

Assessing Pupils' Intercultural Competence in EFL Context

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Abstract:

The current research attempts to shed light on pupils' intercultural competence assessment. This study aims at highlighting the learners' attitudes, knowledge, and skills (linguistic skills, i.e., both receptive & productive skills) towards the target language and its culture. The focus is first and on how Middle school teachers teach the English language and its culture in EFL classrooms and foremost on how to assess their pupils' intercultural competence. Moreover, this research focuses on learners' awareness while learning English and its culture for the sake of developing and assessing their IC. To collect data, a questionnaire is administered to third-year pupils at Ketrouci Mohamed Middle school to reveal whether participants are interculturally competent or not. Data shows learners possess cursory knowledge about both British and American cultures. In addition to this, learners have positive attitudes towards learning about both cultures. However, they are weak in terms of translating passages from the mother tongue to English language and vice-versa. Also, they lack the main communicative skills such as critical-cultural awareness which is important while interacting with peoples from the target English language.

Keys words:

Assessment, Intercultural Competence, Pupils' awareness

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1-Introduction

In the age of globalization, educators and teachers increasingly acknowledge the value of Intercultural Competence. Before introducing the essence of intercultural competence, its definition and components this study aims to shed light on the key element which is the assessment of pupils' intercultural competence in the classroom. Also, the present study aims at assessing 21st-century pupils' intercultural competence in terms of attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

2-First Subtitle : Culture in EFL middle school

Culture has been varyingly understood concerning English language teaching and learning since it is a complex concept. For instance, Claire Kramsch (1998) notes that language teaching/learning and culture are inextricably interwoven. In the same line of thought, Peck (1998) asserts that language and culture are tight and therefore learning a foreign or second language without its culture is inaccurate and incomplete. So, to develop and assess learners' intercultural competence teachers should teach the language and its culture since they are interwoven. This study takes the notion of culture beyond the national paradigm (Risager, 2007), and argues that to interact and communicate effectively with speakers of the target language and culture, gaining intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is inevitable and necessary.

3-Second Subtitle :The history of ICC

The history of ICC can be traced back to Dell Hymes (1972) who introduces the notion of communicative competence as a reaction to Noam Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence (Young, 2008). Hymes (1972) defines CC, as knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context. Hymes (1972) argues that learning a second or foreign language involves not only mastering the linguistic competence (i.e.,

knowing the grammar rules of the language) but also to use the language appropriately in the cultural context. Most importantly, the notion of CC highlights the importance of sociocultural knowledge – knowing what and when to speak, and with whom. Hymes' notion and conceptualization of CC have been widely developed by other researchers as Canale and Swain (1980). They propose the model of CC which consists of three components: grammatical competence (i.e., knowledge of the language code), socio-linguistic (i.e., knowledge of the sociocultural rules in a particular context), strategic (i.e., how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in the communication). In arguing so, Canale and Swain refuted Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence for failing to account for the sociolinguistic 'appropriateness' of utterances expressed in context (Canale and Swain,1980). The focus on interaction with speakers of the target language and culture does not mean one has to be proficient since the aforementioned scholars focused much more on sociolinguistic 'appropriateness', especially in this global era when communication through English involves both native and non-native speakers of English language. In the same vein, Byram et al. (2013) argue that due to globalization, new technologies and mass economic, and refugee migration, the focus on sociolinguistic 'appropriateness' and 'politeness' is inadequate (Byram et al.,2013,p.251).

4-Third Subtitle: Definitions of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Scholars view ICC differently according to their theoretical orientations and interests. Some scholars have used the term 'communicative competence', 'intercultural competence', 'global competence', 'intercultural communicative competence', and so on in their works. In the present study, the term intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence are used interchangeably. This study defines intercultural competence as the ability to

interact and communicate effectively with other speakers of English from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In the same respect, Byram (1997) defines ICC as ‘ the ability to interact and communicate with people across cultural boundaries’ (Byram, 1997, p.7). This study chooses Byram’s ICC definition because of its foundational and influential position in studies of ICC. Undeniably , recent works have extended Byram’s (1997) work but his definition is fundamental and suitable since this present study aims to motivate and equip Algerian language policy-makers, textbooks designers, curriculum and syllabus designers, supervisors(inspectors), teachers as well as learners at Algerian Middle schools not only with English linguistic competence, but also with skills that enable learners to value, accept, and appreciate other people’s languages and cultures regardless of their social characteristics, world view, lifestyles, race, and religion. In addition to this, Byram’s work was influential in language classrooms globally. Byram et al. (2002) have extended Byram’s definition, they define it “ the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and the ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their individuality “(p.10).

5- Fourth subtitle: Intercultural Competence (IC)

First of all, it is necessary to define the term ‘competence’ because it is sometimes understood in different ways. Herein, we will mean by ‘competence’ the combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills to successfully cope with tasks, challenges, or difficulties, individually or together with other people (Pérez Garcia, 2016). Then, there is a wide range of scholars and researchers who have defined Intercultural Competence (IC) as a set of knowledge, affective values and, behavioral and cognitive skills that make people able to efficiently interact in intercultural and diverse contexts without any kind of racist and discriminatory attitude, to peacefully

coexist together and to understand and appreciate the richness of existing differences between diverse cultural groups (Bennett, 2008; Deardorff, 2006). In addition to this, Deardorff (2011) following the Unesco (2013) outlines the requirements that are needed to become interculturally competent. These requirements are:

- Respect the “other” and value diversity to be capable of counteracting possible emerging stereotypes and prejudices among students.
- Be conscious of one’s own cultural identity. It means to have enough knowledge about your cultural heritage, story and customs, and the process in which this identity is built because it enables people to become more empathic with others.
- Comprehend and accept how others can see and understand differently the same reality due to the influence that their cultural background causes.
- Be able to strike up and maintain a respectful conversation with people and organizations from different countries fostering equality and raising intercultural awareness. It refers to what is called “intercultural dialogue” whose relevance is also highlighted by the Council of Europe in the *White paper on intercultural dialogue. Living together as equals in the dignity* that was launched by the Council of Europe Ministers of Foreign Affairs in 2008.
- Adapt to not only live in different places different from your country but also to help foreigners to coexist in your cultural context.
- Establish relationships with the “others”.
- Do not underestimate other cultures but to be able to combine esteem and self-awareness.

In addition to these requirements, which embed values, knowledge, and skills, there are others related to heritage and cultural diversity, civics and

citizenship, and human rights and equality that are needed to coexist in 21st-century societies.

Finally, the UNESCO not only understands IC as “having adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different cultures.” (2013, p. 16), but they also refer to its close connection with linguistic competence.

6-Fifth subtitle: Assessment of Intercultural Competence

Scholars in the field of Intercultural Competence agree that it is not easy to assess learners' intercultural competence. However, they strive to find out different tools and methods to assess learners' intercultural competence. Undoubtedly, several scholars such as Michael Byram, Bennet, Fantini and Ruben have developed tools and methods to assess learners' intercultural competence. Approaches to assessment have evolved to include new techniques and formats which are qualitative and quantitative. Fantini identifies two formats of assessment to be used. First, direct assessment which is conducted in certain period of time usually announced and directly done. Second, indirect assessment that is continuously and sporadically done. It is no apparent to learners while it is being done (Fantini ,2006, p.463). Interestingly, Ruben's behavioral approach to the assessment of learners' intercultural communicative competence (1976) has gained academic success. Obviously, Ruben wants to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice, in the sense that what individuals know and how they can interact in real intercultural encounters. He describes an individual ' competence as based on observed actions and rating scales. As the intercultural becomes increasingly an educational focus, several

academic endeavors to offer more comprehensive models to assessment in general and assessment of intercultural competence, in particular.

Accordingly, assessing learners 'knowledge and understanding is not a hard task. It can be done through easy tests that check learners 'factual knowledge, but what can be difficult to determine is which facts are important (Byram et al 2002 :29). Thus, the multidimensional assessment of intercultural competence has revealed where the pitfalls lie. Michael Byram, a notable figure in the cultural studies, introduces his model of *savoirs* for intercultural competence (1997). As it was aforementioned, the *savoirs*' can be assessed through qualitative and quantitative methods and strategies. For example, learners' factual knowledge (*saviors*) can be tested as a function of what they have seen and learned during the course (Byram, 1997, p.96). Moreover, intercultural competence may be judged in direct assessment through performance assessment (Byram, 1997), portfolios for the estimation of attitudes *saviors* 'engager' (Byram, 2002), or interviews and surveys (Fantini&Tirmizi, 2006). To stay in the European context, Risager (2007) also develops a model which recovers its theoretical basis from Byram's model (1997), but it looks comprehensively detailed.

7-Sixth subtitle: Competency-Based Approach(CBA)

The competency-based approach, or CBA, is part of the overall framework of Competency-based Education. From a historical point of view, this approach is believed to have been coming to light in the USA in the late 1960s and early 1970. It has become known in many parts of the world. Back in the 1990s, this approach, originally, was implemented in schools as a remedial approach to overcome the shortcomings and weaknesses of the previous approaches such as communicative language teaching. The competency-based approach relates to the term competency. This latter denotes a 'know-how-to-act' process which is the outcome of the integration of a set of three fundamental

resources: capacities, skills, and knowledge (Benmostefa, 2013). These resources are made valuable if they enable the learner to cope with problem-solving situations outside the classroom. Fundamentally, capacity refers to a 'know-how-to-learn' process that integrates intellectual, strategic, and knowledge. Skills relate to the 'know-how-to-do' process which means how to deal when facing a problem situation (Benmostefa, 2013). Knowledge is the sum of facts, information, concepts, rules, and principles relating to a given discipline. In short, this approach denotes necessarily the fact of having the ability, skills, and knowledge to do something proficiently (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 141).

The competency-based approach has been introduced in Algeria's educational system in 2003. This approach is introduced in parallel with the reforms in 2002 for the individual to reach international standards. The aim behind the adoption of the new approach is to enhance learners' cognitive abilities with a radical change in both teachers' and learners' roles. Thus, the term 'learner-centeredness' came to light in the education setting where all the learning process is centered around the learner. This latter is no longer a 'spoon-fed' but a co-learner.

Concerning the ELT situation in Algeria, as the case of interest, it has been a concern of the overall reforms. The textbooks are the teachers' guidelines and the learners' resources, are radically changed in all scholar levels. They are designed to align with learners' needs and percept the content about the real world. Undeniably, the competency-based approach is part of the process related to the educational level of integration. Though facing considerable criticism, this approach is seen to hold a great promise in EFL teaching/learning process.

8-Seventh subtitle: Methodology

To collect data, a questionnaire is administered to pupils at Middle Schools in Mostaganem. The questionnaire attempts to reveal pupils' knowledge, attitudes, and skills while acquiring the target language (English) and its culture in EFL classrooms. In addition to this, the questionnaire tries to reveal learners' awareness while learning the target culture. The questionnaire is classified into three categories that seek to assess learners' knowledge, attitudes, and skills vis-à-vis the target culture. The first part focuses on learners' knowledge about American and British culture and if they(learners) are aware of similarities and differences of American and British ways of life, education system, geographical location, historic landmarks, and so forth. The second part of the questionnaire is devoted to learners' attitudes towards American or British culture; whether the learners possess negative or positive attitudes towards the target culture(s). The questions posed intend to investigate if the learners are empathetic, tolerant, overt, and respectful towards the other. The third part is devoted to learners' skills. The learning skills which receptive (listening & reading) and productive (speaking & writing) are targeted in this study to investigate if the learners can communicate effectively in English.

9. RESULTS And/ Or Conclusion :Data Analysis Attitudes

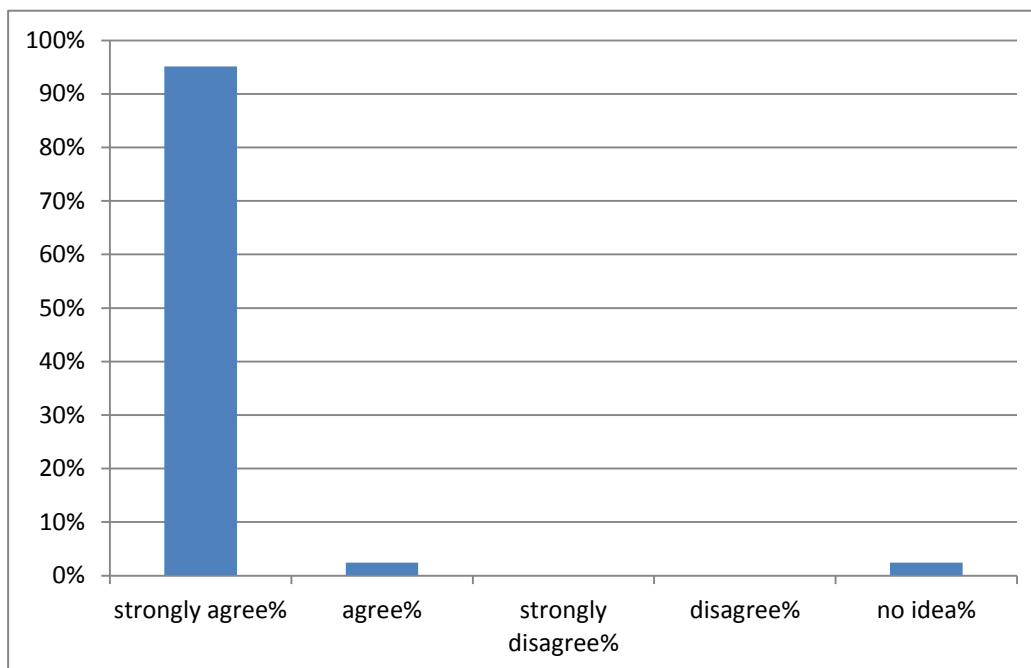


Figure1: Learners' attitudes towards the target culture

1.8.1 Attitudes

The questions about the respondents' attitudes are more focused on the notion of otherness in general and the Americans and British, in particular. Respondents' answers show openness towards the other cultures in questions: Q 2(61%), Q3(66%) and Q9(41%). Questions related to accepting the American and British customs show positive attitudes such as Q4(56%) and Q10(56%) and Q11(66%). However, a contradiction occurs at the level of tolerance and stereotyping. For instance in Q5: dating boys and girls from Great Britain rates 41% and only 22% show tolerance towards girls who wear short skirts, 39% also show intolerance towards girls who smoke or drink alcohol and 22% for Americans and British who eat pork. This contradiction in latter questions justifies the respondents' positive attitudes vis à vis their own culture; about (95%).

Knowledge

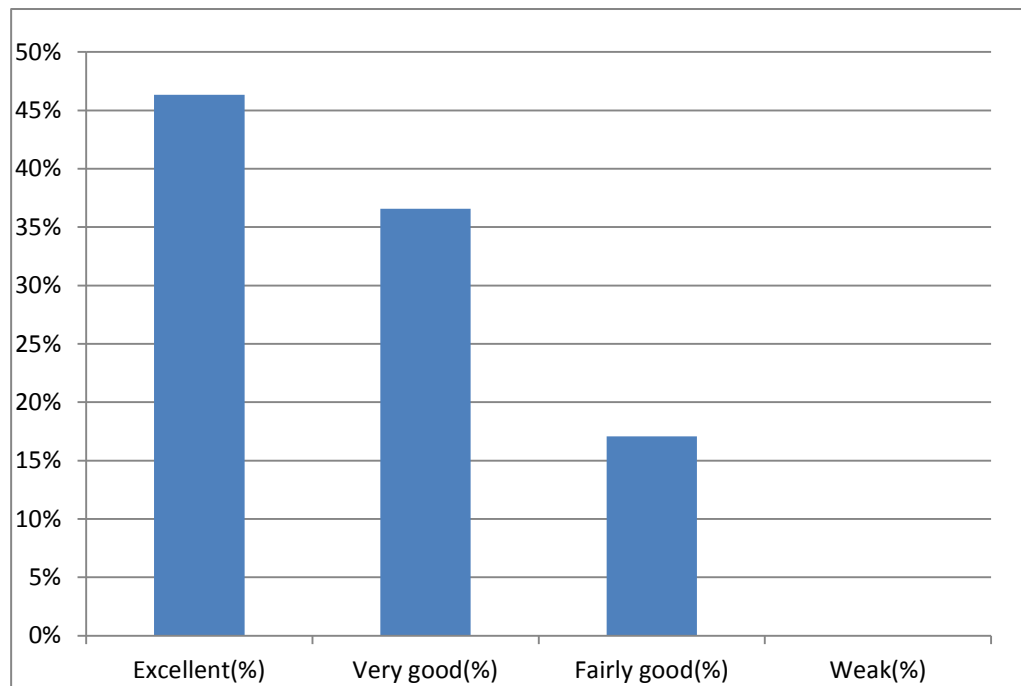


Figure 2 Learners' knowledge about the target culture

1.8.2 Knowledge

The table above shows that more than 45% of the participants ‘answers possess general knowledge about British and American cultures. They can distinguish between educational and political systems in both countries. For instance, 88% of the participants know that the USA is a state, whereas Great Britain is a monarchy. 83% of the participants’ answers indicate that they can identify both currencies and flags of each country. 73% of the participants’ responses show that they know about both countries’ educational systems if it is obligatory, private or public, however, their knowledge of the social life is relatively weak since only 2% of the participants answer very good when asked if kissing an American or British is possible when meeting for the first time.

Skills

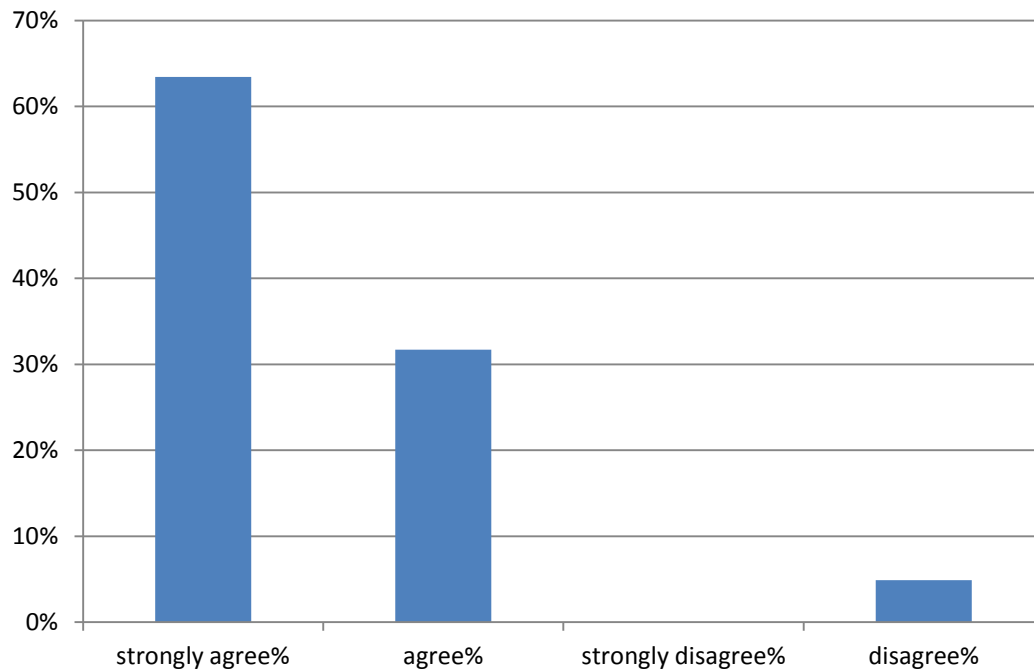


Figure3 : Learners' skills to acquire the target language and culture

1.8.3 Skills

The respondents' responses show that they possess both basic receptive and productive skills. On the one hand, more than 60% can communicate via oral or written messages. The percentage for writing the email, listening to a song, and reading a passage ranges between 63%, 73%, 73% respectively. On the other hand, pupils' pronunciation of long words is weak. Very few pupils encounter difficulties while communicating in English. Concerning translation, only 15% of the participants are unable to translate a passage from English into their mother tongue. While 59% can do so.

Conclusion

The study under scored the importance assessment of intercultural dimensions (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) which are the cement to develop and assess learners' intercultural competence. This latter is important to be integrated into curriculum and syllabus at Algerian Middle Schools since English language is introduced at first-year Middle School. This study suggests that it is advisable to teach English and its culture right from the start since they are intertwined. In addition to this, learners will be, right from the beginning, aware of their own culture and the target one.

This study has clearly shown that to assess learners' intercultural competence using a competency-based approach as a solid theoretical foundation to enhance and assess learners' IC; various shortcomings have been identified.

- Linguistics skills are necessary to be taught, however, there should be aligned to intercultural skills such as the ability to compare, and analyze the learners' own culture to the target one.
- Assessing linguistic skills is not enough to see whether the learners' are interculturally competent or not. There should be both assessment of linguistic skills and intercultural ones.
- Skills like tolerance and openness are the cement of IC and there should be integrated into the syllabus so that learners will know how to tolerate and be open to the other.
- A cursory knowledge of the target culture should be avoided.
- Attitudes towards the acceptance of the others should be targeted.
- Text books should provide learners with real-life problem-solving situations tasks that assist them to perform well.