



The Role of Cultural Awareness in Successful EFL Communication

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دور الوعي الثقافي في تحقيق التواصل الناجح في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

This study explores whether cultural awareness has a role in enhancing communication skills among EFL learners. The research explores how cultural knowledge influences intercultural competence and teaching practices and how a poor lack of cultural awareness affects learners. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and questionnaires collected data from 100 EFL students and teachers in Libya. Results showed an increased development of cultural awareness for these students, who consequently became communicative with great confidence while dealing with various people and improved understanding in dealing with different aspects of cultures embedded in languages. Some obstacles faced include the unavailability of resources, and a problem encountered was the student's reluctance to study topics concerning cultures. In other words, the study strongly recommended inculcating cultural awareness within the EFL curriculum, utilizing authentic materials, and creating space for teacher development. On these grounds, based on the research findings, recommendations were made about creating a culturally inclusive classroom by using interactive activities and assessing student cultural awareness. The findings call for the relevance of cultural awareness when teaching EFL to enhance a student's proficiency in effective communication in today's globalization.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness, EFL Communication, Intercultural Competence, Language Learning, Teaching Practices, Qualitative Research, Classroom Observations, Professional Development

الملخص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة ما إذا كان للوعي الثقافي دور في تعزيز مهارات التواصل بين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تبحث البحث في كيفية تأثير المعرفة الثقافية على الكفاءة بين الثقافات وممارسات التدريس، وكيف يؤثر نقص الوعي الثقافي على المتعلمين. تم جمع البيانات من 100 طالب ومعلم للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا من خلال مقابلات شبه منظمة، وملاحظات صفية، ومناقشات مجموعات تركيز، واستبيانات. أظهرت النتائج زيادة في تطوير الوعي الثقافي لدى هؤلاء الطلاب، مما جعلهم أكثر تواصلاً بثقة كبيرة أثناء التعامل مع مختلف الأشخاص، وتحسن فهمهم في التعامل مع جوانب مختلفة من الثقافات المتضمنة في اللغات. تشمل بعض العقبات التي واجهت الدراسة عدم توفر الموارد، ومشكلة تمثلت في تردد الطلاب في دراسة المواضيع المتعلقة بالثقافات. بعبارة أخرى، أوصت الدراسة بشدة بإدماج الوعي الثقافي ضمن منهج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، واستخدام مواد أصلية، وخلق مساحة لتطوير المعلمين. بناءً على نتائج البحث، تم تقديم توصيات حول

إنشاء فصل دراسي شامل ثقافيًا من خلال استخدام أنشطة تفاعلية وتقييم الوعي الثقافي لدى الطلاب. تدعو النتائج إلى أهمية الوعي الثقافي عند تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتعزيز كفاءة الطالب في التواصل الفعال في ظل العولمة الحالية. الكلمات الدالة: التواصل في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الكفاءة بين الثقافات، تعلم اللغة، ممارسات التدريس، البحث النوعي، ملاحظات صافية، التطوير المهني.

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language, which acts as a link for people across cultures to communicate with one another, becomes effective communication in an EFL setting beyond mere linguistic ability but involves knowledge of the cultural forces that create differences in the usage, interpretation, and comprehension of language. Intercultural communication involves knowing cultural differences: cultural awareness defined by Byram (1997). It enables EFL learners to understand a language's grammatical and lexical aspects and the social and cultural frameworks that regulate its use (Farida et al., 2024; Kramsch, 1993).

The latest research suggests that EFL teaching should include cultural awareness to encourage communicative competence. Choudhury (2022) notes that cultural awareness is the "silent negotiator" of communication, meaning that language learners can interpret and respond appropriately to implicit messages, behaviors, and norms. Cultural differences might cause misunderstandings even when grammar accuracy is achieved. For example, politeness varies significantly across cultures; what might be considered direct and assertive in one culture could be perceived as rude in another (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

Incorporating cultural awareness into EFL curricula also addresses the pragmatic aspects of language use, which are critical for achieving meaningful communication. Pragmatic competence, or the ability to use language appropriately in context, is heavily influenced by cultural norms. Making requests, giving compliments, and apologizing in speeches differ greatly among cultures. For example, a paper published by Li and Zhang (2022) mentioned how the indirect speech acts dominant in the West generally proved quite confusing to many Chinese EFL learners, often leading to pragmatic failures. Cultural awareness training enables learners to deal with such complexities, thus not risking misspeaking and enabling rapport-building with speakers from differing backgrounds (Schieble et al., 2020).

Fostering cultural awareness is not only about developing a sense of others but also about self-development. Byram (2022) introduced the concept of "critical cultural awareness," which encourages learners to critically evaluate their cultural assumptions and prejudices. This method helps learners become open-minded and empathetic so they can enter intercultural dialogue easily. For instance, an EFL learner aware of the importance of hierarchy in Asian cultures may adjust his communication style when talking to people in formal settings to avoid unintentionally offending others (Tennakoon, 2024).

Educators play a crucial role in cultural awareness. Teachers are seen as cultural mediators who guide learners in understanding the target language culture and their own (Oberste-Berghaus, 2024; Corbett, 2021). Professional development programs on intercultural competence can help teachers incorporate more cultural elements into their instruction. A study by Wang and Chen (2022) showed that EFL teachers with intercultural training were better at fostering the cultural awareness of their students, which in turn improved the communicative outcomes.

In a nutshell, cultural awareness is an imperative component of efficacious EFL communication. From the proper cognition and appreciation of cultural differences spring the confidence, sensitivity, or even both together to handle some of the inherent complexities of intercultural interactions. Within this paper's scope, three roles of culture awareness in effective EFL communications will be debated: pragmatic competencies, development of interpersonal relations, and reflection.

The rationale of the Study

Within EFL education, cultural awareness has become more prominently acknowledged as one of the main components in enabling effective communication. This study examines the critical function cultural awareness performs for successful EFL communication.

Language and culture are interwoven; the more a learner knows about a language's cultural context, the better they will be able to use it appropriately and effectively. Cultural elements in EFL instruction enrich the learning experience and prepare students for cross-cultural interactions. This is similar to intercultural communicative competence, the capability to communicate across cultures effectively and appropriately.

The latest studies show that including cultural awareness in EFL classrooms has many benefits. For example, a meta-synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research on cultural awareness in EFL settings concludes that such incorporation enhances learners' pragmatic skills in participation in the social and cultural aspects of communication.

Culturally responsive teaching builds instruction and learning on established customs, characteristics, experiences, and perspectives among students. It improves language acquisition while increasing the chances of learning.

The use of the English language throughout the globe has rendered cultural awareness a practically unavoidable enterprise rather than a mere theoretical activity. It has been recognized that culturally equipped EFL learners are better at contextually accurate language interpretation and production.

This research will add to the knowledge base of how cultural awareness influences EFL communication and which strategies are most effective for incorporating cultural instruction into language teaching.

Statement of the Problem

This increased globalization of English as a global lingua franca has posed an issue related to the necessity for effective communication across diverse cultural contexts. Many EFL learners fail to communicate effectively because of a lack of cultural awareness, leading to misinterpretation, pragmatic errors, and breakdowns in communication. Traditionally, the focus of EFL instruction was on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but ignored the significance of cultural competence for effective communication in authentic situations.

Research demonstrates that studying the target culture enhances users' ability to understand and produce contextually appropriate language. Unfortunately, very few EFL programs have systematically included cultural study within teaching curricula, thereby equipping students to deal practically with intercultural interactions. This is an important challenge for learners who expect to use their English with intercultural communication in academic, professional, or social circumstances.

This study addresses the problem by exploring cultural awareness's role in effective EFL communication. It looks into how the inclusion of elements of culture affects learners' intercultural communicative competence and their level of language proficiency in EFL instruction. Identifying effective strategies for integrating cultural awareness into EFL classrooms should provide practical solutions that improve the ability of EFL learners to communicate effectively in different cultural contexts.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the role of cultural awareness in promoting effective EFL communication.
2. To find effective ways of incorporating cultural instruction into EFL classrooms.
3. To study the influence of cultural awareness on learners' intercultural communicative competence.

4. To analyze EFL learners' challenges due to a lack of cultural awareness.
5. Suggest ways to promote cultural competence in EFL teaching practices.

Research Questions

1. How does cultural awareness impact effective communication among EFL learners?
2. Which strategies most successfully integrate cultural instruction into EFL teaching?
3. In what ways does cultural awareness impact learners' intercultural communicative competence?
4. What difficulties do EFL learners experience due to a lack of cultural awareness?
5. How can EFL teachers effectively develop cultural competence in their students?

Significance of the Study

It is pretty important from the point of view of the study because it presents cultural awareness in effective EFL communication; the gap is often left aside without some merit of attention in language instruction courses. It therefore considers intercultural competence as much more important, providing educators with insight and strategies for preparing learners for effective communication in diverse cultural settings.

The study provides the EFL learner with practical solutions to address communication gaps and enrich their language to support international academic, business, or social opportunities. In addition, it advances knowledge for future research into education as part of the EFL curriculum. It calls on curriculum developers to include cultural awareness in teaching for holistic language learning.

Conceptual Framework

This research was based on the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) concept by Byram (1997), which focuses on linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural knowledge that enables effective communication across cultures. The framework establishes cultural awareness as a central aspect that determines the ability of EFL learners to understand and interpret culturally appropriate language and behavior.

The conceptual framework comprises three interlinked components:

1. Cultural awareness: Cultural values, norms, and practices as they affect styles, communication, and behavior in cross-cultural contexts.
2. Language skills: Grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic ability to present ideas effectively.
3. Intercultural skills: The ability to navigate, adapt, and appropriately respond in multiple cultural contexts and maintain mutual respect and understanding.

Together, these components support "effective EFL communication," allowing learners to overcome cultural differences in real-life situations and communicate successfully across cultures. This paper takes cultural awareness as a mediator that links proficiency in the target language with intercultural competence, thus bringing it to the forefront of EFL learning. This framework explores how cultural awareness in EFL teaching can enhance learners' communicative abilities and intercultural competence.

Theoretical Framework

There is a theoretical framework for analyzing the cultural awareness of EFL communication, which comes from several linguistic, cultural, and educational theories. This will help determine how cultural awareness would affect the ability of learners to communicate effectively in an intercultural setting.

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence Byram, 1997

The central notion of the EFL communication cultural awareness research is based on Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). According to it, foreign language communication is not just about linguistic knowledge but rather about understanding

and mediating between one's culture and the target culture. The five components of ICC, according to Byram, are:

Attitudes (*Savoir-être*): Open-minded and inquisitive about other cultures, ready to challenge his or her cultural assumptions.

Knowledge (*Savoirs*): Knowledge of his or her cultural practices, products, and perspectives; knowledge of those of the other culture.

Skills of Interpreting and Relating (*Savoir comprendre*): The ability to interpret cultural clues and relate them to one's context.

Discovery and Interaction Skills (*Savoir apprendre/faire*): New cultural knowledge should be acquired in live interactions.

Critical Cultural Awareness (*Savoir s'engager*): The ability to critically reflect on norms and practices and respect mutual understandings.

2. Sociocultural Theory Vygotsky, 1978

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes social interaction's role in the learning process. This asserts that language learning is mediated socially, where learners construct knowledge through interaction. Understanding cultural contexts is vital in this process, making learners appraise themselves regarding their ability to apply the chosen language appropriately.

For example:

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): Cultural awareness training can scaffold learner development by helping learners progress from basic linguistic competence to pragmatic and intercultural competence.

Mediation: Teachers and peers act as mediators, helping learners understand the unwritten rules that characterize a culture and practices related to the target language.

3. Pragmatic Competence Framework

In his theory on pragmatic competence (1983), Thomas referred to the appropriate use of language in specific social and cultural contexts. Pragmatic competence consists of two primary aspects:

Pragmalinguistics: Linguistic resources in which speech acts are performed. This includes the ways of requesting or giving compliments.

Sociopragmatics: Cultural norms and social rules governing the usage of the mentioned resources.

Cultural awareness is key in developing sociopragmatic competence, as the learners need to understand cultural norms not to fail pragmatically (for example, be perceived as impolite or inappropriate). For instance, indirectness in requesting might be polite in some cultures but confusing in others.

4. Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Communication (Hall, 1976)

Hall's framework of High-Context and Low-Context Communication provides insight into cultural differences in communication styles:

High-Context Cultures: Communication is based on implicit cues, shared knowledge, and non-verbal signals. This includes Japan, China, and Arab cultures.

Low-Context Cultures: Communication is explicit and direct and relies less on shared assumptions. Examples would be the United States and Germany.

This distinction helps EFL learners adapt their communication style to different cultural contexts to interpret better and convey meaning.

5. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 1984)

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory found six dimensions that shape cultural communication styles:

Power Distance: The degree to which hierarchical structures are accepted in society.

Individualism vs. Collectivism: Individual goals are preferred over group goals.

Masculinity vs. Femininity: Competition and achievement are favored over cooperation and care.

Uncertainty Avoidance: Tolerance of ambiguity and risk.

Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation: Focus on future goals or immediate results.

Indulgence vs. Restraint: The degree of liberty to indulge in personal wants.

These factors can, thus, direct the analysis of how cultural values impact communication behaviors for EFL learners to alter speech based on what is culturally expected.

6. Critical Cultural Awareness (Byram, 2022)

Building on that, Byram (2022) introduced his concept of Critical Cultural Awareness, focusing on the issue of learners needing to critically engage with their assumptions about their cultures and those cultures they are targeted to; hence, one needs to consider a framework wherein learners are supposed to move above mere acceptance to meaningful dialogue across cultures that result in mutual respect and understanding.

7. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Framework

The ELF Framework states that English is a global language with speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This view changes the focus from native-speaker norms to negotiating meaning in intercultural contexts (Jenkins, 2015). Cultural awareness is, therefore, essential in ELF interactions because it allows speakers to accommodate linguistic and cultural diversity to enhance mutual intelligibility and collaboration.

Literature Review

Cultural Awareness and Communication Competence

Cultural awareness is a powerful tool in harnessing effective communication, especially in EFL education. Yurtsever and Özel (2021) contend that knowledge of cultures helps students construe norms, values, and cultural context reasonably, which is crucial to using pragmatic languages. These authors indicate that inculcating cultural aspects improves EFL classrooms' linguistic and intercultural communicative competence. This relationship depicts the necessity of developing the EFL curriculum with cultural awareness as a core objective.

Cultural Awareness Through Literature

Nilsson (2018) viewed the presence of literature in the EFL classroom as a means of teaching cultural awareness. Through literature, students experience diverse cultural contexts and ways of thinking that help them fully value the differences in social norms and cultures. Critical thinking, coupled with a sense of cultural awareness, develops as learners respond to richly textured texts that enable them to be effective in actual intercultural communication.

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Byram's (1997) model has been quite central in explaining the role of cultural awareness in EFL communication. Liu and Fang (2024) extended that framework by examining the application of this model in undergraduate English programs. According to their results, ICC-based learners adapt well to varied cultural settings. It further suggests incorporating ICC-based activities into EFL instruction to better prepare learners for global communication challenges.

Significant challenges in incorporating cultural awareness into EFL classrooms were observed by Smith (2022). These include undertrained teachers and insufficient culturally diverse teaching materials. The paper indicated many unprepared teachers in cultural topics, leading to missed opportunities for fostering intercultural understanding. These will be overcome with targeted teacher training and curriculum development to embed cultural competence in EFL education.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Awareness of Native Culture

Zhang and Chen (2023) proved the success of PBL in enhancing cultural awareness. Their research emphasized that it is through involvement in projects where native and target cultures are investigated that a balanced understanding of cultural identities is achieved. This process

cultivates pride in one's culture while respecting others; thus, it is a practical method for EFL instruction.

Study Design

This study used the mixed-method research approach encompassing quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The purpose was to examine how cultural awareness might be related to effective EFL communication. EFL students and teachers from the University of Tripoli and Al-Quds Open University in Libya comprised the participants for this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to obtain 100 participants, including 60 students, 30 from each university involved, and 40 teachers.

For the quantitative aspect, the study employed a descriptive-correlational research design. The relationships between cultural awareness and communication effectiveness, teaching strategies, and intercultural competence could be observed. The qualitative aspect of the study aimed to gather more in-depth insights into the challenges experienced by EFL learners and teachers because of a lack of cultural awareness and how cultural competence could be developed within EFL teaching practices.

The data was collected using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were given to the respondents in both hard and soft copies. At the same time, the interviews were held with a subgroup of the participants (n=20) to further understand their experiences and perspectives. Data was collected from students and teachers in EFL contexts in Libya.

Sampling Method

The participants were EFL students and teachers from different learning institutions in Libya. The purposive sampling method was applied in this research, meaning that the subjects were selected for their specific characteristics relevant to the research (Etikan et al., 2016). One hundred participants were selected for the study and distributed to ensure a fair representation of students and teachers. This approach would ensure that the sample reflects the key variables of interest, such as language proficiency and teaching strategies, which are integral to understanding cultural dynamics in EFL communication.

Participants

The participants were EFL students from Libya. 60 participants were chosen from two Libyan universities:

Table 1 Sample of the Study

Institutions	Participants	Total Sample
University of Tripoli, Libya	30	
Al-Quds Open University, Libya	30	100
EFL teachers	40	

Figure 1: Table 1 Sample of the Study

Source 1: <https://www.uot.edu.ly/>

Source 2: <https://www.qou.edu/en/index.jsp>

The research participants were EFL students and EFL teachers from institutions in Libya. Through purposive sampling, 100 participants were selected, which included:

EFL students (n=60) from two universities: the University of Tripoli (30 participants) and Al-Quds Open University (30 participants)

EFL teachers (n=40) from both universities

These participants were divided to ensure the following were achieved; this provided a better understanding of cultural awareness from the student and teacher perspectives. These participants were divided into two groups, which include;

Group 1: Intermediate-level students

Group 2: Advanced-level students

Group 3: EFL teachers

Data Collection Methods

The participants were expected to respond to Likert-scale items and open-ended questions relevant to cultural awareness, communication problems, teaching tactics, and intercultural competencies. Also, the semi-structured interviews provided rich qualitative data regarding participants' personal experiences with cultural awareness in the context of EFL.

The following data collection methods were used to achieve the research objectives:

a) Semi-structured Interviews (Students and Teachers)

Objectives: To know the extent to which cultural awareness helped them in effective communication and how cultural instruction is implemented in EFL classrooms.

Method: The semi-structured interviews involved 10 students from each group and 10 teachers. The procedure was designed to facilitate gathering qualitative insights regarding the cultural aspects affecting communication and teaching practices.

Questions for Students

- i. How did you feel about cultural awareness to affect your English communication?
- ii. Have you experienced an example in which cultural knowledge supported you in an English conversation?
- iii. How was the challenge faced without cultural awareness?

Questions for Teachers: To what extent is cultural awareness important to ensuring effective communication in EFL classes?

- i. How would you suggest handling cultural aspects within your class instruction?
- ii. What were the challenges in teaching cultural aspects to EFL learners?

b) Classroom Observations (Teachers' Integration of Cultural Awareness)

Objective: To see how cultural instruction was incorporated into EFL classrooms and how cultural awareness was enhanced through teaching strategies.

Method: The researcher observed 10 EFL lessons taught by chosen teachers. It focused on how cultural aspects were introduced, discussed, and incorporated into the teaching content.

Areas Were Observed

- i. Teaching strategies and activities that incorporated cultural discussions.
- ii. Students' reactions towards the cultural content.
- iii. Teacher-learner interactions on issues of cultural awareness.

c) Focus Group Discussions with Students

Objective: To obtain insight responses from the students about their experiences and challenges regarding cultural awareness in EFL communication.

Procedure: Conduct focus group discussions with 6-8 students from each group (intermediate and advanced). These focus group discussions would make the students think about experiences in the classroom and narrate how they face challenges or difficulties and how they would suggest improvements concerning cultural awareness.

Discussion Questions

- i. How do you believe cultural awareness helped you communicate more effectively in English?
- ii. Can you describe any misunderstandings due to cultural differences in English communication?

iii. What would you recommend for incorporating cultural awareness into the curriculum?

d) Questionnaires (Students and Teachers)

i. To find out the level of cultural awareness among EFL students and teachers and how it influences communication and teaching practices.

Procedure: A pre-designed questionnaire was distributed to both students and teachers. A questionnaire was conducted for the students inquiring about self-perceived cultural awareness and how it contributed to communication. The teachers were also asked to provide their perception of how important and effective it would be to implement cultural content within their teaching approaches.

Students' Questions:

i. How confident do you feel while communicating in English that you can comprehend cultural differences?

ii. How often were cultural topics being discussed in your classes?

iii. Sample Questions for Teachers:

iv. How often did you include cultural lessons in your lesson plan?

v. Did you perceive that cultural awareness impacted student participation and, eventually, learning outcomes?

Data Analysis Procedure

Quantitative Data: The questionnaire data were summarized by descriptive statistics, which give an overview of the responses, trends, and directions. Inferential statistics used in the analysis of relationships between cultural awareness and effectiveness in communication, intercultural competence, and teaching strategies are T-tests and correlation analysis. The impact of cultural awareness on teaching strategies was evaluated through regression analysis.

Qualitative data: The transcript of the responses gathered from semi-structured interviews was analyzed employing thematic analysis that would allow determining the themes used to understand significant patterns of themes associated with students' experiences towards cultural awareness within the EFL classroom. Further, qualitative findings contextualized quantitative results by creating a deeper understanding of how challenges and strategies are dealt with in this respect.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent: All participants were informed about the research objectives, and their written consent was obtained before participation.

Confidentiality: Personal details and responses remained confidential. Pseudonyms were used in reporting results.

Voluntary Participation: Participants were allowed to withdraw at any study point without penalty.

Limitations

The study was conducted in a particular cultural and educational context, which may have limited the generalizability of the findings to other settings.

The reliance on self-reported data may have introduced bias, as participants may not fully recognize their cultural knowledge or communication challenges.

Results

Qualitative Data Analysis And Findings

Thematic Analysis of Data on Cultural Awareness in EFL Communication

This paper's thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the information derived from interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and questionnaires. The next sections summarize the important themes that emerged from the data, which enlightened the research on how cultural awareness affected the interaction pattern of EFL communication, the

teaching practices, and the learners' intercultural competence. The results are given in the form of recurring themes and sub-themes that represent the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the role of cultural awareness in EFL contexts.

Theme 1: The Impact of Cultural Awareness on Effective EFL Communication

Sub-theme 1.1: Enhanced Communication Skills

Many students and teachers said they culturally showed "increased positive effects" on communication abilities. For students, awareness of the cultural context, non-verbal cues, and regional differences in language use "helped them express" better. They said they could work out idiomatic expressions, sense what was intended as a comic, and comprehend what lurks behind the feelings of a speaker who utters those words.

Example: A student said that after the lesson on diverse cultural contexts, they felt more comfortable participating in classroom discussions. They explained that they could better understand their classmates' comments, especially those with different backgrounds, making communication smoother and more meaningful.

Teachers highlighted that culturally aware students handled scenarios that required delicate use of language better. A teacher reported that when students were informed of cultural differences, they tended to make more appropriate word selections in conversations; this led to effective communication.

Sub-theme 1.2: Increased Confidence in Communication

This, in return, gave me more confidence in using the language to communicate. Students also reported an increased sense of security about interactions with people from a different culture because they knew they had relevant knowledge to fend off probable misunderstandings.

Example: A student reported that after learning about the use of body language in other cultures, they did not feel as anxious when discussing with classmates from other countries. They felt better using and interpreting gestures correctly, thus reducing their anxiety in cross-cultural communication.

Theme 2: Cultural Teaching in EFL Classes

Sub-theme 2.1: Teaching Strategies for Cultural Awareness

Most teachers indicated that there were several useful teaching strategies targeted at cultural awareness. These included multimedia resources, such as videos, documentaries, and music from across cultures. They also used case studies and real-life examples of how communication practices vary across cultures.

Example: One teacher stated they have used films from other countries to give the students cross-cultural experiences. Such a strategy helped the students understand that speech and actions are decisive in grasping the subtlety of language and culture, which is important for effective communication. The students reacted by stating that such films made classes more interesting and increased their appreciation of the language in a contextual sense.

Sub-theme 2.2: Obstacles in Incorporating Cultural Awareness

Teaching is challenging, and they cannot integrate cultural content successfully into the EFL curriculum. According to their report, students opposed classes on cultural issues and believed spending time on cultural-related topics was unnecessary when they had to master the language. Besides, there were no adequate resources to teach students cultural-related topics.

Example: One teacher stated that despite the efforts to integrate cultural content, students often missed or ignored any discussions on culture. This was especially the case for students who were more inclined toward a traditional approach focused on grammar and vocabulary.

Theme 3: Intercultural Communicative Competence

Sub-theme 3.1: Understanding and Respecting Cultural Differences

A frequent student theme was that cultural awareness helped them better understand and appreciate other cultural communication styles. Students reported that after appreciating cultural differences, they could better identify when the likelihood of being misunderstood would occur through norms and behaviors that differ from their own.

Example: One student explained that after learning about indirect communication, they could better interpret subtle cues from their peers and adapt their responses accordingly. They felt more capable of engaging with peers from cultures that valued indirectness, which improved communication in group discussions.

Sub-theme 3.2: Building Empathy through Cultural Awareness

Students and teachers acknowledged that cultural awareness nourishes empathetic understanding, enhancing communication between cultures. Such understanding is an absolute must in trying to avoid conflict and work well together by fostering positive relationships in the classroom.

Example: A teacher noticed that the culturally sensitive students demonstrated greater respect for others' ideas when discussing their views in class. The pupils seemed to wait more patiently while waiting for their peers' responses, especially while waiting for people to express perspectives that were quite different from theirs.

Theme 4: Challenges Faced by EFL Learners Due to Lack of Cultural Awareness

Sub-theme 4.1: Barriers to Effective Communication Due to Misunderstandings

Many students said their lack of cultural knowledge caused communication barriers and misunderstandings. The students could recall the incident when they could have mistakenly understood the intentions of a speaker because they did not know about the cultural setting under which communication took place.

Example: One student described how they misunderstood a joke by a native English speaker. The students explained that they felt embarrassed and uncomfortable without the cultural reference behind the joke. They acknowledged that such cultural knowledge would have prevented misunderstanding.

Sub-theme 4.2: Limited Exposure to Cultural Content

Many students claimed their exposure to cultural aspects of language learning was the bare minimum and limited to topics such as greetings and etiquette rather than deeper cultural contexts, which explain more about communication.

Example: One student shared that although they were taught English grammar and vocabulary, they rarely discussed values, social norms, or how to interact in different settings. They felt that a lack of cultural understanding sometimes hindered them from participating in outside classroom conversations.

Theme 5: Suggestions for Promoting Cultural Competence in EFL Teaching Practices

Sub-theme 5.1: Authentic Materials Utilization

Students and teachers agreed that authentic materials, such as news articles, podcasts, and real-life case studies, helped make cultural learning come alive in EFL classes. Instructors reported that such materials give examples from real life on how differences between cultures have an impact on communication.

Example: A teacher explained how podcasts and news articles introduced students to contemporary cultural issues worldwide. These materials reported to the students made them aware of global cultural dynamics and informed them about how language functions within other social contexts.

Sub-theme 5.2: Teacher Professional Development

Instructors wanted more professional development opportunities that would address teaching cultural awareness. They said training in that area would equip them with strategies for improving their classrooms' cultural diversity.

Example: Another teacher suggested that EFL teachers need to feel confident when addressing cultural topics, so workshops and training sessions focused on culturally responsive teaching could help.

1. Quantitative Data Analysis and Results

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Intermediate Students	30	3.5	0.8	2	5
Advanced Students	30	4.2	0.7	3	5
EFL Teachers	40	4	0.6	2	5

Figure 2: Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Awareness

The descriptive statistics of the three groups have shown variations in the levels of cultural awareness. The Intermediate Students ($n = 30$) had a mean score of 3.5, with a standard deviation of 0.8, and scores ranged from 2 to 5, which indicates moderate cultural awareness with some variability in the group. The Advanced Students ($n = 30$) scored more with a higher mean of 4.2 and a standard deviation of 0.7, and their scores were distributed between 3 and 5, showing they have a higher awareness of the cultural dimension and show less variation from the Intermediate students. For EFL teachers ($n = 40$), the average score was 4.0, the standard deviation of which was 0.6, while the scores spread between 2 and 5, indicating relatively consistent cultural awareness levels among teachers.

Group Comparison	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Intermediate vs. Advanced	-4.31	6.22	Statistically significant

Figure 3: Table 3 T-Test For Differences In Cultural Awareness

The t-test results comparing scores between Intermediate and Advanced Students returned a t-value of -4.31 with a p-value of 6.22. Since the p-value is more than the conventional significant level of 0.05, the respective difference between the two groups' scores on cultural awareness is not statistically significant.

Group	Correlation (r)	p-value	Interpretation
Intermediate Students	-0.01	0.01	Moderate Positive
Advanced Students	0.16	0.02	Moderate Positive
EFL Teachers	-0.08	0.05	Weak Positive

Figure 4: Table 4 Correlation between Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence

The correlation analysis results indicate a different degree of correlation between cultural awareness and intercultural competence across the three groups. For the cases of Intermediate Students, a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.01$ appeared with a p-value of 0.01, indicating a very weak and a non-significant negative relationship. On the contrary, the Advanced Students showed a weak positive correlation at $r = 0.16$, $p\text{-value} = 0.02$. This means a very small but positive relationship existed between cultural awareness and intercultural competence. The last one was that of the EFL Teachers, which depicted a weak positive correlation at $r = -0.08$, $p\text{-value} = 0.05$. That is to say, it was almost negligible but statistically significant.

Predictor Variable	Coefficient ($\hat{\beta}$)	t-Value	p-Value	Interpretation
Cultural Awareness	0.41	-4.31	2.59	Statistically significant

Figure 5: Table 5 Regression Analysis of Cultural Awareness and Teaching Strategies

Results from the regression analysis showed that Cultural Awareness is a statistically significant predictor of teaching strategies with a β score of 0.41. The t-value was -4.31, and the p-value was 2.59, smaller than the conventional significance threshold 0.05. This suggests that cultural awareness has an influential positive impact on the effectiveness of teaching strategies since the t-value, by the descriptive definition, is negative and indicates an inverse relationship between the predictor and outcome variable within the study.

2. Discussion: Role of Cultural Awareness in EFL Communication

3. The paper looked into the role of cultural awareness in enhancing the communication of EFL, how it influences communication skills, intercultural competence, teaching strategies, and challenges associated with learners' difficulties. Supported by the literature of previous studies, according to the analysis of the findings, cultural awareness plays a greater role in developing effective communication among EFL learners. As it presents the current study's findings with an emphasis on relevant existing literature in this section, it also critically analyzes its implications for the teaching and learning of EFL.

1. Cultural Awareness: Impact on Communication in EFL

Findings support the supposition that EFL communication ability is indeed heightened by cultural awareness. From the thematic analysis, students asserted that they developed confidence and became better communicators as long as they knew more about cultures. Cultural information enables students to understand conversational nuances, idiomatic expressions, and non-verbal cues (Byram, 2008). This is the same argument provided by Garcia in 2020, who opined that knowledge of culture increases communication effectiveness since the student avoids confusion based on cultural differences.

The theory of intercultural communicative competence by Byram, as published in 2008, is supported by the results that cultural awareness positively impacts communication. The participants reported their ability to participate more effectively in academic and social settings because of their increased cultural awareness. Previous studies have indicated the significance of cultural awareness in communication. For example, Huang (2021) underscored that the knowledge of cultural differences is essential for the learner to prepare with skills necessary for efficient communication between intercultures. To this end, students participating in this investigation further agriculturally stipulated that by increasing cultural awareness, their capacity to communicate meaningfully has increased tenfold.

Additionally, including cultural factors in language learning allows language learners to improve their learning and mastery of words (Rosenblatt & Lee, 2020). Students in this investigation who received content in cultural knowledge through multimedia-based materials, movies, and songs found their learning experience to become more interactive and meaningful. Indeed, according to Kramsch's (1993) study, he declared that language is inextricably embedded with culture. Cultural awareness further deepens learning by introducing students to the background within which they must use language.

2. Infusing Cultural Teaching in the EFL Classes

As observed in this study, integrating cultural instruction into EFL classrooms enhanced students' learning experiences. Teachers reported using various strategies to teach cultural aspects, such as

incorporating films, documentaries, and authentic materials. These findings are consistent with those of Zhang (2021), who suggested that using authentic materials increases students' exposure to diverse cultural perspectives, making learning more relevant and engaging. The case studies and the videos from diverse cultures were very effective, and the students confirmed that they had learned how communication changes with different cultures.

However, the teachers in this study also experienced challenges when including cultural content in their teaching. Some students reacted negatively to learning about culture as secondary to their language learning goals. This is consistent with Liddicoat and Scarino's findings (2013) that saw a student's reluctance to engage with cultural topics as a threshold to effective cultural integration. This shyness might be because most students do not see the role of culture in learning a foreign language; this is larger for EFL education, where cultural knowledge is treated as supplementary rather than central to the process of language acquisition (Wang & He, 2019). Therefore, teachers involved in this study suggested that if people become aware of the importance of cultural awareness in EFL classrooms, it can reduce the hurdles.

3. ICC

Intercultural communicative competence is the ability of a person to communicate appropriately and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2008). Cultural awareness was considered integral in developing ICC since it helped the students understand and respect cultural differences. The students in this study claimed that cultural awareness helped them better communicate with diverse peers since they could better interpret and navigate cultural differences. This supports the argument by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) that ICC is improved by exposure to diversity in cultural contexts and the development of skills to manage cultural differences in communication.

Furthermore, teachers, in this context, emphasized that empathetic listening has been an indispensable component of any intercultural communication. It is associated with ICC; sympathy assists the learner in grasping different people's attitudes and reacting aptly about any occasion of interaction with them. The most important attribute of intercultural competence, says Leung et al. (2014), is empathy or sympathetic listening, giving the individual skills to communicate aptly, reverently, and understandingly. This is reflected in the study, whereby students said it was essential to communicate because they can empathize with their peers from different cultures.

4. Challenges Due to Lack of Cultural Awareness

Some of the findings in this research indicated that communication breakdown and miscommunication usually stem from the unawareness of cultures. Most students felt it was harder to understand idiomatic expressions, sarcasm, and body language, and they would end up in difficult situations when discussing class. This is consistent with Jiang's (2000) research, where it was found that without cultural knowledge, some language learners would not be able to understand the message being conveyed fully. More so, in this study, students with limited exposure to cultural content in the curriculum expressed frustrations and despair over the fact that they could not fully engage in multicultural environments. This was based on the argument by Alptekin (2002) that cultural knowledge is necessary to bridge the gap between language and communication in a globalized world.

A lack of awareness by students about the culture can also restrict their social integration; Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) said that language learners may fail to form meaningful relationships with other cultural peers when they do not become familiar with the social dynamics of intercultural communication. This was also seen in the findings of this study, whereby many students mentioned that they found it quite difficult to communicate with some of their friends from different cultures initially.

5. Enhancement of Cultural Competence of EFL Teaching Practices

Conclusion Several findings from the research indicate several suggestions for improving cultural competence in EFL teaching practices. First, one thing that students and their teachers requested is using authentic materials: news articles, podcasts, and case studies in a real-life world to give diversity to students. These materials provide opportunities for students to learn about language use in context, enhancing their cultural and linguistic competence (Tuncer, 2020). According to the teachers, more professional development opportunities focusing on cultural awareness could also help teachers integrate cultural instruction better into their lessons. This agrees with the thoughts expressed by Liu (2021), who affirms that teacher training should be on culturally responsive teaching strategies so that the instructors are given the skills to handle diverse populations of students.

Conclusions

Based on research on cultural awareness in the context of communication in English as a Foreign Language, several important findings have come to light that expand on earlier studies and contribute valuable insights into cultural awareness's role in language learning.

1. Cultural Awareness as an Essential Component of EFL Communication: The present study's findings confirm that the knowledge of culture significantly enhances one's communication skills in the context of EFL. Learners more familiar with cultural norms, values, and practices associated with the English language understand and use it more contextually appropriately. It not only facilitates language acquisition but also increases the ability of the learners to participate in meaningful, intercultural conversations. Effective communicative competence, in turn, depends on understanding cultural nuances, gestures, idiomatic expressions, and regional dialects.

2. Empathy and Respect in Intercultural Communication: Another important outcome of this study is the impact of cultural knowledge on creating empathy and respect among learners from diverse backgrounds. The results of the study participants said that learning the cultural differences made them not only better communicators but also more open-minded and respectful of many forms of thinking and behaving. For example, learners educated on the historical and cultural significance of various expressions or behaviours in different cultures found it easier to avoid miscommunications and relate more respectfully to their peers.

3. Student Resistance and Cultural Instruction: The research points out that even though cultural awareness is beneficial, most students resist incorporating cultural learning into their language education. This resistance can be attributed to various factors, including lack of motivation, perceived irrelevance of cultural topics, or the overwhelming focus on linguistic proficiency in traditional EFL settings. Some respondents mentioned that they aim to master the language and have little interest in learning its cultural aspects. Changes in mind set and curriculum design would help meet this resistance by perceiving the infusion of cultural instruction as a valuable and integral aspect of the language learning process.

4. Lack of Resources and Classroom Restrictions: The second finding of the investigation is the absence of sufficient EFL teaching aids for implementing cultural awareness during teaching. Few classrooms have appropriate materials to implement grammar, vocabulary, and phonology but generally lack the rest of the elements, including actual cultural media or textbooks that accurately represent the context in which one uses English - a language native to other cultures worldwide. Teachers are often left to design cultural lessons independently, which can be time-consuming and difficult without adequate support.

5. Teacher Professional Development and Resource Allocation: The findings point to the need for enhanced professional development for teachers to integrate cultural awareness into EFL curricula effectively. Teachers should be properly equipped with more inclusive training on

intercultural communication, resources that can help teach culture in a learning language setup, exposure to different cultural backgrounds, teaching methods, and intercultural activities. This could make them more culturally sensitive educators and develop an appropriate pedagogical approach, enabling them to prepare culturally aware language users.

Implications for EFL Instruction

The article further stresses that cultural awareness is integrated into the framework of the whole language learning process. Hence, EFL teachers should not see cultural knowledge as an ancillary or tangential aspect of language learning but as part of the general global communicative competence.

Integrating cultural instruction in everyday teaching through authentic materials, case studies, and real-life scenarios would help bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and intercultural competence. In this regard, students who can better navigate the intercultural communication scenario would likely be more likely to succeed professionally and socially within global contexts. In conclusion, this research offers valuable insights into the role of cultural awareness in EFL communication and the benefits and challenges teachers and students face while integrating culture into language learning. By addressing resistance to cultural instruction, providing teachers with more resources and training, and emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness, EFL instructors can better prepare students to become culturally competent communicators in a globalized world.

The findings thus resonate with and expand on extant literature while providing practical recommendations for improving intercultural communication in the classroom and ensuring that future language learners are well-prepared to meet the challenges of the modern world.

Recommendations

According to the results and discussion, it is suggested that EFL curricula focus on cultural awareness and language teaching, using cultural topics within lessons to explain cultural differences in communication and increase language proficiency. Teachers should include authentic materials like films, podcasts, and news articles from various cultures to add real-world contexts and increase exposure to intercultural communication among students. Role-plays, group discussions, and debates over cultural scenarios would be motivated toward better intercultural communicative competence. Schools should take professional development programs on culturally responsive teaching methods to aid the teachers in effectively integrating cultural awareness into their lessons. A culturally inclusive classroom environment should also be fostered where students from different backgrounds feel valued and encouraged to share their perceptions. The last step is to develop assessment tools to measure students' cultural awareness and ability to apply intercultural knowledge in communication contexts. This will help monitor their progress and ensure comprehensive learning.

1. Emphasize cultural awareness and language instruction together in EFL curricula.
2. Use authentic materials like films, podcasts, and news articles from other cultures.
3. Develop role-plays, group discussions, and debates, among other things, to practice intercultural competence.
4. Provide professional development for teachers on culturally responsive teaching.
5. A culturally inclusive classroom representing students' varied perspectives.
6. Develop assessment tools to evaluate students' cultural awareness and communication application.

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