

# Culturally Designed Tasks to Enhance EFL Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence



P-ISSN: 1680-9300  
E-ISSN: 2790-2129  
Vol. (26), No. (2)  
pp. 41-50

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## Abstract:

Teaching culture and fostering intercultural communicative competency has received dramatic attention lately as it is the aim of the current study. It is recognized that mere knowledge of culture and the skills required to develop intercultural communicative competency is hardly enough. Extensive, focused, and organized practice is in order. The study utilizes narrative conversational activities as basis for the tasks to enhance intercultural communicative competence. The population consists of 72 learners evenly divided into 2 groups; group A is randomly chosen to serve as the experimental group. The two-group pretest-posttest design is used in the study for statistical assessment of the hypotheses proposed. The results show efficiency of the procedures adopted as the statistical treatment shows a significant improvement in ICC.

**Keywords:** Culture, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Tasks, Narrative Conversations.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the “genetically” inherited controversy of the concept of culture and how it should be taught, teaching culture has received a great deal of attention lately. Under globalization and rapid technological advancement, intercultural communication has been inevitable. Along with this urgent need, a series of challenges stood out. Some are related to the concept of culture itself. Some are attributed to the methodological application of teaching culture and intercultural communication. Nevertheless, endeavors have been conducted to achieve the aim. The present study is an

attempt within the same line.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

As the researcher has been teaching and emphasizing “culture” in the Department of English/ College of Education for Humanities for many years now, the experience had been so exciting and the students were enthusiastic. Yet, according to the observations, the learning process has been like the “Egg of Columbus”. Students’ lack skills of discovery and interpretation which must be enhanced. Raising learners’ awareness of culture and its impact on language learning is insufficient. Sheer knowledge of culture and the skills required for proper intercultural communication should be practiced hands-on in our department. It is about time to put this theoretical knowledge into practice through direct involvement aiming for enhanced intercultural communication as it is an urgent educational need in the world of globalization.

### 3. Aim of the Study

The study aims at enhancing Iraqi EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence (henceforth ICC) through theory and practice so that they would function as intercultural mediators. In other words, integrating theoretical awareness and knowledge into practical exercises that activate the skills to discover and/or interact and skills to interpret and relate as well as students' knowledge and attitudes. Such enhancement should involve operationalizing contextual cross-cultural concepts within the tasks.

### 4. Hypotheses

Two hypotheses are posed to assess the achievement of the aim of this study as follows:

H1: 1. There is no significant difference between the mean scores of both the culturally oriented group and the general communicatively oriented group in the post-test.

H2: 2. There is no significant difference between the mean scores of both the culturally oriented group and the general communicatively oriented group in the post-test in terms of the four components of Byram's model.

### 5. Scope of the Study

The study is limited to fourth-year students at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul for the academic year 2023-2024. Ten cultural domains (themes) have been prescribed as major source of input.

The target community is the United States of America and the United Kingdom as prominent examples of English cultures. Authenticity has been decided as the primary condition for any teaching material to be considered. Hence, the materials integrated into the cultural tasks are mostly movies, series, songs, podcasts, talk shows, and news channels. The tasks themselves have been designed in form of conversational stories, namely, narratives.

### 6. How to teach culture and intercultural communication?

As mentioned earlier, this question is debatable to the extent of exhaustion. It is rather impossible to find a total accord among researchers in the field concerning how could/should culture be taught or how can intercultural communicative competency be fostered.

In Ilyas (2024), it has been suggested an adaptable and flexible framework towards intercultural instruction. The framework emphasizes the concept of interaction being interactional rather than transactional. Byram's model of ICC has provided the theoretical backbone for the framework, while the course of conversation is assigned to be the "guinea pig". In the study at hand, the framework is put to the test.

### 7. Acculturation

In this study, a differentiation between "Enculturation and Acculturation" is taken into consideration. For many reasons, acculturation should be the aim of foreign language learning contexts. Berry (1980) argues that both differ only in terms of the outcomes, yet, this difference has a crucial impact on teaching culture to foreigners. Acculturation would remove many obstacles from the way of teachers of English.

*"Enculturation and acculturation can be considered a set of points along a continuum: learners can be fully assimilated (enculturation) or alternatively, they might find themselves integrated into the new culture while retaining their identity, or they might be marginalised by the other culture, or totally alienated from it" (Berry,2003).*

The study doesn't intend to totally immerse my students in foreign cultures or make them exact replicants of native speakers of English, rather than to prepare them to be international mediators and negotiators who can function well in cross-cultural communications. The goal is to equip them with the tools required to be ambassadors of their cultural background who are open and accepting to the other. The goal is to build their characters and prepare them to access and be accessed in an atmosphere of tolerance and flexibility.

### 8. Procedure

The experiment started on September 20th and ended on May

the 15th 2023-2024. The two-group pretest-posttest design is used in the study. As the instructor of the subject of conversation in both the evening and morning studies in the department, I assigned the 4th year evening study group to be the population of the study; (72) students. They are already evenly divided into two groups A and B alphabetically. Group A is randomly chosen to serve as the experimental group. In other words, it would be culturally oriented, while group B represents the control group; i.e. it would be in the domain of general communication orientation. A test adopted from Al-Husseiny & Ilyas (2022) which is based on Byram's model (1997) with the aforementioned cultural domains for source of input. The test is conducted pre-and-post instructions (see Appendix "A" for a sample). The results are statistically treated to investigate the level of significance of the differences. It is worth mentioning that any intervening variable, such as, time, materials, and assessment conditions, is controlled for more reliable and valid results.

### 9. The task design and implementation (lesson plan)

The narrative conversational task combines five main elements; goals, input, activity, learners' role, teachers' role, and setting. All the cultural domains chosen as input are weaved into this framework and the task is tailored in accordance with Byram's specific goals in the form of authentic materials. For a sample task, see (Appendix B).

As the lesson plan is set, students are grouped into 10s. A speaker is chosen to narrate a conversational story related to the main cultural themes assigned by the researcher from the authentic material. The speaker is chosen deliberately to be one of the skilled students and the researcher would guide him and provide some training beforehand. The concept of "listenership" is carefully explained to the speaker. He is directed to involve the students, attract their attention, and engage them in full-scale participation. The teacher

(researcher) supervises the groups, gives instructions, gets involved when necessary, and most importantly provides "ad hoc" cultural input as suitable. The researcher has always seized the opportunity to provide the students with the most common proverbs, idioms, and quotes from iconic movies and literature.

After the narration is over, the groups are dismantled. The researcher highlights explicitly the main cultural concepts that were the focus of each narration. Then a discussion relating these concepts to the Iraqi, Arabic, and Muslim cultures take place. The debate emphasizes the enhancement of skills such as tolerance, flexibility, patience, sense of humor, suspending judgment, adaptability, curiosity, open-mindedness, etc.

### 10. Statistics

The study utilizes the T-test for two independent samples to statically treat the data collected from both the pre-and-posttests as well as for the component skills separately. The results show the following:

#### 10.1 The Pre-Test

Tables below show the group statistics and the statistic treatment of the pre-test:

**Table 1. The Pre-Test Group Statistics**

	VAR00008	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
VAR00004	Pre-exp.	36	53.4412	2.20164	0.26699
	Pre-cont.	36	52.8676	1.46506	0.17766

Table 2. The Pre-Test Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre-exp.	Equal variances assumed	7.176	0.008	1.788	70	0.076	0.57353	0.3207	-.06076	1.20782
Pre-cont.	Equal variances not assumed			1.788	70	0.076	0.57353	0.3207	-.06162	1.20868

## 10.2 The Post-Test

Tables below show the group statistics and the statistic treatment of the post-test:

Table 3. The Post-Test Group Statistics

	VAR00008	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-exp.	Exp.	36	54.7941	2.37875	0.28847
Post contr.	Contr.	36	52.9412	1.44431	0.17515

Table 4. The Post-Test Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post-exp.	Equal variances assumed	16.105	0	5.491	70	0	1.85294	0.33748	1.18547	2.52041
Post contr.	Equal variances not assumed			5.491	70	0	1.85294	0.33748	1.18418	2.52171

## 11. The Skills

Table 5. Attitudes Group Statistics

### 11.1 Attitudes

Utilizing the T-test shows that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of both the culturally oriented group and the general communicatively oriented group.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Attitudes	Exp.	9	53.2353	2.13686	0.51827
	Contr.	9	52.9412	1.47778	0.35841

Table 6. Attitudes Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.152	0.152	0.467	16	0.644	0.29412	0.63013	-.98941	1.57764
Equal variances not assumed			0.467	16	0.644	0.29412	0.63013	-.99571	1.58394

### 11.2 Knowledge

The statistical treatment yielded a significant difference between the mean scores in favor of the culturally oriented group over the general communicatively oriented group.

Table 7. Knowledge Group Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post knows.	Exp.	9	54.7059	1.75943	0.42672
	Contr.	9	52.9412	1.47778	0.35841

Table 8. Knowledge Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post knows.	Equal variances assumed	0.166	0.686	3.167	16	0.003	1.76471	0.55727	0.62958	2.89983
	Equal variances not assumed			3.167	16	0.003	1.76471	0.55727	0.62825	2.90116

### 11.3 Skills to Discover and/or Interact

Another significant difference is found in favor of the culturally oriented group over the general communicatively oriented group.

Table 9. Skills to Discover and/or Interact Group Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post Skill to discover or interact	Exp.	9	56.6471	2.47339	0.59988
	Contr.	9	52.9412	1.47778	0.35841

Table 10. Skills to Discover and/or Interact Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post.	Equal variances assumed	5.813	0.022	5.303	16	0	3.70588	0.6988	2.28247	5.12929
discover and/or interact	Equal variances not assumed			5.303	16	0	3.70588	0.6988	2.26983	5.14193

### 11.4 Skills to Interpret and Relate

As shown in the table below, no significant difference is found in the mean scores between the culturally oriented group and the general communicatively oriented group.

**Table 11. Skills to Interpret and Relate Group Statistics**

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post Skills to interpret and relate	Exp.	9	53.5294	2.06512	0.50086
	Contr.	9	52.9412	1.47778	0.35841

**Table 12. Skills to Interpret and Relate Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post Skills to interpret and relate	Equal variances assumed	1.173	0.287	0.955	16	0.347	0.58824	0.61589	-.66630	1.84277
	Equal variances not assumed			0.955	16	0.347	0.58824	0.61589	-.67144	1.84791

## 12. Discussion of the Results

As expected, no significant differences are found in the results of the pretest between the two groups. Culture and cultural knowledge and aspects, to a great extent, are overlooked in the department. Therefore, it is natural to find a low level of cultural communication competency.

As for the overall achievement of the students in the post-test (the study's first hypothesis), the results show a significant enhancement in their cultural communicative competency. The tasks are "effective", and mission accomplished.

Yet, after a whole academic year of cultural training, the results are deemed rather interesting and some reflection is in order (the second hypothesis). For instance, when there is no significant difference, as far as "attitudes" is concerned, this would shed some light on our students' psychological and cultural abilities.

They are already highly motivated, open-minded, and have the set of skills required to overcome attitudinal barriers against learning the cultures of English communities. Being seniors in the department made it obvious to them how important culture is in communication and obviously, they are eager to access the targeted cultures. "Cultural anxiety is at its lowest

level”.

Another interesting and rather unsatisfactory finding is that their skills to interpret and relate need much more training. They would do just fine discovering the sociocultural aspects in any discourse they are put through. Even if they can't pinpoint them exactly, they certainly can feel it in their guts. But more difficulty is found when it comes to interpretation. It is even more difficult to relate such aspects to their own culture. For instance, it is noticed that the students are able to identify or recognize an idiomatic expression within oral or written discourse, yet, they can't really put their fingers on what it means contextually. Moreover, they had a hard time relating it to Iraqi or Arabic culture or finding an Arabic equivalent.

Finally, it was noticed that despite these difficulties, students showed a capacity to overcome them as soon as some guidance was provided even if it was just a “hint”. My statement earlier about how teaching culture is just like the “Egg of Columbus” has been repeatedly observed. All that our students need is some guidance, knowledge, and a little push on the right path.

### 13. General remarks and pedagogical implications

Some certain conceptions and beliefs should be revisited by Iraqi applied linguists, curriculum designers, teachers, and professors. For example, interactional rather than transactional interaction must be at the top of teachers' aims as it is considered the threshold for intercultural communication. Moreover, aiming for intercultural communicative competency should be prioritized under globalization. Iraqi EFL setting is in desperate need for providing interculturally communicative competent teachers and learners. At college level, culture is inevitable. It should be taken more seriously.

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## Appendix A

### A sample of the test

#### Attitudes

For each of the following situations, choose ONE option only:

(Objective A: Willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with British/American people in a relationship of equality, distinct from seeking out the exotic or the profitable.)

1. In a party, you were introduced to a British reporter, your reaction would be:

A. I simply smile at him and continue talking to my friends as if he's not there; I fear I may embarrass myself, and I am really not that interested.

B. I try to chat with him in English even if it's difficult because I'm really interested in knowing him.

C. I don't like talking to foreigners but I will force myself to; maybe I can convince him to publish my work.

(Objective B: Interest in discovering different perspectives of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own culture and that in the UK/USA.)

2. You phoned your Christian American friend and invited him over for lunch on the coming Wednesday, but he apologized to you saying he will be celebrating 'Ash Wednesday' with his family. Then he asked you whether you or Christians in your community celebrate 'Ash Wednesday' too, your reaction would be:

A. I show interest and curiosity in knowing and discussing what Ash Wednesday is, why he's celebrating it, and how it is different from or similar to Christian traditions in my community.

B. I feel annoyed and hang up the phone immediately. I spent time preparing for this, yet he prioritized his beliefs over my invitation. I was wrong to have invited him in the first place.

C. I tell him we can have lunch on another day and try to change the subject, because I'm not interested in discussing differences or similarities in our values, beliefs and cultural practices.

Objective C: Willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment.

3. You are enjoying a day-off with your friends from the UK, USA and other nationalities. At some point, they start talking about their cultural practices and its relation to their values and beliefs. Following that, they start sharing their honest opinions about how they perceive each other's cultural practices and values. When your British friend starts giving his

opinion and perspective about some phenomenon related to your own culture, your reaction would be:

A. I find an excuse and leave them, because I can't stand other people's perspectives towards my cultural practices and values.

B. I listen to him and tolerate his opinions, because I'm curious about how my cultural practices and beliefs are perceived by others.

C. I get angry and interrupt him; nobody is to give his opinion about my cultural practices, not even a friend.

Objective D: Readiness to experience the different stages of adaptation to and interaction with another culture during a period of residence.

4. You are in the USA for some business and you have to stay for a month. Everything around you is different from home, and every time you leave the hotel you end up with some embarrassing situations due to your lack of knowledge about their culture and daily life practices. It's been two weeks already, and you still have two more weeks to stay, what would you do?

A. I stay at the hotel most of the time and leave only for essentials so as to avoid being embarrassed again.

B. I leave my business undone and go back home; I can't stand this humility and embarrassment anymore.

C. I try to stay positive and learn from these embarrassing situations and adapt myself to their culture, though it not easy at all.

Objective E: Readiness to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction.

5. You are in the UK, and your friend told you about a funeral which you must attend. Your friend understands that you have different cultural background thus advices you to wear black, bring white lilies, listen patiently to the old stories and memories shared by the family of the deceased, and he even gives you few suggestions about what to say, your reaction would be:

A. I try to follow my friend's advice as much as possible though it's out of my culture, because I want to show my respect to the family of the deceased.

B. I refuse his advice because I have my own cultural practices and I don't have to follow their culture and buy flowers or wear black.

C. I try to find excuses so as not to attend the funeral, because I don't like to be engaged in their cultural practices whether verbal or non-verbal.

## Appendix B

### A sample lesson plan

#### Objective A

**Willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with British/American people in a relationship of equality**

#### Goals:

- Developing students' ability to discover and engage in cross-cultural communication.
- Directing students' attitudes towards tolerance and acceptance of other cultures.

#### Input:

- A narration related to the main cultural themes assigned. The narration shows some extreme differences between the students' culture and that of the USA and/or the UK. A movie, "The Patriot", is used for narration scenario.

#### Activity:

- A conversational task that requires the students to get involved, interact, debate, and reflect.
- An explicit discussion that involves engaging all students through asking questions and collecting and

analyzing answers.

#### Learners' roles:

- Students are asked to listen and observe.
- Interrupt if necessary.
- Take notes for later discussion.
- Respond if they are asked.
- Elaborate using turn-taking mechanism.
- Evaluate and reflect on their own performance and their peers.

#### Teacher's role:

- Providing pre-activity guidance and training.
- Assigning goals and objectives.
- Choosing the cultural input and focus he deems more important and related to the objectives.
- Supervising the group's activities.
- Providing technical and emotional support.
- Providing cultural "ad hocs" when possible.
- Participating in the activity to ensure correct application.
- Explicitly explain the targeted cultural input.
- Holds a debate and discussion at the end of the activity.

#### Settings:

- The activity is executed in form of group work.
- Tasks are narrative conversations. Things that happened, would/could happen that are culturally loaded and related.
- Materials include cultural themes assigned earlier, authentic related materials, and unprompted or prompted "ad hoc"