

A Mixed-Methods Study on the Role of Culture in EFL Teaching for Kurdish Learners

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Abstract

This study explored the role of culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching for Kurdish learners in higher education. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 97 students and 48 teachers across three universities in Iraqi Kurdistan through questionnaires and interviews. The analysis combined percentage-based survey findings with thematic insights from teacher perspectives. The results indicate that cultural integration has a marked effect on language learning outcomes. A large majority of students (85%) reported that exposure to cultural contexts enhanced their communicative competence, while 78% highlighted the value of learning cultural scripts such as politeness and social norms. Similarly, 72% stressed the importance of non-verbal communication, and 90% of participants agreed that culturally relevant materials increased their motivation and classroom engagement. However, the findings also reveal notable challenges: 75% of teachers lacked sufficient training in cultural pedagogy, and 70% cited limited access to authentic cultural resources. These findings suggest that language teaching cannot be separated from cultural content without risking reduced communicative effectiveness. For EFL classrooms in Kurdistan, the study highlights the need to expand teacher training, invest in authentic cultural materials, and promote experiential learning activities. By embedding culture within language instruction, educators can foster more effective, engaging, and globally relevant learning experiences for their students.

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are two elements which are interrelated in more than simple ways. While teaching a language, applying cultural aspects is highly useful for a balanced approach for working with a new language. Language is not merely a set of vocabulary and rules but also encompasses the traditions, values, and worldview of its speakers. Therefore, knowing the language's culture is important for using the language successfully.

Culture is an important aspect of language learning because it enables learners to link the language with real-life situations, thereby improving cognitive as well as communicative skills. When learners are taught the language within its cultural setting, they are better able to deal with varying social situations, including the use of expressions that are considered appropriate in the society and culture of the language speakers. This awareness of culture should promote greater use of the language and help learners to deal with problems caused by differing values, gestures, and expressions.

For teachers, using a specific culture while teaching a language involves more than teaching an excerpt of a culture's traditions and customs. Rather, it is meant to provide an experience that broadens the students' horizons. It helps the learners to use the language from a global perspective and understand the diversity of human communication.

Despite the fact that culture is given increased importance within language learning, many language syllabi still do not prioritize intercultural competence. Language instruction has always focused on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation at the expense of the culture and pragmatics of real-life communication (Scarino & Byram Liddicoat, 1997–1993). This creates a major problem for learners, especially in intercultural settings, because the ability to communicate in such contexts exceeds mere linguistic proficiency (Kramsch, 2013).

Among the perennial problems of language teaching is the problems students have in appreciating humor, idioms, and strategies of politeness, and non-verbal communication which are customarily part of the foreign culture. Such indirect speech is not easily understood in Japanese (Cohen & Ishihara 2010), Korean interlocutors employ indirect politeness strategies (Brown & Winter, 2018) and in China, face-saving acts are employed (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Using a foreign language is not just about having effortless speech but knowing the unwritten rules and expectations of how people from that culture communicate in reality (Fantini, 2020).

This issue has been deeply exacerbated by the simplistic and stereotypical representations of cultures in textbooks. Scholars like Holliday (2010) and Dervin (2016) have pointed out this phenomenon of culture's static representation in educational materials and the need to treat culture, which is inherently complex, in a more appropriate fashion during language teaching. Some English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs have also been criticized for their lack of multicultural English context by focusing on monocentric, native-speaker English norms (Pennycook, 2017).

Despite these studies, very few have examined how culture and EFL learning intersect in the Kurdish context. This gap is important because Kurdish learners face distinct challenges, including limited exposure to authentic cultural resources and insufficient teacher training in intercultural pedagogy.

Therefore, this study focuses specifically on Kurdish EFL learners in higher education to address this research gap. By embedding culture within language instruction, it aims to provide new insights into how cultural understanding can enhance communicative competence and improve language teaching in Kurdistan.

In order to meet these objectives, this project attempts to answer the following major research questions:

1. In what way does the interaction between communication and language acquisition get affected by culture?
2. What are the effective methods of teaching that enable teachers to incorporate cultural understanding into a language class?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The connection between language and culture has long been a subject of inquiry in applied linguistics. Early contributions from Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956) suggested that language is not only a tool for communication but also a reflection of cultural values, shaping how individuals perceive and interpret the world. This idea, often framed as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, established the basis for understanding language as a cultural phenomenon. Kramsch (1993, 1998) later emphasized that learners cannot achieve true communicative competence without also acquiring the cultural knowledge necessary to interact appropriately in social contexts. From another perspective, Chomsky (1965) highlighted the structural rules that underlie all languages, reinforcing the idea that language learning extends beyond grammar to include meaning, purpose, and social context.

Building on this foundation, intercultural competence emerged as a key element in language learning. Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) illustrates how communicative ability is inseparable from cultural awareness. Deardorff (2006) further argued that intercultural competence promotes mutual understanding and reduces ethnocentrism, while Brown (2000) noted that learning a second language often supports cultural adjustment and more flexible attitudes toward diversity. These perspectives demonstrate that language acquisition is enriched when learners develop the ability to navigate cultural differences alongside linguistic skills.

In terms of pedagogy, scholars have consistently shown that integrating culture into classroom practice enhances learning outcomes. Hinkel (1999) and Kramsch (2013) argued that culture-based instruction makes language learning more authentic and socially relevant. Approaches such as content-based instruction (Snow, 2001) and intercultural learning frameworks (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) encourage the use of real-life materials, role-playing, and authentic interactions. Similarly, Ellis (2003) and Willis (2007) observed that task-based teaching provides opportunities for students to engage in meaningful, culturally grounded activities. These methods suggest that culture-focused instruction not only strengthens communicative skills but also fosters learner engagement and motivation.

Despite these advantages, incorporating culture into EFL classrooms presents several challenges. Teachers may lack training in intercultural pedagogy (Hinkel, 1999), resources for authentic cultural content are often limited (Gilmore, 2007), and there is a risk of perpetuating stereotypes if culture is taught in an oversimplified manner (Holliday, 2010). Globalization adds further complexity by blurring cultural boundaries and producing hybrid identities, making it difficult to present culture as a fixed set of practices (Risager, 2006; Pennycook, 2017). These issues highlight the need for careful curriculum design and teacher preparation to ensure that cultural integration in language teaching is accurate, respectful, and effective.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a **mixed-methods design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how culture influences English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning. The quantitative strand used survey data to identify general patterns, while the qualitative strand relied on interviews to gain deeper insights into teachers' experiences.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 48 EFL teachers and 97 undergraduate students drawn from three universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. A random sampling technique was employed to ensure diversity in terms of academic background and cultural exposure. This sample size and composition provided both teacher and learner perspectives, strengthening the validity of the findings.

Instruments

Two primary instruments were used for data collection. First, a survey questionnaire was distributed to both students and teachers to gather their views on the integration of cultural components in language teaching and learning. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore in detail their perceptions, challenges, and strategies for incorporating culture into pedagogy.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed both quantitative descriptive and qualitative thematic approaches. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and frequency counts) to highlight the prevalence of specific views and experiences. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns and themes related to cultural integration in EFL teaching. Together, these methods provided a balanced interpretation of the research questions.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the study, integrating quantitative survey findings with qualitative insights from teacher interviews. Rather than only listing percentages, the results are interpreted to highlight their broader implications and connections to existing research.

Table 1. The Role of Culture in Language Acquisition

Aspect	Findings	Percentage of Impact	Implications
Communicative Competence	Learners exposed to cultural contexts showed better understanding of sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of language.	85%	Teaching language without cultural context is incomplete and ineffective.
Cultural Scripts	Familiarity with cultural scripts (Social norms) improved learners' ability to modify speech for different cultural contexts.	78%	Cultural scripts should be integrated into language teaching to enhance crosscultural communication.
Non-Verbal Communication	Non-verbal cues (gestures, facial expressions) are culturally specific and crucial for effective communication.	72%	Language teaching should include non-verbal communication to avoid cultural misunderstandings.
Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis	Language influences thought and perception, making cultural context essential for language learning.	80%	Language teaching should incorporate cultural contexts to help learners think in the target language.

The survey revealed that 85% of learners exposed to cultural contexts demonstrated better sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. This supports Kramsch (1998), who argued that communicative competence cannot be achieved without cultural awareness. Similarly, the finding that 78% of learners benefited from cultural scripts aligns with Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, which emphasizes adapting language use to context. Teachers also reported that without explicit instruction on non-verbal communication (72%), students often

misinterpreted gestures, echoing Cohen & Ishihara (2010) on the role of pragmatics in language learning.

Table 2. Benefits of Cultural Integration

Benefit	Findings	Percentage of Impact	Implications
Cross-Cultural Sensitivity	Students exposed to cultural content showed greater intercultural awareness and sensitivity.	88%	Cultural integration fosters empathy and reduces cultural misunderstandings.
Motivation and Engagement	Learners reported higher motivation when cultural content was relevant to their personal experiences.	90%	Culturally relevant materials and activities enhance student interest and participation.
Cultural Identity	Students felt a stronger sense of ownership and empathy when their own culture was included in the curriculum.	82%	Inclusive teaching strategies that acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds are essential.
Experiential Learning	Immersive cultural activities (e.g., role-playing, field trips) increased motivation and retention.	85%	Experiential learning methods should be incorporated into language teaching to enhance cultural understanding.

High percentages were reported for motivation (90%) and cross-cultural sensitivity (88%). This suggests that culturally responsive content not only improves language outcomes but also strengthens empathy and engagement. These findings are consistent with Deardorff's (2006) view that intercultural competence reduces ethnocentrism and enhances global readiness. Student interviews confirmed that when their own culture was recognized in class (82%), they felt more valued, supporting Gilmore (2007) on the role of authentic, learner-relevant materials.

Table 3. Challenges in Cultural Integration

Challenge	Findings	Percentage of Impact	Implications
Teacher Training	Many teachers lack the necessary cultural insight and training to integrate culture effectively.	75%	Professional development programs are needed to equip teachers with cultural teaching skills.
Resource Limitations	Lack of access to authentic cultural materials (e.g., books, films) hinders cultural integration.	70%	Schools need to invest in cultural resources and technology to support language teaching.
Cultural Resistance	Some students and teachers resist cultural instruction due to personal biases or lack of interest.	65%	Fostering a respectful and supportive environment is crucial for cultural learning.
Stereotyping	Risk of reinforcing cultural stereotypes if cultural content	68%	Teachers must critically evaluate cultural materials to avoid perpetuating stereotypes.

	is oversimplified or misrepresented.		
Globalization	Globalization has led to cultural hybridization, making it difficult to define specific cultural traits.	60%	Language teachers must adapt to the changing cultural landscape and teach both traditional and emerging cultural facets.

The data also revealed significant barriers. 75% of teachers acknowledged limited training in intercultural pedagogy, a challenge already noted by Hinkel (1999). Similarly, 70% cited insufficient authentic resources, confirming Gilmore’s (2007) critique of textbook culture. Teachers further noted the risk of stereotyping (68%), which resonates with Holliday’s (2010) concern about static cultural representations. These obstacles indicate that without institutional support, teachers struggle to fully embed culture in EFL classrooms.

Table 4. Strategies for Effective Cultural Integration

Strategy	Findings	Percentage of Effectiveness	Implications
Teacher Training	Ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to effectively integrate culture.	85%	Seminars and workshops on intercultural understanding should be mandatory for language teachers.
Experiential Learning	Role-playing, simulations, and project-based learning enhance cultural understanding.	88%	Experiential learning methods should be incorporated into the curriculum to provide hands on cultural experiences.
Authentic Materials	Use of real-life cultural materials (e.g., literature, films) improves language and cultural understanding.	90%	Teachers should incorporate authentic cultural materials into their lessons.
Technology and Digital Aids	Virtual exchanges, multimedia, and online resources provide real-world cultural engagement.	80%	Schools should invest in technology to facilitate cultural learning, especially in underfunded areas.
Curriculum Development	Intercultural communicative competence should be a key objective in language education policy.	78%	Curricula should be designed to reflect a pluralistic and inclusive approach to culture.

Teachers and students identified several strategies as highly effective, particularly the use of authentic materials (90%) and experiential learning (88%). These findings are in line with Ellis (2003) and Willis (2007), who highlighted the importance of meaningful, task-based learning. Technology (80%) and professional development (85%) also emerged as crucial, supporting Liddicoat & Scarino (2013) on intercultural language pedagogy.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results confirm that cultural integration significantly enhances EFL learning outcomes, but challenges such as teacher training, limited resources, and risk of stereotyping must be addressed. The evidence demonstrates that language learning without culture is incomplete, and that embedding cultural elements improves communicative competence, motivation, and global readiness.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that culture plays a central role in EFL learning for Kurdish learners. The high percentage of students (85%) reporting improved communicative competence through cultural exposure confirms Kramsch (1998), who argued that language and culture are inseparable in achieving true communicative competence. This result also supports Byram's (1997) framework of Intercultural Communicative Competence, which highlights the importance of adapting language use to social and cultural contexts.

The study further demonstrated that learners felt more motivated and engaged (90%) when cultural content was integrated into instruction. This is consistent with Deardorff (2006), who emphasized that intercultural competence enhances motivation and reduces ethnocentrism, and with Gilmore (2007), who found that authentic cultural materials increase student interest and participation. The positive responses of Kurdish students when their own cultural background was acknowledged echo Holliday's (2010) concern that culture must not be presented as static or monocentric, but instead connected to learners' lived experiences.

However, the results also revealed significant challenges. The majority of teachers (75%) reported lacking training in cultural pedagogy, a finding that mirrors Hinkel (1999) and Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), who stressed the need for professional development in intercultural language teaching. Resource limitations (70%) further constrained teachers' ability to use authentic cultural materials, confirming Gilmore's (2007) critique of over-reliance on textbooks. In addition, teachers expressed concern about the risk of stereotyping (68%), which aligns with Dervin (2016) and others who warn against oversimplified cultural representations.

These findings have practical implications for Kurdish EFL contexts. Teacher education programs need to provide sustained professional development in intercultural competence, with workshops and training sessions focusing on cultural pedagogy. Curriculum designers should integrate authentic cultural materials and experiential activities such as role-plays, simulations, and virtual exchanges to increase engagement. Universities and policymakers must also invest in accessible digital and physical resources to support cultural integration in classrooms.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small (48 teachers and 97 students), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data were collected from a specific regional context (three universities in Iraqi Kurdistan), meaning results may not fully represent broader EFL contexts. Finally, while percentage-based survey data provided useful descriptive insights, more advanced statistical analysis could have strengthened the quantitative dimension of the research.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable evidence to the growing literature on the role of culture in language education. It demonstrates both the opportunities and challenges of embedding culture into EFL instruction, particularly in under-researched contexts such as Kurdistan.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the intricate relationship between culture and language acquisition, specifically within the unique context of Kurdish EFL learners in higher education. The

analysis of data collected from both students and teachers demonstrates convincingly that cultural understanding is a central component of effective language learning, rather than an optional supplement. The findings answer the research questions by revealing that culture profoundly affects communication by providing essential social and pragmatic context, and that effective teaching methods are those that incorporate authentic materials and experiential activities.

The key outcomes of this research highlight a consistent theme: while the benefits of cultural integration are widely recognized by learners, significant systemic challenges hinder its implementation. Students reported that exposure to cultural contexts markedly improved their communicative competence and motivation. Conversely, teachers expressed a strong desire to incorporate culture but faced considerable obstacles, primarily a lack of specialized training and access to appropriate resources. This disconnect points to a critical gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice in the Kurdish EFL setting.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial. For EFL teaching and curriculum design in Kurdistan, this study suggests three primary courses of action. First, teacher education programs must be enhanced to include comprehensive training in intercultural pedagogy, equipping instructors with the skills to teach culture confidently and avoid oversimplification. Second, there is a pressing need to develop and integrate authentic, culturally rich materials that reflect the dynamic nature of English as a global language. Finally, curriculum designers should promote experiential learning strategies, such as role-playing and project-based tasks, to provide students with meaningful opportunities to engage with cultural concepts.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The sample, though providing valuable insights, was confined to three universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, which may affect the generalizability of the results to other regions. Furthermore, the reliance on descriptive statistics, while suitable for this initial investigation, invites future research to employ more complex inferential analyses to explore causal relationships.

In summary, this research affirms that language and culture are inextricably linked. For Kurdish students to achieve true communicative competence, their learning must be embedded within a cultural framework. Addressing the challenges of teacher training and resource allocation is not merely an improvement but a necessity for advancing English language education in Kurdistan. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating specific intervention strategies to bridge the identified gaps, ultimately fostering a more holistic and effective learning experience for students.

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