

Intercultural sensitivity and its effects on ELT curricula – Teacher insights

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Abstract

Purpose – This qualitative research set out to understand what teachers' assessments were of the context of teaching as it relates to the curriculum, and what they consider appropriate for an optimal teaching and learning experience in a university English language teaching (ELT) context.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data were deemed required to understand the effects and understanding teachers had of the ELT curriculum as it played out in their teaching context. Focus group interviews and observations were the main method for data generation.

Findings – The context has a bearing on the ongoing development of teachers' intercultural sensitivity (IS) frames and how they address IS over time in their context of teaching as it pertains to curriculum.

Originality/value – This is an original research paper which gives insight to knowledge about the relationship between ELT, curriculum and culture.

Keywords Higher education, Curriculum, Culture, Intercultural sensitivity, TESOL, ELT

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Intercultural sensitivity (IS) no doubt has a bearing on the course of teacher instruction. This is more so if the teaching material poses a threat or challenge to the culture of learners as well as teachers. In a qualitative study of expatriate teachers in a Saudi Arabian university, IS affected teachers' practices and challenged their pedagogical expertise. Teachers had various ways of engaging students in a curriculum that was replete with offensive content, mainly based on western culture. This paper is focused not on the challenges of IS during instruction but on the views teachers had about how a modified curriculum could reduce the challenges of student engagement and give students language skills that could be applied in a greater variety of intercultural contexts outside of textbooks replete with western culture. Teachers identify visions to curricula that could improve their context of teaching in a unique context like Saudi Arabia. In addition, insight is given to the importance of IS in English language teaching (ELT), and various useful pedagogies that could be used to integrate its development among the students and teachers themselves.

2. Literature review

The context of ELT can be challenging, especially in countries whose fabric of society is closely tied to culture and religion. Saudi Arabia is an example of such a country whose culture and Islamic faith permeates nearly all aspects of life. Saudi Arabia is the largest



country in the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East. Its official language is Arabic and its government is a monarchy whose constitution is its holy book, the Quran and sayings of Muhammad, the prophet of God to whom the Quran was revealed. Schools in Saudi Arabia are segregated and women and girls are generally veiled. Alcohol is banned in the country and because marriage is sanctified, Islam prohibits any other form of intimacy outside of marriage. Work and trading usually stop at the call of the prayers done five times a day. Therefore, working in such unique contexts such as Saudi Arabia requires an extra set of abilities in addition to a teacher's general repertoire that is in effect more tied to communication than English form and function.

According to the literature, intercultural, cross-cultural and transcultural are used interchangeably and generally refer to communication across cultures (Stone, 2006). A well-grounded definition for IS is one offered by Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), who identify IS as a predictor of effectiveness:

to be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures (p. 416).

IS thus becomes as important as other aspects of English teaching because without it, a breakdown in communication can be a constant threat and impinge on the course of teaching. Consequently, IS begs understanding for any teacher whose students are from one or multiple cultures, especially cultures that differ from that of the teacher.

The literature on IS has borne out of studies in intercultural communication which emerged post-Second World War due to increased international contact and commerce (Smith *et al.*, 2003). Most studies into this phenomenon were concentrated on various professions of exported labour (Kealy, 1989; Ruben, 1989) and then towards the 1980s to the turn of the 21st century, overseas students (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992; Davis and Turner, 1993; Straffon, 2003; Westrick, 2002). Some research extended to teachers in the Asian context (Lai, 2006), but up until the last decade, little in the Middle Eastern context generally and more specifically Saudi Arabia. Since the rise of globalisation and the development of English as a lingua franca, there has been a noticeable demand for English teachers across the world and the Middle East. With this demand is also the demand that teachers understand the challenges different contexts bring to the ELT classroom. It then becomes important to identify the "frames of references" that come into play in these contexts; the contextual frame and its potential discordance with the teachers' biographical frame of reference which Woods (1996) refers to as Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge (BAK): teachers' underlying BAK (p. 213). The contextual frame is a fairly static frame made up by the fabric of its society and is culturally shaped. The teachers' biographical frame is also fairly static as it is also shaped by the fabric of its society and culturally shaped. To be an effective teacher given this circumstance of potential discordance, it will require teachers to become interculturally sensitive which Bennett (1993) defined as a continuum of the awareness, understanding and response that a person has towards people of other cultures (pp. 24–28). Since the teachers' biographical frame is no longer in its normal zone of function but in a foreign one, teachers will require awareness, understanding and appropriate response (i.e. IS) to the new set of contextual conditions imposed by the ELT contextual frame to function harmoniously and effectively inside it.

As a transnational teacher, it becomes imperative teachers understand that they represent their culture. As Sparrow (2000) pointed, teachers' pedagogies and general classroom conduct are a reflection of their own culture which are not always realised by them. These are similar views to Kramsch (1993) and confirmed true in a qualitative study by Duff and Uchida (1997) who concluded teachers were sending messages about their perceptions and identities in their daily lessons without realising it. They called for teachers to reflect on their own teaching

foundations, cultural biases and perspectives, as they may need to change or modify them to suit their specific teaching contexts:

teachers' sociocultural perceptions, identities, roles, and images have an established biographical and professional basis but at the same time are subject to change in response to unexpected questions/problems or critical incidents that arise in each classroom context as the curriculum is lived out (Duff and Uchida, 1997, p. 473).

The teacher variables at play in the ELT classroom are a challenge as noted. The difficulty of this challenge, however, is more or less complicated further by the curriculum and the place culture has in the ELT curriculum for teachers. For a long time, culture in ELT had little significance to teachers as focus was more concentrated on grammar and linguistic competence (Bennett *et al.*, 2003; Lafayette, 2003). Teachers took comfort in grammar as it was finite and could easily be tested. Culture on the other hand did not have such qualities which could be the reason why teachers saw no central role for it in their classes. Traditionally however, the teaching of any limited culture centred mainly on the transmission of factual information about people and their national culture and traditions known as big C culture, the more visible aspects (Brody, 2003). Little c culture being the less visible aspects such as beliefs and behaviours, however, tended to be limited. The problem with teaching the more visible aspects of culture, a limitation itself as culture is much broader based on the definitions given in the literature (Samovar *et al.*, 2005; Seelye, 1996), is it can reinforce stereotypes and other biases of culture by students (Crawford and McLaren, 2003). The ELT curriculum has been strongly advocated to prepare students with not only the English language skills they require but also cross-cultural communication skills that seem more relevant in a globalised world (Byram and Morgan, 1994; Curran and Stelluto, 2005; Kramersch, 1993; Lo Bianco *et al.*, 1999). It becomes important for teachers in this context of teaching to become aware of the limitations or deficiencies their teaching may potentially create for their students trying to communicate in cross-cultural contexts. As Damen (2003) contends, the importance given to English core content such as grammar at the expense of culture is questionable considering that the benefits of culture in a world of increasing cross-cultural communication can far outweigh the benefits of core English grammar knowledge; a view echoed also by teachers themselves in a qualitative study by Basarir (2017).

Culture in the ELT curriculum can affect both teachers' and students' cultural awareness which is the reason it has developed into an important part of the shift from communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence. Teachers in past research expressed they were often too occupied with trying to cover an overcrowded curriculum and found it difficult to find the time to address culture (Hadley, 2001 cited in Durocher, 2007). However, the shift in ELT's aim to intercultural communicative competence has embraced culture on par with language as cross-cultural skills are considered central for any communication competence in English (Byram and Morgan, 1994; Kohler, 2005; Kramersch, 1993). As much as the importance of the teacher's input in addressing culture in the English classroom is, so is the students' input as the struggle to develop their "third place" (making sense of their own and other cultures) (Byram, 2018; Kramersch, 1993; Lo Bianco *et al.*, 1999), may be met with resistance (Steele, 1990). ELT students are generally described as being ethnocentric (Phillips, 2001) and exposure to cultural materials may be seen as a threat to their identity which is why academics warned that the ELT classroom should not be turned into a platform for students that fosters xenophobia or even a rejection of their own culture (Webber, 1987).

Clearly, the place of culture in ELT is a challenge for both teachers and students and how it is addressed and perceived by these groups will dictate the level of the classroom's success. This research set out to establish what the challenges are to teachers based on their experience with the curriculum at hand and in what ways they deem improvements could be made not only for the benefit of their students but also for them as well.

3. Methodology

The approach to this research was more driven by what data were required as it was one related to understanding human behaviour and attitudes, and how they are affected by experience. The best approach for this endeavour is to capture the data as it happens in its natural environment as [Patton \(2002\)](#) describes, in a non-controlling way. [McMillan and Schumacher \(2001\)](#) explain that qualitative methods can be used to understand social phenomena from the:

Participants' perspectives. Understanding is acquired by analysing the many contexts of the participants and by narrating participants' meaning for these situations and events. Participants' meanings include their feelings, beliefs, ideas, thoughts, and actions (p. 396).

By selecting a case study of teachers in the ELT context for in-depth research, the details of interaction within its natural context ([Stake, 1995](#)) could provide the data required to understand the effects and understanding teachers had of the ELT curriculum as it played out in their teaching context. The data methods that give direct access to that kind of in-depth quality data are interviews and observations ([Patton, 2002](#)). The main method for data generation was focus group interviews which were a series of carefully planned, facilitated and directed discussions among participants ([Krueger and Casey, 2000](#)). [Krueger and Casey \(2000\)](#) define a focus group as a carefully planned discussion "designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 18). The aim of these focus group interviews was to allow a natural discussion among the participants and to facilitate focus and detail, including examples and incidents in class, on the topics intended. The other methods were supplementary and they included follow-up interviews for the purposes of elaboration and details that bore out of the focus groups interviews. These were supplemented with live classroom observations via video recordings to capture data in its natural setting. And the last method was the diary method which was a diary given to all teachers to write at their own convenience related incidences or thoughts during the course of the research or the choice to email them.

The research undertaken took place in a university in Saudi Arabia which for the purposes of this paper is X University. X University is a young university which was founded in 2005. The aims of the university were to provide education mainly to its local students in computers, language, business, engineering and economics to service the various petrochemical and other sectors in the city. English was the medium of instruction in the university and most English courses were for the preparatory year students which were general English courses based on a number of British and American books such as *Interchange* and *Headway* which were replete with western culture. Students were given 20 instructional hours per week, five of which were computer based provided by the Rosetta Stone software. The case study included a total of 19 expatriate teachers (13 males and 6 females) from various countries (Jordan, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Philippines, Sudan, UK, and USA) who were given pseudonyms in the analysis to reflect their culture. Teachers were divided into three groups (2 males and 1 female) and invited to participate in three separate audio recorded focus group interviews on campus. The questions mainly centred around teachers experience in the Saudi ELT setting, the factors that affect their IS, and the way they construct IS within their own classes and unique set of students. As noted above, these were supplemented by follow-up audio recorded interviews (6 in total), video recordings (30 lessons in total of 50 min duration of 4 participants) and diary entries (26 in total both email and written) of their experiences. All interviews as well as video recordings were transcribed and diary entries digitised and imported into NVivo for sorting and clustering into themes. Initially, 55 themes were identified and after further analysis, these were reduced to 16 themes that fell into 4 clusters. One of these clusters was curriculum for which the following analysis is based.

4. Curriculum

4.1 *Importance of intercultural sensitivity*

Teachers in this case study showed competence in knowledge about Saudi Arabian culture and elements considered taboo. Based on the university's hierarchy, teachers are instructed by administration on "what" to teach. The "how" to teach factor, however, is dependent on the teacher's IS frames. Experience with dealing with foreign students may give some teachers an advantage, but even for Moslem teachers who had the advantage of sharing the same faith as Saudi students could not be taken for granted; culture means a lot more than religion (Samovar *et al.*, 2005). However, given the chance to integrate what teachers knew and experienced of the Saudi ELT context during their time in X University, teachers displayed strong visions for a curriculum that addressed the issue of IS. Teachers showed agreement about the importance of IS for any new curriculum and that any changes to the curriculum could not be made without properly addressing IS:

So, of course this is very crucial. It has to be taken into consideration and this is the crux of all the debate that we've done so far. Intercultural sensitivity should be taken care of; [it] should be considered when making syllabi (FGB – Khan).

It is evident that IS has reached a place of importance similar to other traditional components of an ELT curriculum, including other language skills such as reading and writing, and language benchmarks. IS has a raised status based on the discussions teachers in this study had mainly through their participation in the focus groups as the following sections will show. Although the focus groups were only intended to learn about teachers' views of IS in ELT and how they addressed it, there was wide agreement among the teachers that it was crucial for any new curriculum to include and address IS. This implies that the current English curriculum is not well planned and is in need of change to give IS its rightful place of importance for a learners' language development and intercultural communication competence skills.

4.2 *Media*

Many teachers expressed the importance of media and the ways they could be integrated to better serve the students and the path to developing their intercultural communication skills. One method was integrating newspapers into ELT lessons. Zarina asserts that local Saudi English newspapers are good sources for exposing students to people of other cultures:

I think the most important thing from my point of view is if we can have access to the newspapers . . . I think that is going to help them a lot . . . we will expose them to the . . . things which are published here in Saudi Arabia so . . . we are not exposing them to anything that is not allowed. That is the most safe and most practical approach to expose them to different cultures and systems (FGC – Zarina).

According to Zarina, not only would the content serve the purpose of teaching students about people and their cultures, but the content of the newspapers coming from Saudi Arabia is generally considered safe and in accordance with government regulations. Although the safety of the content may keep teachers away from the eyes of government and the administration, it is still considerably limited as the content of Saudi newspapers is not as free as one may find in other parts of the world and is government restricted. Despite these limitations, Zarina's vision accounts for the confines of this Saudi ELT context and its importance.

Another form of media one teacher considered worthy to integrate into English lessons is the Internet. The Internet is seen as a rich place replete with content that could be utilised for IS and intercultural communication development purposes:

And you can open up a world of information to your students in the class; a world of culture. You could have (the) *National Geographic* website . . . *Arab News* . . . *BBC news* . . . *CNN* . . . I think having Internet access in the classroom would open up some of these students. They are coming from small

villages and they have not been exposed to anything. Some of the students in the college, their family only has channel 1 and channel 2 on their TV. They do not even have cable. So, they come with these very narrow ideas. Open up the world to them. We are teachers. That is what we are here for. Give us the tools so that we can teach. It does not have to be the whole Internet. You can just choose like I said four or five websites that have been approved and stamped and given that cultural seal of approval and then let us do it; let them see the world (FGC – Safia).

Safia avers that in-class access to the Internet could be something new for many students who come from small villages and poor families. She admits these types of students have very limited exposure to people of other cultures as their media are limited to two local government TV channels. Due to this lack of exposure, she believes that these students' enculturation process is a source for the narrow-mindedness she experienced of them during her teaching at the university. Similar to Zarina's concerns, however, Safia proposes a number of news and documentary websites that could attain government or administration approval for limited Internet access specifically to those websites. With formal granted access, teachers could utilise a wealth of content from specific websites that could help students understand how other people around world live and do things. Khan also believed *National Geographic* would be an excellent source for such purposes:

the thing that is shown on *National Geographic* about animals, about nature, even about laws in different countries. Some of these laws are very interesting, so they can compare these things with the ones in their own country (FGB – Khan).

In this sense, English lessons would allow students to experience the world as they develop language skills that could be applied in different contexts. Because culture is complex, dynamic and unique to certain environments, the discovery of new information about people and their traditions could benefit teachers as much as their students. Despite the content choices, media sources however seemed crucial for any ELT curriculum:

Not just the content of the curriculum, but also the manner in which it is presented. So, it has to be a multi-media curriculum. It has to include videos ... interactive uses of the Internet ... smart board ... [a] variety basically (FGB – Saeed).

Saeed sees multi-media as very important components for achieving curriculum benchmarks. He explains that there should be a variety of them as the presentation of ELT content through these types of media are important for any curriculum designed to engage students and potentially develop their language and intercultural communication skills.

4.3 Individual activities

Saeed also believed it was crucial for any new curriculum to encourage individual initiative. Many teachers previously confessed to a spoon-feeding culture among the students and the heavy reliance students had on their teachers. It was imperative that any new curriculum address this issue and shift students away from teacher-centred learning to more learner-centred. Saeed proposes giving students individual assignments that encourage interaction with foreigners, which could also be an invaluable method for developing their intercultural communication skills:

I think the best way to do it is to ... give them assignments to interact with people around them ... to go and find a foreigner in this country and ... interview them and ... record ... or videotape it and present it to the class ... [to develop] communications skills ... using ... body language in conjunction with the verbal (FGB – Saeed).

Saeed views it imperative that students record their interviews to present in class. By requiring class presentations, students are encouraged to discuss their experiences with their teacher and peers potentially creating a learning experience for the whole class. Thus, Saeed's

idea was about turning an individual assignment into a group one for the purposes of language and intercultural communication development.

4.4 Group activities

A number of teachers in this study favoured the promotion of group over individual activities. These teachers felt such small group divisions would be a source of confidence building for students:

[have] group discussion forums in small groups ... they feel more comfortable and they get more interest in the learning where students are also actively participating ... these all help a lot in making their confidence level better ... [using] small topics ... about their culture, even about their college environment ... [and] disciplines they want to adopt in the future ... we can choose even social topics and something like ... the roles of male[s] and female[s] in society ... women drivers; anything ... to bring them to express their views and points (FGC – Nasreen).

Nasreen contends that a very good way of achieving student participation would be through topics about the current state of affairs that all students could relate to, like the discussion surrounding women driving in Saudi Arabia. To her, the success of group discussions would depend on the amount of interest generated for the students and the extent of their engagement. This confidence-building strategy, with active participation and discussion by students who come from different cities and villages and may have different views, may be an invaluable foundation for developing their communication skills in more intercultural settings. An extensive amount of literature emphasises that the key to understanding others begins by self-awareness (Byram and Morgan, 1994; Phillips, 2001). This strategy also seems to encourage communication between Saudi sub-cultural groups, which could be a springboard of experience for communication with inter-cultural groups. Dania, however, actually envisions creating discussion groups with inter-cultural groups rather than Saudi sub-cultural groups:

They need a discussion group. They need to have more opportunities to be able to ... communicate with other English learners outside of Saudi Arabia ... there were students who in America learning English ... were very interested in being able to speak to Saudi girls because ... they [could not be] exposed to this culture, [only with] what they see in the media ... if they have these opportunities to speak to other people, this is a way for them to show who they are. People have the impression that Saudi women are oppressed. When they talk to Saudi girls, they will know what Saudi girls are like and ... also Saudi girls ... can get a view into what ... other cultures are, not just what has been fed to us from the TV or from radio programs (FGC – Dania).

Dania favours a more intercultural experience for students, which could be in the form of discussion groups between Saudi students and English learners in the West. To her, communication with people from other cultures at the students' level could be a whole new learning experience for them and a source for diffusing stereotypes. She draws on her experience justifying that people from America were eager to know about Saudi Arabians and about the authenticity of information they received through various media about issues, such as whether Saudi women were indeed oppressed. This inter-cultural group discussion idea also had the possibility of building understanding and relationships with more Western students, potentially giving students valuable intercultural experience. Although Dania did not mention the method in which this communication (speaking) would be established between the groups, the Internet seems like the most cost-effective and accessible technology for this type of communication.

4.5 Role-playing

Given that access to people from other cultures may be difficult in Saudi Arabia, especially English language students from other cultures, many teachers saw importance for role-plays

in the ELT curriculum. Teachers described role-plays as valuable methods that allowed students to act with different worldviews. In other words, students are engaged in exercises that require the temporary removal of the lenses with which they see the world while they try different ones. Although the role-play method is a firmly established communicative method of language teaching and a feature method of *Interchange* and other English books in X University's English curriculum, teachers specifically mentioned its use be made for intercultural communication purposes and not exclusively for general communication. Some teachers specified cases where role-playing would be ideal and useful:

You could have a culture week in the class if it is related to one of the topics in the book or you could just do it the first week of the semester where you spend one week just studying different cultures and then at the end of the week do some role-plays. Give them some courage and let two students work together in pairs in a situation. Say you are both Chinese now or one is Chinese and one is Swedish or something like this. You give them a situation and knowing what you know about that culture, how would that person react in that situation and let them do some role-plays in class (FGC – Safia).

According to Safia, the scope of role-playing could be widened to include a special week devoted to studying people of different cultures. The period could include immersing students with information about various cultures with the aim of increasing their role-playing ability. The restriction of her idea, however, was the limited period allocated for its use. This was unlike other teachers who saw role-playing as an open and general teaching method not restricted to any single week:

Yes, role-plays mainly . . . for example . . . a shopkeeper and the customer . . . or the boss of the store . . . we put them in a situation and ask them to [role-play]. And I endorse these activities (FGA – Maheer).

We should have some situations in our books for our students to practise . . . activities which tell the students how to react verbally in these situations . . . like in the airport, in a hospital, or if they're at school or at a bus stop (FGA – Sohail).

Although the examples Maheer and Sohail gave are general and not culture specific, they show support for role-playing in general which could potentially be used to encourage and develop the students' intercultural communication skills. Other teachers made specified role playing in cultural contexts in a more ambitious way preferring to develop programs that would effectively take their students to real life contexts:

Role-play, for instance . . . where they can be exposed to different cultures and different way[s] of thinking and even accents . . . get them out of their shell . . . and just put them in the midst of the culture . . . and if I were to be ambitious, we could get the summer programs, for instance, we're going to send them overseas to interact with other people, other cultures (FGA – Amir).

Although a summer camp in an English-speaking country may be implausible, it shows the importance context plays in communication. Amir believes a change in environment is an invaluable method for enhancing the students' intercultural communication skills. In addition, he also shows consideration for the students' college commitments where the timing of such a program would coincide with the students' vacation period and not impinge on their other academic commitments; English was not the only subject students studied at university.

4.6 Saudising the syllabus

Many teachers in this study considered it is crucial for any new curriculum to be based entirely on Saudi Arabian culture. This view emanated from the problems and issues that an insensitive curriculum creates:

I think whenever you are going to design a curriculum ... the content should be completely culturally relevant to the social norms in the community ... otherwise you are going to face many problems ... the content should be culturally relevant (FGA – Hakeem).

Hakeem's vision of a future curriculum that addressed IS was based on one that was sensitive and tailored to the culture of Saudi students. Here, Hakeem's justifications do not go beyond the discomfort foreign culture causes some students and their learning context, which may be based on some of his negative teaching experiences in the Saudi ELT from interview data. Even though a number of teachers supported Hakeem's idea of Saudisation, it was limited. To these teachers, it appears imperative that a new intercultural curriculum remove only specific items believed to be inappropriate:

I would suggest that things like ... very explicit images [found in the] Rosetta Stone [program] ... and the explicit themes and others, they can [be] easily [re]moved and this is how we ... sort of Saudise the English syllabus ... So only the explicit things that can be sometimes harmful and not acceptable (FGB – Khan).

I would omit that chapter [dating] ... because ... we can teach language very well without talking about these very ... cultural specific things. Dating is obviously very ... culture specific, which I do not think has any relevance with this culture (FGA – Sohail).

Both Khan and Sohail envision an intercultural curriculum as one that debar specific content considered taboo in Saudi society. In their view, explicit pictures and sensitive content, such as the infamous theme of dating, should be removed and substituted with more appropriate content that was not necessarily limited to Saudi culture. They show little support for a curriculum envisioned by Hakeem that was based entirely on Saudi culture, but more for a curriculum that changes taboo elements and considers Saudi culture. Thus, Hakeem's idea of an intercultural curriculum was one that focuses on Saudi culture while Khan's and Sohail's idea was one that conforms to Saudi culture.

Despite the different visions of what a Saudised curriculum would look like, a number of teachers disagreed about the concept of Saudisation altogether. These teachers believed such a curriculum would impinge and have negative effects on the students' intercultural communication development:

I think this is where you're just making them more ethnocentric even if they're not. Make them more accommodating, make them more considerate so when they move into a different society and they interact ... with the different people coming from ... different horizons, they must be in a position to simply understand the culture and the background as well (FGA– Maheer).

Maheer claims a Saudised curriculum is not intercultural but indeed a source for fuelling ethnocentrism. His understanding of an intercultural curriculum is one that includes content about different cultures and that any content deemed sensitive was irrelevant. To him, the whole idea of an intercultural curriculum was about knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the other; Saudi culture had no bearing on such a curriculum. Maheer saw it crucial that an intercultural curriculum equips students with the minimum skills needed for travel and vital intercultural education which [Byram *et al.* \(2017\)](#) see crucial in their theory of "intercultural citizenship" in our globalised world. Furthermore, regarding the notion of taboo, one teacher maintained that a Saudi version of taboos existed in Saudi society and therefore, there was no need to debar them from the curriculum. Teachers admitted students had access and exposure to more than what was traditionally found in books and elsewhere:

we cannot possibly teach English out of context ... introduce whatever themes are appropriate to the English culture. Obviously, you can filter according to their beliefs ... if you introduce something about dating ... dating happens here in [the] Moslem world as well ... the shape is different. I mean, it's still dating and they can engage and go out to eat, etc ... besides, they ... know about the concept

of dating quite well. So, we're not going to have a smokescreen to try to cover everything that's there already. So, exposure is key for them to understand and . . . if they were to go to another country . . . they're not going to feel like black sheep. So, it's crucial to expose them to English [and] . . . foreign culture for that matter (FGA– Amir).

Amir places a lot of emphasis on contextual teaching. His idea of curriculum is one that gives students exposure to contextual uses of English. He believes that a limited form of Saudisation would be required; a more precise term would be “Islamisation” as Amir seems to support filtering content based on the beliefs of students. Regarding the theme of dating, he confesses that some form of it happens in Saudi Arabia and in the Moslem world in general. So, the concept to him does not really seem foreign to students or taboo and hence, should not be debarred from the curriculum; the students need to understand language use based on different contexts, not just the Saudi one. Therefore, Saudising the curriculum was not viewed as a totally viable solution for a curriculum aimed at integrating the development of intercultural communication skills in a comprehensive ELT curriculum; exposure rather than relevance to Saudi culture was seen as integral for any new curriculum by most teachers in this study.

4.7 Changing book themes

Teachers admitted to resorting to censoring offensive content during instruction. To eliminate this requirement, one teacher saw a revamp of new themes in a new curriculum as ideal:

We will clean it from all those phony little topics . . . it would be initially tailored to the linguistic rules . . . finding themes . . . that would usually generate some interest from the students and make them communicate using English . . . sports, for instance . . . students relate to that a lot . . . plenty of themes . . . we could talk about the environment; we could talk about different types of energy; we could talk about science and technology (FGB – Saeed).

Saeed supports a substitution of culturally inappropriate themes to ones believed more suited to the tastes of Saudi students. His choices of themes are related more to physical and concrete phenomena than the metaphysical. Topics about the different types of love relationships, for example, are not favoured by Saeed because he believed students could not, “relate to (them)” (FGB – Saeed). Although themes about relationships may have had societal restrictions, his theme substitution suggestions, which include sport, technology and science, seemed ideal because they were culturally neutral. His theme suggestions, however, drew some criticisms in a focus group by other teachers, “these things are boring Saeed!” (FGB – Bashir). In addition, the themes suggested by Saeed did not revolve around interactions between people but rather between people and the physical world. Thus, it is difficult to envision how such themes could be a source for developing the intercultural communication skills of students in their quest for learning English in an intercultural curriculum.

4.8 Issues with creating a curriculum and the role of English language teachers

Some teachers expressed a bleak relationship between an intercultural curriculum and religion. They questioned whether the goals of an intercultural curriculum could actually be achieved in the Saudi ELT context. Religion was at times projected as a real hindrance to any development of intercultural communication skills in the Saudi ELT context, “now when it comes to religious matters . . . the religion is really . . . the obstacle in showing or practising . . . what . . . they know (FGA – Amir). Amir ascribes two religious associated hindrances to an intercultural curriculum. The first is that religion is uncompromising for Saudi students in general. And the second, which is a consequence of the first, is that intercultural learning will continue to be filtered and limited by the students’ religion. The students seem to be limited

by their religion in how they develop knowledge of the other and apply knowledge of it. Thus, despite having visions for a curriculum that is grounded with an intercultural ELT experience, according to some teachers in this study, students would meet some religious restrictions:

making them ethnorelative is a wider issue and I do not agree with the teachers that say they are educators . . . four months of teaching is not a period for educating them. It's a really short period . . . so making them ethnorelative is not just the entire responsibility of a language teacher who's teaching them just for four months. It depends on the entire system of the education; the years spent in school. Whether they're making them biased or they're making them more open and more acceptable to other cultures; what the media is doing throughout the country (FGA – Amjad).

Amjad considers ELT teachers have a small role to play and are restricted in any effort designed to develop students' intercultural communication skills. The most important of these factors seems to be the limited time teachers have to significantly and positively impact on their students. In addition, Amjad confesses that other factors which are societal and cannot be controlled by teachers during their teaching efforts have a larger role to play and to a large extent, affect the efforts of teachers; teachers in this contextual frame are bound by strong societal factors. He further questions whether it is incumbent on teachers to actually be part of any process designed for developing the IS and communication skills of students:

We're . . . in conflict [with] ourselves as teachers. I'm belonging to a culture that . . . do[es]n't want to accept differences of other cultures . . . Being an authority in the class, I want my students to live the way I want them to live . . . why can't they decide for themselves? If they're ethnocentric, what's wrong with that? They're happy being ethnocentric, so why should I enforce my opinion and my viewpoint toward them to change them to being ethnorelative . . . I find myself in a very difficult situation while I'm talking about all these things. And because I have my own spectacles and glasses when I'm looking at things and I[then] want . . . them (to) look at the world through these glasses! . . . There's probably no need to change them (FGA – Amjad).

Amjad affirms his own ethnocentricity and how being a teacher places him in the position of swaying students to his IS frames of reference; and yet, Webber (1987) warns that teachers should not create environments that place students in such positions. Amjad questions the legitimacy of his views which seem erroneous to him and a source of confusion. To him, students should have the freedom to choose how they view the world, and teachers should not be a source of influence of these choices. He suggests that there is nothing wrong about being ethnocentric and thus, there is no need for developing students' IS. However, not all teachers agree:

they're happy to be ethnocentric, so be it. I think as . . . teachers . . . we know much better than that, because we know the world is a different place, so we really have to prepare them . . . if they were in that situation, then how are they going to deal with it. Are they going to accept the other or not? . . . It is . . . incumbent [we] introduce . . . and prepare them [for] the . . . globalised . . . world (FGA – Amir).

Unlike Amjad, Amir believes teachers should challenge their students' ethnocentric views of the world even if students are content with them. To him, teachers are more experienced and know more about the globalised world of today and thus, it is important they integrate the development of intercultural communication skills in their lessons. He sees teachers not only as a source for language development but intercultural development as well. This suggests that for him, an intercultural curriculum drawing on the diverse cultures of people using English is the way forward for English teachers in the Saudi ELT context, primarily based on the advantages it would give students for communication in a globalised world. Although such an intercultural curriculum may seem ideal for students in this day and age, the role of the teachers in how they deliver their lessons seems crucial for its success:

we are not just simply . . . teachers . . . we are the[ir] guides. I have to tell them what's right or wrong. We have to exploit the particular text in the best possible manner. That's essential (FGA – Maheer).

Maheer views teachers as having a mentor relationship with students and therefore could teach any discourse to their students. However, his idea of mentor appears to stem from the ideas common in collectivistic societies (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), one of which he is from. So in this sense, the teacher's IS frame would affect their students' understanding; a scenario, the extent of which Amjad and many scholars like Kramsch (1993), Duff and Uchida (1997) and others caution about. In addition, such a curriculum seems to be teacher-centred and not student-centred, which is in opposition to one of Byram and Morgan's (1994) premises of their model on Intercultural Communicative Competence. Despite that, the role of the teacher for any future intercultural curriculum seems important. Like the current circumstances in the classrooms that teachers described, teachers see the need to be skilful in creating a platform of understanding between students and other cultures:

You can tell them in non-Islamic [countries] if you were going to talk about something prohibited in Islam and just tell them these are the elements that all the cultures [have], for instance (FGA – Amir).

Amir describes a supportive role teachers would have in creating the “third place” where students make sense of their own culture in relation to others. This is in contrast to Maheer's view above, who sees teachers as having lead and not supplementary roles.

Therefore, the position of teachers seemed to be at the core of any intercultural curriculum. Important is not only what a teacher teaches but also how they teach content. Teachers admit an intercultural curriculum will be met with some opposition and thus, teachers need to be prepared with strategies for dealing with such circumstances. What is clear is that the Saudi ELT context is a complex one and because it is permeated by religion, any intercultural curriculum will have to be restricted.

5. Teacher development of intercultural sensitivity in the Saudi Arabian English language teaching contextual frame

Most discussion of any future visions of ELT in Saudi Arabia centred on curriculum development. Teachers seemed to agree that a revamp of the current curriculum was integral for integrating with language development in the students' IS and communication skills. Fundamentally important however, are the teachers' own IS skills.

Teachers had an integral role in how they taught in an intercultural curriculum and therefore, it is incumbent they were able to display these skills themselves. Some teachers see background knowledge about Saudi Arabia and its culture important and essential for the how process of teaching in an intercultural curriculum:

If they . . . had an orientation [module] called Saudi Arabia 101 explaining to teachers the cultural norms, what is allowed, what is not allowed, any restrictions, things that they need to know because if they come here blind without having any clue about the culture, and some people do, then they will run into problems and their students will suffer (FGC – Dania).

Dania sees many advantages with giving teachers some formal orientation about Saudi Arabian people and their culture. The first is that it addresses ignorance. Some teachers may enter the Saudi ELT context but are ill-equipped with essential knowledge about the people and their culture and thus will find teaching in this context quite challenging. The second is it reduces the pedagogical challenges for teachers where their display of competence in knowledge about Saudi culture can be reflected in their practices. This seems like it may give students a sense of respect because of the awareness teachers may show of their culture. And the third is that it may help teachers avoid offending their students in class. With such knowledge, teachers may reduce problems associated with a lack of Saudi cultural

awareness. The last advantage for such a course could also be related to dispelling any stereotypes one may have:

When I was coming here, obviously I read a lot on the Internet; the views by all these Westerners about Saudi Arabia and they were negative views about them being ethnocentric . . . which you can find on the Internet. So, I came here with preconceived notions . . . so probably I'm looking at my class under the influence of those preconceived notions and the things which I'm told about Saudi Arabia . . . rather than getting involved in this society, integrating in the society, I'm an outsider. I have not tried to integrate to find out what the reality is, and what's there in their mind[s] (FGA – Amjad).

Teachers may strive to learn about Saudi Arabia before coming to Saudi Arabia but may have been misinformed or given misrepresentations about it based on the views of some people or writers. As Amjad explained, entering a classroom with such misinformation, which may have been based on the bias of individuals, may negatively affect a teacher's IS frame and the way they present and conduct their lessons. In addition, teachers may feel reluctant to know more about Saudi Arabian culture through Saudis themselves and through integrating into their culture. Thus, Dania's idea about an orientation course given about Saudi Arabia when teachers arrive, which is the initial place of discordance between the converging frames of reference for IS may help dispel any misinformation teachers may have brought with them. It could also provide them with more accurate and authentic information to give them a proper awareness of the culture and its people. This in turn may positively affect the ongoing development of teachers' IS frames and how they address IS in their classes, allowing them to make preparations based on accurate information about the culture of their students and engage in other teaching methods they may see useful in light of that information.

6. Conclusion

This research was focused on teachers experience of IS in a Saudi Arabian ELT setting. Because the curriculum was replete with content considered taboo in Saudi culture, teachers saw it as crucial to engage in a number of types of censorship in order to reduce offending their students. Teachers had different views about how the censorship should be done, while others questioned its legitimacy. Despite censorship being a prevalent pedagogy, teachers still considered IS important for the English curriculum. They therefore envisioned many ways IS could be integrated into the ELT curriculum in X University. Some of these visions related to the inclusion of various media into the classroom and the creation of a more learner-centred teaching environment. Acknowledging that the Saudi ELT context is permeated by the Islamic religion, teachers nevertheless showed disagreement about the concept of Saudising the English curriculum and basing the curriculum on Saudi Arabian culture. Such ideas seemed to solve the problems that offensive content cause students but at the expense of developing their IS and intercultural communication skills, which are required in today's globalised world. Even though extensive knowledge of Saudi Arabian culture could reduce the challenges teaching English has for foreigners in the Saudi ELT context, it is still a complex context. Indeed, the context has a bearing on the ongoing development of teachers' IS frames and how they address IS over time in their context of teaching.

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