Fostering Cultural Awareness in EFL Classes: An Exploration of EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices in Iranian Language Schools

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Abstract: Culture is an integral facet of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. This qualitative study examined EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools. Based on a researcher-developed protocol, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve EFL teachers from Tehran, Karaj, and Urmia, Iran, whose teaching experiences ranged from 6 to 19 years, with the purpose of identifying their perceptions, experiences, and challenges regarding fostering students' cultural awareness. The interviews drew upon emergent methodology to categorize the interviewees' value-laden comments into six major attitudinal themes of 1) the meaning of culture, 2) the role of English culture and social norms in EFL teaching and learning, 3) the materials and activities teachers employ to foster their students' cultural awareness, 4) benefits of teaching English culture in Iranian language schools, 5) EFL teachers' challenges regarding teaching English culture, and 6) teachers' suggestions or recommendations regarding teaching culture in the Iranian EFL context. The findings of the study illustrated that despite the fact that Iranian EFL teachers preferred to include cultural content in their courses, they faced a variety of challenges regarding teaching English culture and social norms. Further, Iranian policymakers, stakeholders, and educators are expected to provide professional training opportunities for EFL teachers in teaching English culture. Thus, teaching culture should be underscored in EFL classes and instructors are required to explore and apply various effective strategies and authentic materials to enhance their language learners' cultural knowledge. The implications are presented and discussed in more detail in the paper.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness, Culture, EFL Teacher.

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Introduction

There has always been a complex relationship between culture and language since understanding one of them without knowing the other is extremely difficult. Many scholars underscored the significance of incorporating culture in EFL classes and noted that language and culture are inseparable (Almutairi, 2021; Civelek & Toplu, 2021; Ghavamnia, 2020). On the contrary, other researchers pointed out that EFL teachers are required to be cautious about raising their students' cultural awareness (Alptekin, 2002; Modiano, 2001). In the same line, Gonen and Saglam (2012) noted that "teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of teaching culture as a part of language study" (p. 26).

For many years, the primary goal of second language instruction has been to help students become communicatively competent. Besides, instructors' attitudes toward culture have changed during the last decade. It is noteworthy that EFL and ESL teachers need to develop their cultural as well as linguistic competence (Ghavamnia, 2020; Nguyen, Harvey, & Grant, 2016; Piatkowska, 2015). Therefore, EFL instructors are expected to assist their students in gaining cultural knowledge and becoming intercultural speakers (Fantini, 2012). Furthermore, misunderstandings and miscommunications between native and non-native English speakers are most often caused by cultural gaps between the speakers, rather than by linguistic flaws (Czura, 2016; Ghavamnia, 2020). In the same vein, Dabou, Hammoudi, and Chibani (2021) pointed out that: "Knowing the target culture contributes to the knowledge of the self and the other and the cultural shock tremendously hinders the possibility to learn English properly" (p. 254). On the other hand, according to Collins Dictionary, EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers "are teachers who teach English to students in a country where English is not a native language". In this study, Iranian EFL teachers and their perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools were taken into consideration.

Many Iranians have prioritized studying English as a foreign language. In addition, they must acquire both cultural and linguistic knowledge in order to be successful English language learners. Thus, fostering EFL learners' cultural awareness undoubtedly makes them competent speakers. Moreover, EFL teachers are the key agents in Iranian language schools and, due to the importance of the role of EFL teachers, their perceptions are significant. Language instructors' viewpoints must be taken into account since they affect their instruction and students' development and there is a

strong relationship between their perceptions and classroom practices. Therefore, it becomes critical to investigate their viewpoints.

Through investigating Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in EFL classes, curriculum developers can assist course designers in incorporating English culture and social norms into their pedagogical processes. Besides, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there have not been any qualitative studies in the literature on the perceptions EFL teachers hold toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in the Iranian EFL context. Thus, this research topic has remained under-researched and this prompted the researcher to undertake this study. The present study aimed at exploring Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in their EFL classes, exploring the challenges they face regarding teaching English culture, and examining whether or not they consider culture essential to be incorporated in EFL classes in Iranian language schools.

Review of the Literature

A number of theories and models have been proposed for culture by different educational theorists. National Cultural Dimensions Model (NCD) proposed by Hofstede (1983) is one of the most cited models when discussing culture that has been applied widely across disciplines. According to this model, global cultures could be divided into six dimensions based on cultural values, and it is those dimensions that comprise national cultural dimensions. Hoefstede (1983) pointed out that the NCD model illustrates the preference of one state over the other and underscores that the dimensions are relative as humans themselves are unique and might change.

On the other hand, Cultural Adaptation Process Model (CAP) proposed by Edmundson (2007) is intended to facilitate the adaptation of online courses designed to serve one culture to meet the needs of target students from another culture. This model aimed to guide a consistent analytical process (Edmundson, 2007). Besides, the CAP model highlights the importance of the relationship between instructional materials and students represented by national cultural norms. Therefore, this model may serve as a guide for designers wishing to adapt their products to other cultures. This is particularly important in a culture of cross-cultural learning whereby, for instance, a course is created in one culture and is adapted to another.

Furthermore, the Culture-Based Model (CBM) proposed by Young (2009) is "an intercultural instructional design framework that guides designers through the management, design, development, and assessment process while taking into account explicit culture-based considerations" (p. 37). Moreover, the culture-based model was proposed to guide designers

interested in culture-based Information Communication Technologies and answer questions such as how: (a) technology affects teaching design and media? (b) instructional products disclose their nature, and how that nature is culturally and linguistically specific? (c) macro and micro-social, political, cultural, and economic issues mediate the text and context of a document (Young, 2009)?

The way language instructors perceive teaching culture influences their classroom practices and teaching methods (Estaji & Faraji Savarabadi, 2020). In addition, language instructors' primary goal has shifted from teaching communicative competence to teaching intercultural communicative competence in recent years (Ghavamnia, 2020). Besides, Mudawe (2020) asserted that culture is a way of life, and at a deeper level, it refers to how individuals communicate and interpret their ideas in certain circumstances. However, arriving at a comprehensive and straightforward definition of the nature of culture is a culturally based concept itself. Further, culture is at the heart of language, among other things, and is linked to attitude. In this regard, Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, and DeJaeghere (2003) described culture in terms of a positive or negative attitude. Culture is how people react to a society's norms negatively or favorably (Dabou et al., 2021). According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, culture is "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time". Culture connects individuals through identity and influences the way they speak, interact, behave, and live. Language cannot be isolated from the culture of the individuals who use it because culture explains why certain individuals behave and speak in certain ways. Similarly, a society's language is by far the best language for describing that society's culture (Brooks, 2000). Therefore, Brown (2000) pointed out that culture is a component of language, and language is a component of culture.

Kiziltan and Zülal (2020) demonstrated that culture is one of the key factors in foreign language education that might be considered as a way of life since it is the unified norms of a community on the path to make their identities common. That way of life unites everyone in the country around the same expectations, beliefs, rituals, and behaviors, as well as certain critical problems. Thus, culture is a reality that is created by individuals from the same nation. As a result, while it might change through time, its separation from the language would indicate that the language may not strive to survive (Abbaspour, Rajaee Nia, & Zare, 2012; Kiziltan & Zülal, 2020; Wardhaugh, 2010).

Since culture is a multidimensional term that has been debated extensively in language education over the years, there have been both counterproductive and unprejudiced approaches to its inclusion into second or foreign language instruction. Brown (2007) demonstrated that when someone is encouraged or directed to participate in other cultural norms, his or her exaggerated

patriotism emerges, and absorbing the language and culture is ultimately refracted. At this stage, cartoons may be used as authentic tools to assist learners to become more self-aware of their views toward the foreign language, allowing them to avoid contempt for other languages throughout the acculturation process and preventing future culture shock.

Yurtsever and Özel (2021) asserted that listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are the essentials of a language class and students should be encouraged to build strong communication with them beyond their classroom. Besides, culture is considered as the fifth skill of a foreign language classroom, reminding itself via encounters that might be troublesome (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). For EFL students, getting to know different cultures is a challenging task. It cannot occur overnight by studying a single textbook, completing repetitive activities, or having limited opportunities to communicate with native speakers of the target language. Thus, cultural awareness needs to be included in teacher education programs and students need to be engaged in a deliberate process of growth in their foreign language (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). As a result, formal instruction of culture in EFL classes may be beneficial to students. Teaching culture exposes language learners to the lifestyles of the regions where the target language is spoken. When learners walk out into the target language world, getting to know the target language culture can help them feel more at ease in real circumstances. Moreover, students who combine cultural understanding with linguistic abilities become better communicators (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021).

For second language learners, cultural adaption into the target language is critical, and the culture shock they encounter is viewed as a good component in the process of raising their cultural awareness. In contrast, foreign language learners are less likely to be exposed to a culturally varied setting because most of their practices take place in the class. However, materials and interactions might be developed to enhance exposure and foster cultural awareness (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). One of the current issues in ESL and EFL teaching is how cultural awareness influences language teaching. Besides, materials development and planning are among the topics of culture-related debates and employing authentic materials fosters EFL students' intercultural awareness (Beresova, 2015). Hazaea (2020) noted that like two sides of the same coin, culture and language are inextricably linked. Recently, there has been an interest in adopting sociocultural methods of language learning that consider it as a social activity. Guechi and Krishnasamy (2020) noted that several researchers have raised concerns about incorporating culture into foreign language instruction and acquisition. However, only a few scholars, if any, have created techniques to assist instructors and practitioners in teaching culture to EFL or ESL students (Sehlaoui, 2001). In order to include culture into language studies, a variety of activities must be carried out, including

incorporating culture into grammar, writing, reading, and speaking (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). Cultural awareness is an inevitable issue that must be taken into account in a foreign language classroom (Batista, 2018). In addition, cultural knowledge is an important element of language learning and teaching because it assists EFL language learners in changing their perspectives toward English (Batista, 2018).

Culture has been examined by different scholars from a variety of perspectives. A number of studies that have investigated the integration of culture in ESL and EFL classrooms have been discussed chronologically in what follows. For instance, Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011) examined 342 Iranian EFL instructors' attitudes from Mashhad to explore the extent to which EFL instructors preserved their Iranian culture, and whether demographic factors influenced their Iranian culture through a questionnaire. The results of the study indicated that home culture preservation was not achieved by the participants. However, EFL instructors, who experienced more English culture contact, were attached to their Iranian culture. Further, the findings revealed that the younger instructors were less attached to their Iranian culture than the older participants. On the other hand, the instructors' gender had no significant role in the participants' home culture maintenance.

Furthermore, Mahboudi and Javdani (2012) examined the perspectives of 300 Iranian university students from Rabe Rashid University in Tabriz toward treating culture in Iran through questionnaires and interviews. The findings of the study demonstrated that all of the students harbored pessimistic perspectives toward the way culture is addressed in the Iranian EFL context. Moreover, the majority of the students believed that there is little place for teaching English culture in Iranian textbooks, and teaching English in Iranian EFL classes is based on censorial motives.

On the other hand, Liu and Laohawiriyanon (2013) investigated 69 Chinese non-English major university students' attitudes toward interest in learning about little c and Big C cultures along with the sources of target culture they favor through employing a questionnaire. When it came to cultural themes, students demonstrated a stronger preference for Big C culture over small c culture. Home culture was also favored, followed by target and intercultural culture. This might be due to the fact that they were non-English major students who had low interest in developing their knowledge of the target culture in comparison to English major students.

In another study, Tafaroji Yeganeh and Raeesi (2015) investigated the place of culture in Iranian EFL classes. To this end, 291 Iranian EFL teachers from Kermanshah, Ilam, and Kurdistan were selected based on random sampling and filled out questionnaires. The results of the study indicated that the instructors had positive perspectives toward teaching culture in EFL classes and

developing students' knowledge of culture was the main purpose of teaching English culture in EFL secondary-school level classes. On the contrary, the results illustrated that there was a gap between the participants' perspectives and practices in dealing with cultural issues in EFL classes and they did not try to put culture into practice as much as they verbalized it. In another quantitative study, Al-Amir (2017) investigated female language instructors' attitudes toward teaching culture in an EFL class at the University of Jeddah. The researcher employed a three-point Likert scale questionnaire and the results of the study revealed that the majority of female EFL instructors favored the integration of culture in the curriculum.

Namaziandost, Sabzevari, and Hashemifardnia (2018) explored the effect of employing cultural materials on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students. Accordingly, 48 female and 48 male EFL students were selected from several language schools in Ahvaz, Iran. The participants of each gender were randomly assigned into four equal groups of the target culture, international target culture, source culture, and culture-free. Afterward, the researchers administered a pretest to evaluate the students' listening comprehension. Then, they started the treatment and used materials that reflected a particular culture. After the treatment, a post-test was administered. Ultimately, two-way ANOVA was run to test the null hypotheses. The results demonstrated that the students performed differently on the post-test, indicating that culturally oriented materials improved the participants' listening comprehension. Besides, the findings revealed that the male students outperformed female language learners on the posttest.

In another study, Solgi and Tafazoli (2018) explored 32 Iranian university students' attitudes toward the impact of the culture course they attended. To this end, the researchers used a questionnaire and held lecture-type sessions along with several research project presentations. The findings of the study indicated that there was a significant similarity between the participants' attitudes and the theoretical benefits of a culture course as discussed by some ELT scholars.

In a recent mixed methods study, Isariyawat, Yenphech, and Intanoo (2020) explored the perceptions of Thai EFL undergraduate students regarding literature and investigated the effect of literary texts and literature on students' language skills and cultural awareness. An abstract was included in an EFL lesson with 100 English major students at Buriram Rajabhat university in Thailand. A basic random sampling approach was used to select the samples. Moreover, the analyst conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. The findings of the study demonstrated consistency between the students' perceptions. All of the participants of the study emphasized the importance of integrating students' cultural awareness and language abilities through employing literary texts.

In another recent study, Guechi and Krishnasamy (2020) put under the spotlight the significance of integrating culture into EFL classes and examined the major difficulties that arise while teaching culture to ESL or EFL students. The researchers provided the definitions of these two intertwined notions and discussed the qualities and components of culture that must be incorporated into EFL courses. Besides, the researchers defined main concepts such as culture and language, explained how to include cultural studies into foreign and second language courses using a variety of methods, and provided numerous perspectives and assumptions on culture.

On the other hand, Mudawe (2020) examined the cultural phenomena substantiated in a television series for promoting cross-cultural communication in ESL or EFL classes. Friends, being one of the most well-known American sitcoms, was utilized as a corpus in the study to examine the cultural aspects used by speakers in certain socio-cultural situations. The study employed a corpus-based approach to investigate how comedies may be used to improve ESL and EFL students' cultural awareness. Various conversational patterns were studied throughout the study using discourse perspectives to discover cultural subtleties and their effect on the development of the target culture's meaning. The results of the study demonstrated that television series had a significant effect on developing EFL students' cultural awareness of multi-cultural settings as a corpus. Further, television series had a lot of potential for classroom use as a reservoir of genuine resources that might be extremely useful in improving ESL and ESL students' communicative competence in certain socio-cultural situations.

Finally, in a very recent study, Soodmand Afshar and Moradifar (2021) identified the possible relationships between 300 EFL instructors' cultural awareness, self-efficacy, institutional identity, job performance, and reflective teaching in Iranian language schools. The teachers participating in the study were selected based on convenience sampling and completed the cultural awareness, the instructor's sense of self-efficacy, the institutional identity, and the reflective teaching scales. Further, 1500 EFL learners were selected from the instructors' classes to participate in the study. Afterward, structural equation modeling was employed to analyze the findings and the study indicated that all of the predictor factors, except cultural awareness, predicted EFL instructors' job performance. On the other hand, self-efficacy was discovered to be the most powerful predictor of Iranian EFL instructors' performance at work.

To delve into the term culture more deeply, examining EFL teachers' perceptions toward raising students' cultural awareness is required since any analysis of culture requires the analysis of teachers' perceptions of language, culture, and culture teaching (Mudawe, 2020). Accordingly, the following research question was posed to address the aim of the present study: What

perceptions do Iranian EFL teachers hold toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in EFL classes?

Method

Participants

The participants of the current study included 12 Iranian EFL teachers who were selected through convenience sampling from several language institutes in Tehran, Karaj, and Urmia, Iran. Table 1 provides information on the participants. The teachers participating in the study comprised nine females and three males. Their ages ranged from 26-42, with 6-19 years of teaching experience. The teachers had Ph.D., MA, or BA in Translation Studies, TEFL, or English Language and Literature. It is noteworthy that, in order to protect anonymity, the participants' names and language schools are not revealed in this study.

Table 1. *Participants' Academic Degree, Field of Study, and Teaching Experience*

Participants	Degree	Field of Study	Years of Teaching Experience
1. Teacher (T1)	Ph.D.	TEFL	18
2. Teacher (T2)	Ph.D.	TEFL	14
3. Teacher (T3)	Ph.D.	TEFL	7
4. Teacher (T4)	MA	TEFL	8
5. Teacher (T5)	MA	TEFL	7
6. Teacher (T6)	MA	Translation Studies	13
7. Teacher (T7)	MA	Translation Studies	7
8. Teacher (T8)	MA	English Language and Literature	8
9. Teacher (T9)	BA	Translation Studies	19
10. Teacher (T10)	BA	Translation Studies	7
11. Teacher (T11)	BA	Translation Studies	7
12. Teacher (T12)	BA	English Language and Literature	6

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews based on the interview protocol developed by the researcher were conducted in order to address the research question of this study. The first interview items were created based on a comprehensive examination of the related literature as well as the researcher's expertise and knowledge of teaching in Iranian language institutes. In addition, the researcher conducted a group interview with three instructors to test the interview questions and revise them based on the given comments and recommendations. Further, three associate professors of TEFL commented on the interview questions in order to validate them. The interviews employed emergent methodology to classify the participants' value-laden statements into six major attitudinal themes, namely, 1) the meaning of culture, 2) the role of English culture and social norms in EFL teaching and learning, 3) the materials and activities teachers employ to foster their students' cultural awareness, 4) benefits of teaching English culture in Iranian language schools, 5) EFL teachers' challenges regarding teaching English culture, and 6) teachers' suggestions or recommendations regarding teaching culture in the Iranian EFL context (See the Appendix for the complete interview protocol).

Procedure and Data Analysis

As this study was attitudinal in its scope and nature, it employed the principles of qualitative research (Denzin, 2000) to collect data, explore the interviewees' perceptions, and find out the answer to the research question of the study. Most of the qualitative studies which intend to explore the theory inherent in the data inductively and deductively follow an emergent methodology. Therefore, this study aimed to focus on the insightful perceptions regarding fostering EFL students' cultural awareness that appeared from the data through employing the procedures followed by Grant-Davie (1992), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Coffey and Atkinson (1996). It is worth mentioning that the researcher supplemented this approach by an in-depth content analysis (Dawson, 2002), a method in which a researcher analytically examines interview transcripts and assigns codes to the emergent concepts. Thus, in line with Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2009), the researcher conducted interviews to explore EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools.

Furthermore, in order to meet the study's objectives, the researcher developed a series of interview questions for instructors. It should be noted that the researcher followed a semi-structured interview protocol and asked more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion

with the interviewees rather than a straightforward question and answer format. The interviews with the teachers were conducted either face to face or through Skype, lasting between 30 to 50 minutes, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcripts were sent to the participants for verification and possible modification through email.

Afterward, the researcher manually coded and classified the transcribed data to identify "value-laden instances" (Silverman, 2000) which revealed EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools. The researcher assigned a code name to each teacher to make it easier for readers to keep track of each interviewee's contribution. For instance, T1 stands for Teacher Number 1 (see Table 1). Moreover, the wording of the interview excerpts is also significant to note. As is evident in the results, some of the interviewees expressed the same viewpoint on a single question, and their voices were largely similar. Thus, the researcher provided a number of sample extracts obtained from the teachers as evidence for an issue when reporting the number and identities of the interviewees who highlighted a similar issue. Therefore, the researcher analyzed and reported the transcriptions based on the research question and research objective in order to investigate EFL instructors' perceptions toward fostering their language learners' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools.

Results

The research question of this study dealt with the perceptions of EFL teachers toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools. In this section, the researcher reports and describes the interviewees' perceptions through employing supporting excerpts from the interviews. The teachers participating in this study were asked six questions.

1. The Meaning of Culture

The first major attitudinal theme of the interviews was 'the meaning of culture'. In this respect, all of the interviewees asserted that culture is a way of life and includes attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, customs, social norms, religion, language, and nationality of a particular group of people or society that distinguishes them from other categories of people. Besides, the teachers noted that culture is a broad term that affects behavior and is associated with social groups. These points are evident in the following excerpts from T10, T11, and T12, respectively:

"The term culture refers to our nationalities, social norms, belief systems, values, behaviors, and attitudes and encompasses different areas of our lives such as the role of the family, educational systems, gender, and employment at a particular time".

"Culture is the beliefs, values, behaviors, symbols, language, and traditions of a group of people that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and they are transmitted from generation to generation".

"I believe that culture is a very broad concept that includes the knowledge and characteristics of a particular group of individuals, encompassing social habits, customs, religion, ideology, and language".

Meanwhile, all interviewees pointed out that culture refers to appropriate forms of dressing, eating, drinking, thinking, and communicating that are passed from one generation to the next. In this regard, T1, with almost two decades of teaching experience, demonstrated that:

"To me, culture is the way of life, particularly the knowledge, social systems, beliefs, customs, and patterns of behavior shared by a relatively large group of people. Therefore, it refers to views of the world and the way people eat, drink, dress, think, communicate, speak, and behave".

2. The Role of English Culture and Social Norms in EFL Teaching and Learning

The second major attitudinal theme of the interviews was 'the role of English culture and social norms in EFL teaching and learning'. In this regard, the interviewees pointed out that teaching and learning the English language is inseparable from teaching its culture, cultural awareness is of great significance in English learning and teaching, and EFL learners can be successful in communication only through the communication of language competence and cultural awareness. Further, they noted that EFL teachers in Iranian language institutes are free to foster their students' English cultural awareness through teaching cultural and social issues in their classes and help them get better adjusted to English norms. On the contrary, the interviewees highlighted the importance of deculturation in Iran and asserted that the Ministry of Education's policies require school teachers to focus on developing alphabet recognition, reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, and, as a result, English culture and social norms are largely neglected. The following comments from T5 and T7 indicate these points, respectively:

"Culture is the foundation of communication. However, in our country, there is a case for making proactive strategies in English language teaching to protect our national culture. Thus, the Ministry of Education forces school English teachers to assist their students in analyzing their particular situation and defending themselves against potentially imperialistic forces. In contrast, in Iranian language institutes, teachers feel totally free to raise their students' cultural awareness and teach them social issues of English-speaking countries in their EFL classes".

"Culture is considered as an indispensable part of EFL learning. In Iranian language institutes, EFL teachers can help their students become familiar with English culture and social issues through raising their cultural awareness. However, Iranian school teachers are not allowed to raise their students' awareness of the importance of learning American and British culture and social norms. In addition, school textbooks do not include anything about the culture and social norms of English-speaking countries. Unfortunately, even all the names or situations that are presented in the school textbooks are Iranian! This issue might be a political decision that is a considerable barrier to communicative language learning".

3. The Materials and Activities Teachers Employ to Foster their Students' Cultural Awareness

The next major attitudinal theme of the interviews was 'the materials and activities teachers employ to foster their students' cultural awareness'. The interviewees noted that EFL teachers are required to carefully incorporate teaching culture into lesson plans and put under the spotlight the importance of using textbooks on English culture and social norms, teaching common English idioms and expressions, watching English movies, TV series, and documentaries, listening to English podcasts, role-playing, asking students to conduct ethnographic interviews with native speakers of English, presenting them with images and objects that originate from the target culture, making them carry out research, studying English literature, reading English magazines, newspapers, novels, and novelettes, and communicating with native speakers of English. The following excerpts from T8, T11, and T12 elucidate these points, respectively:

"Role-playing and teaching English idioms are beneficial techniques for presenting English culture in EFL classes. Learning English proverbs, idioms, and

expressions leads to a better understanding of English culture and customs. Therefore, teaching English idioms and expressions should not be neglected by teachers in EFL classrooms. Moreover, in role-plays, students could role-play different situations using culturally appropriate forms to address different groups of individuals in the target culture".

"I believe that one of the most effective techniques to foster EFL students' cultural awareness is providing them with cultural images or objects that originate from English culture. Thus, teachers may encourage them to find information about the object by investigating and doing research. Therefore, they can gain insights into the cultural issues of native speakers of English".

"I assume that making EFL students carry out interviews with native speakers of English to gain knowledge and understanding of English social norms is one of the best activities to raise their cultural awareness. Additionally, chatting with their English friends or relatives could also assist them in developing their cultural knowledge".

Furthermore, T2, Ph.D. in TEFL, with 14 years of teaching experience, underscored the significance of reading restaurant menus and English culture textbooks and demonstrated that employing authentic materials from the native speech community might foster students' cultural awareness and engage them in authentic cultural experiences. Concerning this, she pointed out that:

"Reading textbooks on English culture and social norms, reading restaurant menus, novels, newspapers, and magazines such as Reader's Digest, watching English documentaries and authentic TV shows, and listening to authentic English podcasts are among the effective techniques through which we can foster our students' cultural awareness. Moreover, watching English movies and TV series offers students an opportunity to witness cultural and social behaviors that are not obvious in printed materials".

4. Benefits of Teaching English Culture in Iranian Language Schools

Another major theme of the interviews investigated 'the benefits of teaching English culture in Iranian language schools'. All of the interviewees put under the spotlight the significance of developing sociocultural knowledge and incorporating English culture and social norms into

EFL classes. In this regard, they asserted that there is a reciprocal relationship between culture and language and culture must be considered as the fifth language skill. Further, they pointed out that teaching American and British culture and social norms could minimize students' culture shock, make EFL classes more pleasant for instructors and language learners, develop English language instruction, and assist EFL learners in promoting their communication skills and developing rapport and positive attitudes toward native speakers of English. The following excerpts from T5, T6, T8, and T10 elucidate these points:

"Since language and culture are inseparable, language teaching is culture teaching. Moreover, it should be mentioned that, since culture helps to determine how individuals interpret messages and the meanings understood from the messages in different contexts and circumstances, culture and communication are inseparable. On the other hand, the major goal of EFL programs in Iran is the mastery of communicative competence. Thus, raising our students' cultural awareness can help them develop successful communication and interaction with English people and respect cultural differences. Therefore, this is one of the most important advantages of teaching the target culture".

"In my view, foreign language learning is foreign culture learning. Therefore, in addition to listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, culture must be considered the fifth language skill. On the other hand, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with culturally appropriate behaviors. Therefore, teaching culture must be regarded as a vital part of language instruction".

"The English language is a part of English culture and English culture is a part of the English language. In addition, teaching cultural issues could help EFL learners develop sympathy toward English people, have positive attitudes toward the English language, and reduce culture shock".

"One of the major benefits of teaching cultural matters is that it involves understanding how to use language to accept differences, and how to be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things which may be different from yours. Additionally, studying English culture gives our language learners a reason to study English because understanding culture makes studying English more meaningful".

5. EFL Teachers' Challenges Regarding Teaching English Culture

The fifth major theme of the interviews explored 'EFL teachers' challenges regarding teaching English culture'. Six interviewees (T1, T2, T4, T5, T10, and T12) pointed out that since having close contact with English culture and native speakers of English is a rare opportunity for most EFL students in Iran, they might not appreciate the significance of learning the cultural aspects of communication unless they visit another country and experience the difficulties. Further, lack of time and professional development opportunities, fears of showing the superiority of the target culture over native culture, being influenced by English culture, and losing their own identity were among the EFL teachers' other challenges regarding teaching English culture in the Iranian language schools. In this regard, T1 and T2 gave the following comments:

> "Well, I believe that one of the major challenges toward teaching English culture in an Iranian EFL setting is that most EFL instructors are not aware of the importance of teaching the target culture and social norms and assume that communication is merely the application of grammar rules in practice".

> "One of the most important challenges regarding teaching English culture is that our language learners often believe that English culture is superior to their native culture. As a result, in some religious families, the students' parents assume that learning English culture is a huge threat to their native values and social norms".

6. Teachers' Suggestions or Recommendations Regarding Teaching Culture in the Iranian EFL Context

The last major attitudinal theme of the interviews explored 'teachers' suggestions or recommendations regarding teaching culture in the Iranian EFL context'. Five interviewees (T3, T4, T6, T7, and T11) asserted that teaching culture should be underscored in English language classes and EFL instructors are required to explore and apply various effective strategies to enhance their language learners' cultural knowledge. Moreover, they noted that, thanks to the advancement of technology, Iranian EFL teachers may go beyond textbooks and design many activities to maximize their students' cultural awareness. Besides, the interviewees asserted that EFL instructors need to be critical about selecting what to teach because the limited teaching time might not allow them to convey everything related to culture. Besides, the interviewees highlighted the importance of using technology because language

learners might become more engaged with authentic cultural content they can access and explore freely, which allows instructors to tailor digital media to make culture learning more accessible to language learners in EFL classes. The following statement from T7 elucidates this:

> "EFL teachers are expected to encourage their students to use new technologies as well as devices such as their smartphones and laptops to raise and reinforce their cultural awareness".

On the other hand, seven interviewees (T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T8, and T9) pointed out that in order to teach culture effectively, Iranian policymakers, stakeholders, and educators are expected to provide EFL teachers with professional training opportunities on teaching English culture and social norms. The following statement from T9 demonstrates this point:

> "Unfortunately, in the Iranian language schools, EFL teachers receive no training on the ways through which they can teach cultural issues and develop their students' cultural awareness. However, I believe that training instructors to teach culture is of great importance in the Iranian EFL context".

Further, T3, Ph.D. in TEFL, with seven years of teaching experience, spoke about enhancing students' motivation, designing problem-solving tasks, conducting research on English countries and people, and drawing conclusions about their culture and social norms. Concerning this, she gave the following comment:

> "I believe that Iranian EFL teachers should encourage their students to do research on English countries and then make them draw conclusions about English culture and people, their lifestyles, customs, and values. Additionally, I believe that EFL teachers are expected to motivate their students to gain insights into English culture through devising cultural problem-solving activities based on the contents of their lessons and providing them with opportunities to deal with English cultural matters and discuss them".

Discussion

The current study intended to explore EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools. As a result of doing this study, the researcher discovered that, according to the interviewees' perceptions, culture is a way of life and includes attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, customs, social norms, religion, language, and nationality of a particular group of people or society that distinguishes them from other categories of people. Moreover, culture refers to appropriate forms of dressing, eating, drinking, thinking, and communicating that are passed from one generation to the next. These are illustrated in the literature by some scholars (Al-Amir, 2017; Almutairi, 2021; Brown, 2007; Choudhury, 2013; Civeleki & Toplu, 2021; Ghavamnia, 2020; Mudawe, 2020). For instance, Civeleki and Toplu (2021) demonstrated that culture is a broad concept that covers skills, customs, and shared invisible features of a specific community such as the way people live, feel, and interact with others.

The participants' perceptions toward the role of English culture and social norms in EFL teaching and learning revealed that teaching the English language is inseparable from teaching its culture, cultural awareness is of great significance in English learning and teaching, and EFL learners could be successful in communication only through the communication of language competence and cultural awareness. Besides, the results of the study demonstrated that EFL teachers in Iranian language institutes are free to foster their students' English cultural awareness through teaching cultural and social issues in their classes and help them get better adjusted to English norms. In contrast, the Ministry of Education's policies require school teachers to focus on developing alphabet recognition, reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, and, as a result, English culture and social norms are largely neglected. One plausible justification for this finding is that Iranian school teachers and stakeholders see EFL learning and teaching as linguistic imperialism that would have negative impacts on Iranian EFL students' national identity. These findings are in line with some previously conducted studies (e.g. Al-Amir, 2017; Almutairi, 2021; Choudhury, 2013; Civeleki & Toplu, 2021; Dabou et al., 2021; Estaji & Faraji Savarabadi, 2020; Soodmand Afshar & Moradifar, 2021). In this regard, Al-Amir (2017) postulated that language and culture have always had an inextricable and interdependent relationship. Their interdependence comes from the fact that language is not a code free from culture, but an embodiment of it. Thus, learning the English language is inseparable from learning its culture. In the same line, Choudhury (2013) noted that learning a foreign language without learning its culture might only produce

a fluent fool, that is an individual who speaks the language well but cannot understand the social context in which it exists.

The results showed that EFL teachers are required to carefully incorporate teaching culture into lesson plans. Further, using textbooks on English culture and social norms, teaching common English idioms and expressions, watching English movies, TV series, and documentaries, listening to English podcasts, role-playing, asking students to conduct ethnographic interviews with native speakers of English, presenting them with images and objects that originate from the target culture and making them carry out research, employing authentic materials, reading English magazines, newspapers, novels, and restaurant menus, and communicating with native speakers of English were among the materials and activities teachers employed to foster their students' cultural awareness. These are illustrated in the literature by some scholars (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020; Guechi & Krishnasamy, 2020; Isariyawat et al., 2020; Kızıltan & Ayar, 2020; Mudawe, 2020).

In this regard, Isariyawat et al. (2020) explored the effect of using literary texts on Thai EFL undergraduate students' cultural awareness and language skills. They selected the participants of the study based on a simple random sampling method and conducted interviews to elicit data from the participants. It must be noted that all of the interviewees underscored the importance of employing literary texts as integrating students' cultural awareness and language skills. In the same vein, Guechi and Krishnasamy (2020) put under the spotlight the significance of using authentic materials, journals, proverbs, television programs, movies, and magazines. Moreover, they noted that employing authentic materials could assist teachers in incorporating culture into their EFL classes and engaging their students to discuss English cultural issues.

On the other hand, in contrast to the findings of the present study, Ghavamnia (2020) examined ten Iranian non-native English speaking teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward incorporating culture teaching into EFL classes. She selected the participants of the study based on a non-random purposive sampling method from Isfahan, Iran. It is noteworthy that the researcher collected the data through a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview and demonstrated that Iranian EFL teachers do not include much culture teaching in their actual classes even though they feel that language and culture must be integrated and cannot be isolated. Thus, they spend most of their class time teaching language rather than spending time on teaching English culture and social norms.

Meanwhile, the interviewees' perceptions toward the benefits of teaching English culture in Iranian language schools indicated that incorporating English culture and social norms into EFL classes could develop students' sociocultural knowledge, minimize their culture shock, make EFL classes more pleasant for instructors and language learners, develop English language instruction, and assist EFL learners in promoting their communication skills and developing rapport and positive attitudes toward native speakers of English. In line with these findings, Kizi and Ugli (2020) highlighted the importance of teaching English culture and asserted that learning the English language without understanding its culture is like eating a meal without salt. Even if a person does not feel hungry when eating a meal without salt, he or she cannot enjoy it. Therefore, speaking without understanding the essence of the culture of the English language is similar to the example mentioned above.

The findings of the study demonstrated that lack of time and professional development opportunities, and fears of showing the superiority of the target culture over native culture, being influenced by English culture, and losing their own identity were among the EFL teachers' major challenges regarding teaching English culture in Iranian language schools. Such findings emanate from the fact that English culture teaching has not been easily accepted in Iran due to religion. Thus, some educators assume that teaching English culture may harm the mother culture and students' way of thinking. Hence, students should focus only on the local culture as the main source for cultural content. This may also be owing to the fact that, for many stakeholders and educators, culture still plays a minor role in education and they ignore the necessity of teaching culture and training teachers on teaching English cultural issues. In the same vein, Altay (2005) pointed out that most EFL teachers feel inadequate in the amount of information they have and they are unsure about how they are going to transfer cultural skills to their students.

In line with the results of this study, Jabeen and Shah (2011) discovered Pakistani University students' perspectives toward teaching target culture and illustrated that, due to the importance of local religion, the participants showed pessimistic attitudes toward teaching the target culture. Further, in much the same way, Nadia (2015) demonstrated that students at Biskra University held negative perspectives toward the integration of English culture in the EFL classes and noted that students living in Biskra are guided by religious imperatives which are part of their daily behaviors.

Furthermore, this study revealed that applying various effective strategies and activities to enhance EFL learners' cultural knowledge, going beyond textbooks, being critical about

selecting what to teach and the limited teaching time, using technology and authentic cultural content, providing EFL teachers with professional training opportunities on teaching English culture, enhancing students' motivation, designing problem-solving tasks, conducting research on English countries and people, and drawing conclusions about their culture and social norms were among the interviewees' suggestions and recommendations regarding teaching culture in the Iranian EFL context. In like manner, Altay (2005) and McConachy (2008) stressed the importance of educating EFL teachers on cultural awareness and employing authentic and communicative materials to incorporate English culture and social norms in EFL classes.
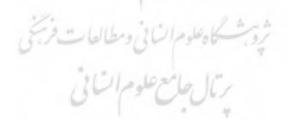
Conclusion

This study investigated EFL teachers' perceptions toward raising their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools. In conclusion, the study demonstrated that language and culture are two inseparable entities and an integral aspect of learning and teaching a foreign language. Furthermore, teaching and learning English well means more than merely teaching or learning the vocabulary and grammar. It also involves knowing how to slip into the English culture and being informed about how native speakers of English see the world and how the English language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society. Meanwhile, Iranian EFL students' mastery of the linguistic elements alone cannot guarantee their success in communicating through the English language. Therefore, acquirement of the cultural element is a must; language is closely related to culture, and culture needs to be learned and taught. However, many EFL teachers underestimate this key component in language teaching. On the other hand, it is worth noting that all languages and cultures have their own consistencies and inconsistencies, so we cannot say a language or culture is superior to the other one. Further, this study found that Iranian educators and policymakers are expected to provide EFL teachers with professional training opportunities on teaching English culture and social norms. Besides, teaching culture should be underscored in EFL classes and instructors are required to explore and apply various effective strategies and authentic materials to enhance their language learners' cultural knowledge.

Further, the findings of this study provide some pedagogical implications that might be of benefit for EFL educators, teachers, and language learners. Iranian stakeholders and educators can consult these results as a means of identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis (Hill & Westbrook, 1997) of EFL teaching in Iranian language schools. The SWOT analysis of EFL teaching might assist Iranian educators

and stakeholders in developing a comprehensive awareness of all the factors involved in language teaching and improve Iranian EFL teachers' practices. In addition, educators can use the findings to provide some professional development opportunities for EFL teachers on teaching culture and raising their students' cultural awareness. Moreover, the results of this study might familiarize stakeholders with the challenges Iranian EFL teachers face and the perceptions they harbor regarding teaching culture and address such concerns in their future practices.

The current study faced certain limitations which need to be taken into account in interpreting the findings. The first limitation of this study concerns the number of teachers. Thus, future studies can include more participants to yield more generalizable results. Besides, the interviewees of this study were selected from language schools in Tehran, Karaj, and Urmia, Iran. Therefore, it made it a little difficult to provide a clear image of all EFL teachers' perceptions toward fostering their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools. Therefore, further research can replicate this study with EFL teachers from different cities of Iran or even other countries. On the other hand, the participants of the current study were selected based on convenience sampling. Thus, the study can be duplicated with other procedures to make the results more generalizable. Moreover, the study calls for further investigation to explore EFL teachers' perceptions toward raising their students' cultural awareness in Iranian language schools considering the differences in their academic degree, age, gender, and teaching experience.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Protocol: *Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions toward Cultural Awareness in EFL Classes*

1. How do you define the term culture?

2. What is the role of English culture and social norms in EFL teaching and learning?

3. What materials and activities do you employ to foster your students' cultural awareness in your EFL classes?

4. What are the benefits of teaching English culture in Iranian language schools?

5. What challenges do you face regarding teaching English culture in your EFL classes?

6. What are your suggestions or recommendations regarding teaching culture in the Iranian EFL context?