes with children from ethnic minority communities.	20.70	46.28	14.09	16.15	2.77
Language instruction must take precedence over culture instruction when you have a restricted amount of teaching time.	15.04	5.66	11.43	4.66	12.21
Intercultural competency should be encouraged in all subject areas, not just foreign language instruction.	16.92	50.06	13.26	11.21	8.55
In order to give students a realistic picture of a foreign culture, a foreign language teacher should discuss the drawbacks of that culture as well as its society.	3.72	6.21	22.58	0.00	9.49
Even in foreign language classes, reading texts written in the mother tongue and having discussions about them in that language is essential if one hopes to make any progress toward intercultural understanding.	14.21	36.79	20.81	23.53	4.66
Students studying foreign languages can only gain more cultural knowledge in the classroom. They are unable to learn intercultural competency.	15.92	47.23	16.09	15.04	5.72
You only need to teach intercultural competency when you have students from the ethnic minority community in your classes.	11.43	27.30	23.64	23.53	14.09
Teaching language and culture simultaneously is not possible. You must keep the two apart.	3.89	.00	2.89	40.51	3.72
In addition to teaching foreign languages, my goal is to impart intercultural competency.	24.47	29.30	20.81	16.04	9.38
Students' preconceived notions about other people and cultures are strengthened by intercultural education.	32.02	21.75	15.15	20.64	10.43
Students become more accepting of different cultures and people when they are given more cultural information.	10.43	44.28	30.25	5.66	9.38
Misunderstandings in cross-border interactions stem primarily from language barriers rather than cultural disparities.	14.21	39.62	15.04	28.36	2.77
Teaching foreign languages should cover more than just the cultures of other countries. Additionally, it ought to help students comprehend their own culture better.	35.91	26.36	7.49	20.70	9.55

4.5 EFL Teachers' Perception about the Objectives of Foreign Language Teaching

The questionnaire results indicate that half of the participants think that motivating their students to learn foreign languages is the primary goal of foreign language instruction (item4). Item 7 is the second most unanimously selected item as being the most important objective by 29.2% of the respondents which deals with helping the students develop life skills and other subject areas by teaching them how to memorize, summarize, put into words, formulate correctly, give a presentation, etc. 44.34% of the respondents also selected item 6 as the second most important objective which refers to encouraging the development of a level of proficiency in the target language that will enable the learners to use it for everyday communication. Results are summarized in Table 5.

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Table 5. Percentage of each objective's questionnaire items selected by the respondents

culture learning objectives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
encourage my students to become acquainted with the customs and traditions of the nations where the language they are learning is spoken.	10.38	32.08	20.75	15.09	6.60	10.38	1.89	2.83
encourage the development of a receptive mindset and a welcoming attitude toward different cultures	16.98	28.30	16.04	12.26	0.00	0.00	22.64	3.77
assist my pupils in developing a better understanding of their own identity and culture. help my students gain a deeper comprehension of their own identity and culture. Goals for learning a language	19.81	18.87	30.19	5.66	10.38	8.49	1.89	4.72
4motivate my students to acquire foreign languages.	50	16.04	4.72	8.49	10.38	5.66	2.83	1.89
help my students reach a proficiency level in the target language so they can read literature written in that language.	6.60	18.87	35.85	11.32	14.15	2.83	8.49	1.89
encourage learners to reach a level of proficiency in the target language that will enable them to communicate in that language for everyday needs.	21.70	44.34	9.43	15.09	6.60	1.89	0.94	0.00
help my students develop transferable skills (such as the ability to memorize, summarize, put into words, formulate accurately, give a presentation, etc.) that will be useful in other subject areas and in real life.	29.25	9.43	7.55	39.62	5.66	1.89	0.94	5.66
encourage the development of learning abilities that are relevant to the study of additional foreign languages.	20.75	25.74	10.3	19.81	0.00	3.77	11.32	8.49

4.6 Interview

Interview data shows that 60% of the interviewees would like to devote more time to "culture teaching" but do not get round to it. The results are shown in Table 6.

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Table 6. EFL teachers' willingness to devote more time to culture teaching

Items	Frequency	percentage
Yes, very much so	4	%16
Yes, up to a certain extent	15	%60
No, not particularly	3	%12
No, not at all	3	%12
No opinion	0	%0

The results obtained from content analysis of the interview data reveal that the mostcommon difficulty in the way of teaching culture according to 85.6% of the respondents is lack of time. Following are the most frequent reasons stated by the interviewees for not teaching culture in classroom.

1. Lack of time

2. Lack of cultural familiarity among teachers

3. Absence of materials for culture teaching

4. The focus of the institutes is mostly on language learning rather than culture learning.

5. Absence of any guidelines for culture teaching in their institute

6. Students' learning is driven by external pressures, such as parental expectations and exam results, which limits their engagement and interest in additional learning opportunities, including cultural ones.

7. The absence of cultural content in standardized exams discourages teachers from integrating cultural education into their teaching, resulting in a narrow focus on language mechanics and test preparation.

8. Effective cultural education requires creativity and extensive preparation, which are often hindered by time constraints and a lack of resources and institutional support.

4.7 Inferential Statistics

4.7.1 Test of Normality

Before conducting inferential statistics, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run in order to ensure the normality of the data. Since the sample size is more than 50, this test is more efficient than Shapiro-Wilk test. Results are shown in Table 7.

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Table 7. Results of Kolmogorov Smirnov test for normality of data

Group	Statistic	Df	Sig.
teachers' opinion about the importance of culture teaching	.106	102	.006
teachers' perception about the objectives of foreign language teaching	.146	102	.000
teachers' objectives of foreign language teaching	.125	102	.000
teachers' familiarity with the target culture	.112	102	.002

As the P-value in all variables is less than 0.05, the normality of data is rejected in 95% of confidence interval. Therefore, nonparametric tests were used for analyzing the rest of research questions.

4.7.2 Teachers' Academic Degree and their Perception of Culture Teaching

Since the normality of the data was rejected, nonparametric test for comparing the teachers' academic degree and their perception of culture teaching was used. Due to three different classifications for the teachers' academic degree, Kruskal-Wallis test was applied and the results are illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8. Kruskal-Wallis test results for teachers' academic degree and their perception ofculture teaching

	teachers' perception about the objectives of foreign language teaching
Chi-Square	.294
Df	2
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.853

Since the significant level is more than 0.05, there is not any statistically significant relationship between teachers' academic degree and their perception of culture teaching. Therefore, the first null hypothesis of the current study is accepted.

4.7.3 Teachers' Academic Degree and Their familiarity with the Target Culture

Since the normality of the data was rejected, nonparametric test was used in order to spot any significant relationship between the EFL teachers' academic degree and their familiarity with the target culture. Since there are three different classifications for the teachers' academic degree, Kruskal-Wallis test was applied and the results are illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9. Kruskal-Wallis test results for teachers' academic degree and their familiaritywith the target culture

	teachers' familiarity with the target culture
Chi-Square	0.355
Df	2
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.823

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Due to significant level that is more than 0.05, there is not any statistically significant relationship between teachers' academic degree and their familiarity with the target culture. Therefore, the second null hypothesis of the present research is accepted.

4.7.4 Teachers' Objectives of Foreign Language Teaching across Gender

Since the normality of the data was rejected, nonparametric test was used in order to compare the mean of the two groups. Consequently, Mann-Whitney test was run and the related results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Mann-Whitney nonparametric test results for differences between male and female teachers' objectives of foreign language teaching

	teachers' objectives of foreign language teaching
Mann-Whitney U	1250.500
Wilcoxon W	3013.500
Z	-.294
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.772

On account of significant level that is more than 0.05, there are not any statistically significant differences between male and female teachers' objectives of foreign language teaching. Thus, the third null hypothesis of this study is accepted.

4.7.5 Teachers' Familiarity with the Target Culture across Gender

Due to the fact that the normality of the data was rejected, nonparametric test was used for comparing the mean of the two groups. Due to that end, Mann-Whitney test was applied and the related results are illustrated in Table 11.

Table 11. Mann-Whitney nonparametric test results for differences between male and female teachers' familiarity with the target culture

	teachers' familiarity with the target culture
Mann-Whitney U	1343.500
Wilcoxon W	2548.500
Z	-.300
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.669

Given that the significant level is more than 0.05, it can be concluded that there are no statistically significant differences in the degree of target culture familiarity between male and female teachers. As a result, the fourth null hypothesis of the study at hand is accepted.

4.7.6 Teachers' Academic degree and their Attitudes towards Culture Teaching

The normality of the data was rejected, meanwhile, nonparametric test was conducted in order to compare the teachers' academic degree and their attitudes towards culture teaching. Since there are three different classifications for the teachers' academic degree, Kruskal-Wallis test was applied and the calculated results are shown in table 12.

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Table 12. Kruskal-Wallis test results for teachers' academic degree and their attitudetowards culture teaching

	teachers' opinion about the importance of culture teaching
Chi-Square	.421
Df	2
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.810

Given that the significant level is more than 0.05, there are not any statistically significant differences between teachers' academic degree and their attitudes towards culture teaching. Accordingly, the fifth null hypothesis of this investigation is accepted.

4.7.7 Teachers' Attitudes towards Culture Teaching across Gender

Since the normality of the data was rejected, nonparametric test was run in order to compare the mean of two groups. Correspondingly, Mann-Whitney test was conducted, the results of which are displayed in Table 13.

Table 13. Mann-Whitney nonparametric test results for differences between male and female teachers' attitudes towards culture teaching

	teachers' opinion about the importance of culture teaching
Mann-Whitney U	1375.500
Wilcoxon W	2611.500
Z	-.072
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.924

As a consequence of significant level that is more than 0.05, there are not any statistically significant differences between male and female teachers' attitudes towards culture teaching. Subsequently, the last null hypothesis of the present study is accepted.

5. Discussion

The present study was an exploration of Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural awareness status. In order to accomplish the aims of this study, several aspects of intercultural awareness were taken into considerations including the teachers' degree of familiarity with the foreign culture associated with the foreign language they teach, i.e., English, their attitudes and perceptions regarding culture teaching and their perceived objectives of foreign language teaching. Furthermore, attempts have been made so as to identify any substantial differences across gender and the teachers' academic degree. The results obtained from data analysis revealed some valuable information about Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural awareness status which is elaborated in the following section.

With regard to interconnectedness of language and culture, Brown (2009) states that it is not plausible to teach a foreign language without dealing with its' culture. Since Iranian EFL learners acquire cultural competence of the target language precisely in classes and because of the lack of comprehensive direct contact and familiarity with the native speakers, it's the teachers' responsibility to be culturally competent enough so that they would be able to transfer the cultural values of English language to their students. The findings of this study demonstrates that the majority of Iranian EFL teachers are not sufficiently familiar with the target culture and some of them are not even familiar at all. This is similar to the previous study done by Israelsson (2016) in Sweden which has found that teachers lack theoretical background and central guidance with regards to IC.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that Iranian EFL teachers devote minimum amount of time for teaching culture and most of them do not even dedicate any time for culture teaching; their only concern is language teaching

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without any cultural elements involved. Nonetheless, the results obtained from the interview indicates that most of the teachers are willing to devote more time to culture teaching, but as a result of some constraints they do not get round to it. According to the EFL teachers, one of the most prominent difficulties in the way of culture teaching is lack of cultural familiarity among EFL teachers, along with time limitation issues. These findings are in line with those of Karabinar and Guler (2012) and Yeganeh and Raeesia (2015), which has also found out that the integration of culture into language teaching is a must; however, because of time constraints and excessive requirements of syllabi, it does not yet have a distinguished position in foreign language (FL) education.

Other issues declared by the interviewees as the perceived obstacle of culture teaching includes: Absence of materials for culture teaching, Absence of any guidelines for culture teaching in their institute, lack of learners' motivation and lack of teachers' creativity. Some of them also believed that because the focus of the institutes is mostly on language learning rather than culture learning, and as a result, the final exams include only language related items, cultural instruction doesn't seem so imperative.

According to Sercu (2005), teachers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge (conceptions), shape their instructional behavior. Hence, it seems useful to probe EFL teachers' perceptions of culture teaching, their perceived objectives of foreign language teaching and their attitudes towards intercultural education in order to gain more insight into their teaching practice quality. In other words, by scrutinizing teachers' conceptions, it may be possible to figure out to some extent what is going on in their classrooms. This in turn will provide the opportunity to reflect on the classroom procedure and the preferred objectives which these teachers follow the most and identify any probable fallacy on the part of the instructors and offer the best solution for improving their practice quality.

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of EFL teachers suppose that teaching culture means promoting the learners' ability to handle intercultural contact situations as well as promoting reflection on cultural differences. While some of them declared that Providing information about shared values and beliefs would accomplish culture teaching. This proves that Iranian EFL teachers would promote their pupils' intercultural skills rather than intercultural knowledge in order to increase their intercultural awareness. However, these findings are not in line with those of the investigation done by Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak (2017), which has found that the Thai EFL teachers perceived that ICC can be integrated into their teaching by presenting more cultural content to learners.

The results of this study also revealed that corresponding to the EFL teachers, the most important objective of foreign language teaching is related to enthusing their pupils for learning foreign languages as well as assisting the learners to acquire skills that will be useful in other subject areas and in live (such as memorize, summarize, put into words, formulate accurately, give a presentation, etc.). moreover, the second most important objective refers to Promoting the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow the learners to use the foreign language for practical purposes.

It can be understood from these findings that the most important objectives of foreign language teaching according to the EFL teachers belongs to "language learning objectives" and "general skills/language skills learning objectives". This demonstrates that Iranian EFL teachers does not assume culture learning objectives to be influential. These findings are consistent with those of Atay et al. (2009) and Castro et al. (2004), which also found that EFL teachers prioritize language teaching objectives over culture teaching objectives. According to Atay et al. (2009), EFL teachers were rather concerned with building interpersonal relationships and knowledge. they defined the objectives of foreign language above all in terms of the acquisition of the ability to use the foreign language for practical purposes and in terms of motivating students to learn foreign languages.

The current results corroborate the findings of a numberof previous studies (Al-Amir, 2017; Almutairi, 2021; Brown, 2007; Civeleki & Toplu, 2021; Ghavamnia, 2020; Mudawe, 2020). In this regard, Al-Amir (2017) claimed that creating opportunities for dialogue and interaction among students from different cultural backgrounds is also crucial. Group work, discussions, and collaborative projects that require students to work together can promote intercultural understanding and empathy. Teachers can encourage students to share their own cultural experiences, beliefs, and traditions, fostering a sense of belonging and appreciation for diversity within the classroom.

Furthermore, Amerian and Tajabadi (2020) stated that integrating technology into the classroom can be a powerful tool for promoting intercultural awareness. Online platforms, virtual exchange programs, and video conferencing can

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allow students to connect with peers from different countries and engage in cross-cultural learning experiences. This not only expands their knowledge but also helps break down barriers and build bridges between cultures.

The impact of utilizing literary texts on Thai EFL undergraduate students' language proficiency and cultural awareness was investigated by Isariyawat et al. (2020). Based on the results of this study it is vital for school administrators and policymakers to support and prioritize intercultural awareness initiatives in English language classrooms. Providing resources, funding professional development programs, and creating a supportive environment for teachers and students can greatly enhance the implementation of intercultural education. Lastly, these results are consistent with a study that was carried out earlier by Kizi and Ugli (2020). Kizi and Ugli (2020) highlighted the promoting intercultural awareness in English language classrooms requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses teacher training, authentic materials, dialogue, technology, and institutional support.

6. Conclusions

The present inquiry attempted to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' conceptions of culture teaching and their encountered troubles in the process of teaching and learning of culture in different institutes in Iran by means of questionnaires and interviews. Above all, the present study also investigated how the teachers' gender and obtained academic degree influenced their attitudes and perceptions regarding culture teaching as well as their degree of familiarity with the target culture. Research findings shed light on culture teaching and learning practice in Iranian language institutes. The findings demonstrated that despite having positive attitudes towards implementing cultural instructions to their current teaching procedure, Iranian EFL teachers do not seem to be ready or willing to do so for many reasons among which are time constraints, lack of familiarity with the target culture, lack of proper materials and guidelines, educational policy, final exams, learners' motivational problems and so on.

Based on the present investigation, following suggestions are put forward by the researcher for future studies in the field. Future in depth research containing a larger research population may possibly enhance people's perception on the same research subject area. Besides, this study didn't delve into the textbooks utilized for teaching cultural elements in foreign language institutes. Nevertheless, upcoming research programs involving cultural contents in the foreign language textbooks might provide helpful information about the quality of culture teaching and learning in the language classrooms. How the students' characteristics influence their willingness to learn cultural elements may perhaps be another possible research topic for further studies.

Since most of the investigations are concerning EFL teachers' perceptions regarding intercultural education and little attention is paid to the learners, another beneficial exploration would be EFL learners' intercultural competence and the extent to which their ICC is affected by their instructors' ICC awareness. It is essential for teachers to undergo intercultural training themselves. By enhancing their own cultural competence, teachers can better understand and appreciate the diversity within their classrooms. This training can provide them with the necessary skills to effectively address cultural differences, avoid stereotypes, and facilitate meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

The findings provide a number of pedagogical implications, for EFL teachers who wish to balance their culture teaching and language teaching time, the findings of this study may encourage them to ponder upon their current implemented approaches and adjust them according to the new realm of pedagogical paradigm. Moreover, the findings of this study revealed that one of the main difficulties which EFL teachers encounter in the way of culture teaching is lack of proper materials and fitting guidelines for teaching culture in classrooms.

Therefore, it would be beneficial for learners if the material developers and policy makers considered providing suitable materials and guidelines and implementing them into the current textbooks and official documents. Additionally, the specialists may also want to inspect the learner's requirements in order to make the cultural syllabus more appropriate for the students' learning needs. Based on the findings of the current research, it is to incorporate authentic cultural materials into lesson plans. By using real-life examples, literature, music, and films from different cultures, teachers can expose their students to a wide range of perspectives and foster a deeper understanding of different cultures. This not only helps students develop their language skills but also encourages empathy and respect for other cultures.

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