

Into a Task-Based Language Teaching Approach to Raise EFL Students' Intercultural Competence: A study on Algerian EFL Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

With the increasing globalization and intercultural meetings, developing the intercultural competence for EFL learners is a necessity for guaranteeing effective and appropriate intercultural exchanges and communication. The current study aims to shed light on EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the implementation of the TBLT approach in the EFL setting, and its effect on EFL learners' acquisition of intercultural competence. Accordingly, this study addressed middle school teachers of the English language in the Algerian context. Particularly, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to (60) EFL teachers to gather their views of the effectiveness of the TBLT approach, and to shed light on their teaching practices related to the notion of intercultural competence. The data obtained was analysed manually, and the findings were displayed via pie charts. The results indicate that EFL teachers had mostly positive attitudes towards the use of TBLT to raise EFL learners' intercultural competence. Moreover, based on their responses, the teaching practices adopted within the TBLT framework are likely to provide learners with an environment that supports their development of intercultural ability.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Communication, Task-Based Language Teaching, Algerian Middle Schools.

1. Context of the Study

1.1. Background to the Study

It is believed that learning a language should not be separate from its social context. Social awareness and knowledge, in addition to the skills that govern language use in its social context, should be considered (Pinto, 2018, p. 2). Recently, and due to the increasing effects of the globalized world, deciding about the real-world communicative situations to be considered when course design, as well as learners' needs in such contexts, has become a difficult task for teachers (Kramersch, 2014, p. 296).

The traditional conventions of teaching a foreign language view the target language as a mere system of linguistic items. Nevertheless, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through form-based teaching approaches is no longer considered effective by current trends in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The Standards (2006; cited in Moeller and Nugent, 2014, p. 1) maintain that language goals are mainly concerned with the 5C's: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. This definition of the current language learning goals draws attention to the significant role of the language context in effectively acquiring and maintaining communication. Therefore, special focus should be given to the role of the intercultural aspect in language learning (Moeller and Nugent, 2014, p. 1).

Kramersch (2014, p. 301) contends that recent evolutions in language teaching trends (the 1970s and the 1980s) entail the teaching of language for use instead of the teaching of "(...) how to master the intricacies of the linguistic system". Accordingly, prevailing approaches to teaching EFL in the currently designed curricula mainly consider the contextual features that govern language use, which can give rise to interculturally competent L2 learners. As a definition to the latter concept, Moeller and Nugent (2014, p. 2) state that "an interculturally competent speaker of an FL possesses both communicative competence in that language as well as particular skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge about a culture".

Based on this definition, it is assumed that the current EFL teaching practices seek to develop EFL learners' attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours that ensure the appropriate and effective use of the target language. This is mainly because using the target language not only entails linguistic differences but also differences at the level of the target culture and societal norms. The teaching of the cultural aspect of the language is not necessarily limited to considering the target culture. Kramersch (2014, p. 302) specifies that language teaching now comprises the teaching of both "a global culture of communication for the sake of communication and local cultures of shared values". The tasks' major objective is to accomplish a non-linguistic activity, yet the use of certain linguistic items is not disregarded as they form the means that enable fulfilling such non-linguistic objectives (Pinto, 2018, p. 6). In brief, a task "(...) fournit un contexte, une raison "sociale" pour acquérir une langue" (Van Thienen, 2009, p. 60).

1.2.Statement of the Problem

Because of globalization, the English language has gained a significant role in enhancing interaction amongst people of different cultural identities and societal backgrounds. The English language has become the medium of interaction in today's globalized world. Students all over the world learn English for various reasons, but mainly for achieving the ability to communicate effectively in the target language, English. Indeed, "(...) with the recent influx of immigrants at home and the instant electronic access to other cultures abroad" (Kramsch, Cain, and Murphy-Lejeune, 1996, p. 99), teachers are required to go beyond the linguistic knowledge of the target language in order to ensure "mutual understanding" (Kramsch et al., 1996, p. 99).

It is assumed, thus, that teaching the foreign language should not be limited to teaching its linguistic structures. As such, people interacting with natives of the target language will be overwhelmed with a great number of misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Traditionally, the teaching of a foreign language has long focused on the linguistic and philosophical aspects of the language (Kramsch et al., 1996, p. 99). This led the traditional teaching approaches to neglect the societal and cultural facets of communication maintenance. Based on these arguments, it is argued that teaching the foreign language should involve raising factual awareness about the cultural norms and practices of the target society, the skills and behaviours that enable them to appropriately deal and communicate with others, and a positive attitude towards cultural differences. From this perspective, EFL teachers' perceptions of the role of implementing TBLT in teaching EFL and its importance in enhancing students' intercultural competence is the core issue investigated in the current article.

1.3.Research Objectives

Integrating the TBLT approach is deemed to be one of the various communicative approaches that can serve in raising EFL students' intercultural competence. Investigating this issue is the core objective of this research paper. In other words, the current paper seeks to spotlight the perceptions of Algerian middle school EFL teachers on the potential effectiveness of integrating TBLT in enhancing EFL students' intercultural competence to reach appropriate and effective communication in the L2. It also attempts to shed light on whether or not TBLT can enhance EFL students' positive attitudes towards the target culture, their knowledge of the target culture facts, their skills and behaviours in dealing with people with cultural differences.

1.4.Research Questions

This paper intends to investigate the following questions:

Q1. Do Algerian middle school EFL teachers view intercultural competence as necessary in EFL courses?

Q2. From the teachers' perspective, does the implementation of TBLT serve in enhancing EFL students' intercultural competence?

Q3. Do EFL teachers consider TBLT to be effective in fostering EFL students' ability to appropriately and effectively communicate with people from different linguistic, cultural, and societal backgrounds?

Q4. Do EFL teachers view TBLT as being supportive to building EFL students' attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours that are necessary to achieve intercultural competence?

2. Theoretical Framework

Although it was known for many years, the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach is increasingly gaining popularity in L2 teaching (Rodriguez-Bonces and Rodriguez-Bonces, 2010). In defining the concept of 'Task-Based Language Teaching', one needs to explain the core unit that constitutes this concept, 'Tasks'. Various definitions have been offered in an attempt to define 'tasks'. Different authors/researchers from diversified domains sought to define the concept 'Tasks' from their angle. Generally, a task is any piece of activity done by someone to serve a particular role in all life areas (Long, 1985, p. 89; cited in Nunan, 1989, p. 5). For the current paper, the major field of study is the language teaching and learning realm. In this context, tasks are meant to provide EFL students with communication opportunities that resemble those occurring in the real-life context (Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2011). Bachman and Palmer (1996) claim that language tasks are goal-driven and are dedicated to serving EFL students' communicative competence. Briefly stated, Willis (1996, p. 23) maintains that the "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) to achieve an outcome" are labelled tasks.

As far as TBLT is concerned, it is a teaching approach whose tasks are intended to integrate daily language use, and are deemed to serve the development of learners' communicative competence (Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2011) and pragmatic competence (Ellis, 2003). According to Scarino and Liddicoat (2009), knowing the language itself, though not neglected, is not the central focus of TBLT. Rather, EFL students are supposed to perform certain tasks that require language use to establish and maintain communication in the target language.

Indeed, tasks in TBLT are of various kinds. For instance, some authors distinguish between focused and unfocused tasks. Although both types are meant to help EFL students convey meaning in the target language, focused tasks, unlike unfocused ones, are distinguished by their emphasis on a particular linguistic form that students should use to convey meaning (Nunan, 2004). Ellis (2003, p. 223) maintains:

Unfocused tasks are tasks designed to provide learners with opportunities for using language in general communicatively. Focused tasks are tasks designed to provide opportunities for communicating using some specific linguistic feature (typically a grammatical structure) (...) the target linguistic feature of a focused task is 'hidden' (i.e. learners are not told explicitly what the feature is).

A similar distinction, made by Estaire and Zanon (1994), states that communicative tasks, unlike enabling tasks, are dedicated for helping EFL students acquire the communicative competence through developing their ability to interact, understand, and produce the target language in settings simulating their real-life ones. Such kinds of tasks are content-driven. Enabling tasks, on the other hand, are meant to support communicative tasks (Etaire and Zanon, 1994). This distinction is similar to that made earlier between focused and unfocused tasks. The only difference here is that the authors (Etaire and Zanon, 1994) claim that enabling tasks, as the name denotes, is conducted before communicative tasks to endow EFL students with the linguistic forms they are supposed to use when expressing meaning during communicative tasks.

Furthermore, there is a difference between target tasks and pedagogical tasks. The former can be defined as “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or others, freely or for some reward” (Long, 1985, p. 89). Nunan (1989) adds that such tasks should involve language use so that they can be called ‘target tasks’. On the other hand, pedagogical tasks are carried out for the sake of serving language improvement (Nunan, 2004).

It is noteworthy that the classroom tasks that fall within the TBLT approach have certain hallmarks that characterize them from a simple classroom activity. Willis and Willis (2007) argue that communicative tasks have a primary focus on meaning, are goal-directed, have a clear outcome to be performed, serve learners’ communicative competence, and simulate real-life situations. Additionally, Ellis (2003) specifies that the discourse maintained when conducting tasks should be based on conveying a certain pragmatic function. Moreover, tasks are concerned more with language use in the context of communication, whereas simple classroom activities and exercises are meant to explicitly teach EFL students a certain grammatical rule (Sanchez, 2011).

Indeed, and in addition to the different types of tasks, the latter can have various shapes. Willis and Willis (2007) have proposed a set of task types that can be used in the TBL class. To mention a few, listing, ordering and sorting, problem-solving, matching, comparing, and sharing personal experience (Willis and Willis, 2007). Another typology has been suggested by Prabhu (1987). The author proposes that there are information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap tasks (cited in Nunan, 2004).

Indeed, certain components need to be considered when designing tasks. Nunan (1989, p. 47) maintains that any task should consist of “(...) the goals, the input (linguistic or otherwise), the activities derived from this input, and finally, the roles implied for teacher and learners”, in addition to the setting of task conduction (p. 48). Candlin (1987, cited in Nunan, 1989) adds that teachers’ facilitation, feedback, and assessment should be also considered when analysing tasks.

Task-phase in TBLT is generally divided into three major stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus (Willis, 1996). In the pre-task stage, learners are familiarized with the topic of the task through relevant vocabulary, pictures, videos, etc. They are also presented with task requirements. In the task cycle stage, learners activate their linguistic and background knowledge, plan for task conduction, and report their answers. The final stage of the task consists of focusing

on specific linguistic structures that are used previously to convey meaning in the previous stage. In this stage, the linguistic forms are studied within the context of communication (Willis, 1996).

As far as teachers' roles in TBLT are concerned, Van den Branden (2016) assumes that, first, the teacher needs to decide which tasks to include, and which are supposed to serve the objectives of the lesson. During task conduction, the teacher acts as a motivator, organizer, and a more knowledgeable, conversation prompter and partner (Van den Branden, 2016). As for the post-task stage, the teacher is supposed to assess their performance, reflect on their strategy use, and identify their learning hurdles (Van den Branden, 2016). Furthermore, the teacher can be flexible in deciding which tasks will better serve his/her EFL students' language acquisition and attainment of the more general objectives of the curriculum (Van den Branden, 2016).

Since TBLT is a learner-centred approach, learners assume different roles from those adopted in the traditional, teacher-centred EFL classes. As for the EFL learner, Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that each EFL student, in TBLT, is a member of a collaborative work (group/pair). Learners in TBLT are also supposed to initiate their learning to try to comprehend and develop the target language. They create meaning instead of using their existing knowledge to do the task. Thus, they are innovators and risk-takers (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Indeed, implementing the TBLT approach can lead to enhanced intercultural competence. This claim is supported by Mezger-Wendlandt (2013, p. 2), who asserts that, since TBLT has a primary focus on meaning and on establishing interactions in the L2, this approach can be an intercultural-supportive environment. With the same token, Castillo Fuentes(2015) believes that TBLT environments can support the development of intercultural competence due to the roles the EFL teacher assumes in such learning contexts. The author specifies:

(...) the teacher's role is not so much to transfer students his/her knowledge of the TL but to assist them in communicative interaction while still keeping some kind of distance in order to facilitate independent language and intercultural learning through mutual cooperation (Castillo Fuentes, 2015, p. 28).

Therefore, it is assumed that the principles that govern the implementation of the TBLT approach can make it a suitable environment for teaching EFL students the intercultural competence that is necessary for achieving appropriate communication in the target language. In defining the concept of intercultural competence, the following lines seek to specify the constituting components and aspects of this, broader concept.

According to Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Mompoin-Gaillard, and Philippou (2014), to define the concept of "intercultural competence", several other concepts need to be considered. First, the person's identity is regarded as one of the leading concepts in talking about intercultural competence. Identity refers to one's descriptions for oneself, and to the awareness of the 'who am I?'. It can be personal identity (e.g., personality, relationships to others, etc.) or social (i.e., the social group to which a person belongs) (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 13). Another, constituting concept of the notion of intercultural competence is one's culture. The latter can be seen as the variety in

the beliefs, norms, behaviours, artefacts, religion, language, and many other aspects that might change over time (Barrett et al., 2014, pp. 13-14). However, “cultural boundaries are often very fuzzy” because “cultural affiliations are fluid and dynamic” (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 14). Accordingly, considering aspects of the local culture is vital for achieving intercultural competence.

The intercultural encounter is another aspect of intercultural competence. For the authors, it is defined as interacting, either in person or virtually, with people that belong to another culture (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 16). Accordingly, for effective interaction and appropriate communication with such people, intercultural competence is required (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 16).

Intercultural competence is a significant ability that EFL students should be endowed with. This notion is defined as the ability to appropriately and effectively communicate with people of different cultures and languages (Myles, 2019). Thus, it requires having adequate knowledge about others’ cultures and identities. In addition, being immersed in such cultural diversities is necessary to achieve intercultural competence (Page, 2020). More specifically, this concept consists of four major components: attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviours.

Having attitudes towards the other culture signifies learning about respecting and valuing diversity, possessing tolerance for and openness to other cultural aspects. To be interculturally competent, people also need to have the skills that would enable them to communicate with people from different cultures and transmit appropriate meaning, to adapt to the differences that exist between cultures, to be flexible when dealing with differences, to obtain and evaluate information about others’ cultures. Moreover, the knowledge that people are required to possess consists of knowledge of the cultural and linguistic aspect of the target culture, and knowledge of the conventions that govern language usage and communication in such cultures. The final constituent of the intercultural competence notion requires people to behave appropriately and flexibly with people from different cultural backgrounds (Barrett, 2011, pp. 2-3). By the same token, Barrett et al. (2014, p. 16) maintain that intercultural competence necessitates a set of considerations. Briefly, there is a need for comprehending and respecting people from different cultural backgrounds, establishing appropriate communication and constructive relationships with them, and being aware of the differences between one’s own culture and the others.

In order to investigate the role of TBLT, a teaching approach that, currently, governs the courses delivered in the Algerian middle school curricula, on promoting EFL learners’ intercultural competence, the present study was conducted. More specifically, gathering EFL teachers’ perceptions on the matter is the major procedure for achieving this goal. The next sections provide details of the methodology adopted to investigate this issue and report its major findings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The aim behind conducting the current study is to determine Algerian EFL teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the TBLT approach to teaching EFL students effective communication through developing their intercultural competence. To investigate the research questions and to achieve the stated objectives, a questionnaire was designed and administered to (60) Algerian educators teaching English in middle school settings. The analysis of teachers' questionnaires has been carried out manually, through statistical calculations of the percentage, and a discussion of their responses to open-ended questions. Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were deployed.

The questionnaire consists of six main questions, alongside three follow-up questions, that investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of the implementation of TBLT and its potential effect on their learners' intercultural competence. The questions embedded in this questionnaire are both close-ended and open-ended. Types can be also divided into Likert scale, yes/no questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions. Indeed, questionnaires "(...) can supply a considerable amount of research data for a relatively low cost in terms of materials, money and time"; they are easy to administer (Denscombe, 2010, p. 169). In other words, administering the current questionnaire online allowed the researcher to access more respondents, thus, "(...) collect a huge amount of information" (Dornyei, 2003, p. 9). The questions constituting the current study's questionnaire yield data about the participants' attitudinal information, as they express their evaluations of and opinions on a particular teaching approach, and behavioural information, as they report their actual teaching practices within the English course (Dornyei, 2003, pp. 8-9).

3.2. Participants

The participants involved in the current study were chosen on a convenience basis sampling method, which entails that "(...) a researcher simply collects data from those people or other relevant elements to which he or she has most convenient access" (Blackstone, 2012, p. 81). More specifically, the category targeted in this study is represented by middle school teachers of English that belong to different regions in Algeria. The sample consists of (60) teachers who responded to the online questionnaire. This sample is representative as it consists of teachers of various regional and cultural origins within the Algerian community. Therefore, a variety of insights can be obtained.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The data collection instrument used in this study consists of an online questionnaire administered to (60) middle school EFL teachers, who responded to the questionnaire in a period extended over a week. Data was collected online by the researcher and analysed quantitatively into a bar chart format that displayed quantitative data. The latter was analysed based on frequency distributions. Furthermore, open-ended responses were qualitatively interpreted.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

In the upcoming lines, the results obtained from the questionnaire, which was administered to (60) EFL middle school teachers, will be exposed in detail and interpreted. Later, their significance will be discussed.

As an initial question, the teachers were provided with three statements about the tasks in the TBLT approach, and they were asked the extent to which they agree/disagree with such statements. The following lines list these statements:

- a. Tasks are directed by communicative goals.
- b. Tasks focus primarily on meaning.
- c. Tasks simulate the students' real-world contexts and serve their needs to communicate in such contexts.

This question sought to highlight their views of whether or not the tasks in which their students engage are communicative. More specifically, this question sheds light on the nature of tasks implemented in the middle EFL classroom. For the first statement, the overwhelming majority of the participants (85%) strongly agree that the tasks are directed by communicative goals, 11.67% of the participants agree with the statement, and 3.33% of them are neutral. On the other hand, none of the respondents disagree/strongly disagree with the statement.

As far as the second statement is concerned, the majority of the respondent teachers (58.33%) strongly agree that meaning is the central focus of tasks in TBLT, and 26.67% of them agree with the statement. On the other hand, only a minority number of them are neutral (5%) and disagree (10%) with the statement, with several responses equal to three and six, respectively. However, none of the participants strongly disagree with the second assertion.

The third statement reveals the extent to which the teachers agree/disagree with the experiential nature of tasks. As Figure 1 below displays, the overwhelming majority of teachers strongly agree and agree that tasks in TBLT engage the students in communicative situations that simulate their real-life contexts, with several responses equal to 76.67% and 20%, respectively. None of the teachers is neutral about the matter, and none of them strongly disagree with the statement. Only 3.33% of the responses indicated that teachers disagree with the third statement.

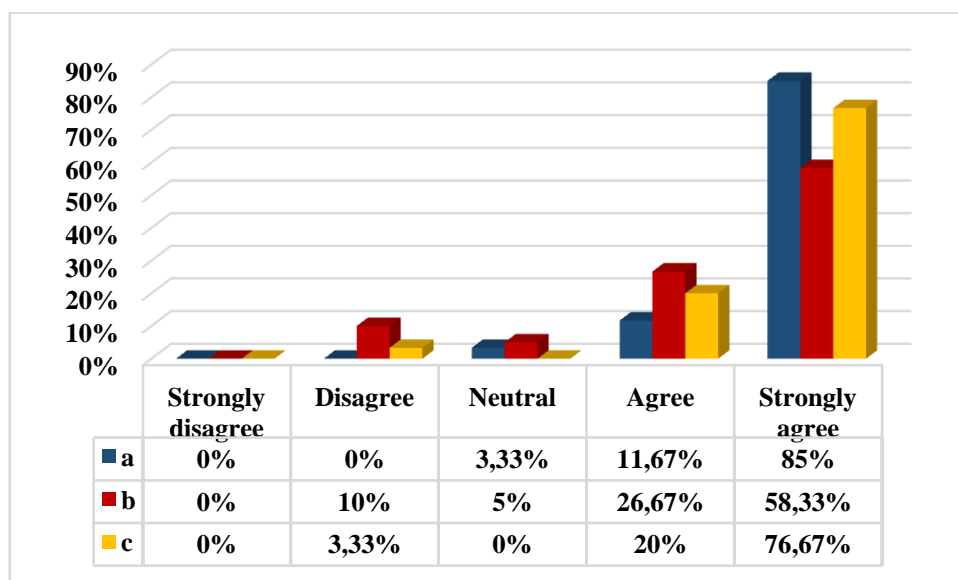


Figure 1: Teachers' attitudes towards the nature of tasks used in TBLT

The results obtained from the teachers' responses to this question indicate that TBLT is mostly perceived as consisting of tasks that direct L2 learning towards the delivery of appropriate meaning through authentic, real-life-like communication. Their view about TBLT is shared by many other researchers. Indeed, any teaching approach adheres to the principles of particular language theory and learning theory. For instance, Rhalmi (2018) contends that the theory of language underlying the design of a task-based course indicates that assessing the successful completion of tasks is primarily based on the appropriate and meaningful L2 outcome. Moreover, the conversation is vital for language acquisition. Therefore, in TBLT, both input and output are vital for the appropriate acquisition of the L2 (Rhalmi, 2018). In a similar vein, Rodriguez-Bonces and Rodriguez-Bonces (2010) assert that the reason behind the increasing popularity of TBLT is its shift of focus from the linguistic forms to communication and meaning negotiation, and its promising effects on EFL learners' natural acquisition of the L2. Moreover, the authors put forward that "(...) that tasks are goal-oriented (...)" (Rodriguez-Bonces and Rodriguez-Bonces, 2010, p. 166), which indicates that, in a language task, L2 is used "(...) for a communicative purpose (goal) to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996, p. 23). Therefore, it is assumed that the majority of the respondent teachers have a correct conception of the characteristics of the communicative tasks that constitute the TBLT approach they are currently implementing in middle school EFL classes. As a founding background to the TBLT approach, Ahmed and Bidin (2016; cited in Tawil, 2018, p. 203) state that this approach is influenced by the theory of John Dewey, who maintains that integrating the real-life experience into classroom education can lead to enhanced learning. Later on, these principles were translated to the communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, which were applied by Prabhu and which led to the design of 'tasks' that do not emphasize the retention of grammatical chunks of the language (Ahmed and Bidin, 2016; cited in Tawil, 2018, p. 204).

Therefore, from the discussion held above, it can be asserted that the current study's majority of participants are well aware of the basic underlying features of tasks carried out in the language classroom. Indeed, TBLT is perceived as an approach that grants EFL learners the opportunity for developing their language knowledge by understanding the socio-cultural norms and differences, which are necessary to be considered in using the target language (Tawil, 2018, p. 209). Accordingly, the next question is an attempt to refer to the respondents' understanding of the 'intercultural competence' notion.

After having defined the concept of culture, the respondent teachers were asked about their conception of the notion of 'intercultural competence' (are you familiar with the meaning of the notion of Intercultural Competence?). In an article published by the Oxford University Press ELT (2021), developing EFL learners' intercultural competence is significantly important in providing them with a view of the world from others' lens, respecting and tolerating such differences, and, hence, ensuring the smooth dealing and communicating with people from the other cultures. The results to the second question, which seeks to highlight whether EFL teachers are familiar with this concept, are displayed in Figure 2 below.

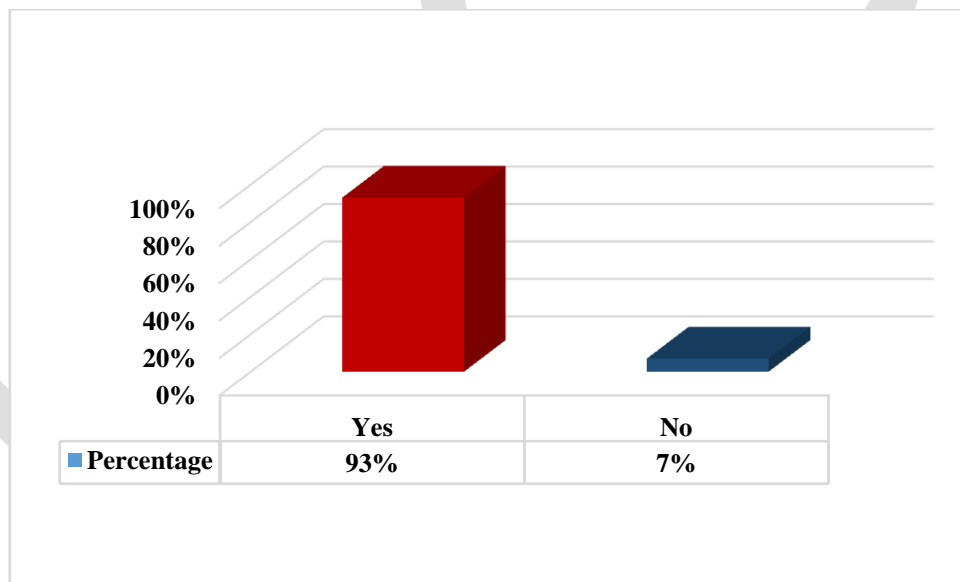


Figure 2: Teachers' familiarity with the concept of 'intercultural competence'

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of teachers indicated that they are acquainted with this concept, with a total percentage of (93%) of the responses opting for 'yes' and only (7%) opting for 'no'. An open-ended, follow-up question (if yes, how do you define this concept?) was asked to highlight the respondents' definitions of this concept. The answers are provided below.

From a total of (60) respondent teachers, (56), who answered affirmatively to the previous question, were asked to provide definitions for the 'intercultural competence' notion. Their responses were categorized, and similar ones were grouped to a general understanding. The following lines provide a brief categorization of their responses to this follow-up question. First,

it is noteworthy that six teachers skipped this question. The reason could be attributed either to their inability to provide a thorough description despite their understanding of the concept, or to their doubtful thinking about what the notion implies.

Starting with the simplest definition offered to the term, ten teachers argue that intercultural competence is the knowledge of the cultural aspects of the language studied. Moreover, (16) other teachers add that, in addition to the knowledge of one's and others' cultures, intercultural competence consists of competencies, or skills, that allow the learners to operate appropriately with others from a different cultural background. Four teachers state that interculturally competent students can distinguish between their and target cultures, and know when to use certain behaviours and when to avoid them when operating from people of another cultural background. Eleven (11) other respondents believe that intercultural competence is an integral skill that L2 learners should possess, which implies their ability to both operate and communicate appropriately with natives of the language they are studying. Finally, nine teachers assert that intercultural competence includes the belief that one should hold a respectful attitude towards the differences existing between the mother and the target cultures, and, accordingly, the L2 language should be used appropriately from a cultural viewpoint.

Regarding the definitions offered by the participants, they offer different perspectives to almost a similar view of what constitutes the intercultural competence notion. In defining this concept, Deardorff (2006) offered a table that illustrates the most commonly used elements that shape the notion of intercultural competence. First, intercultural scholars agree that the concept of intercultural competence consists mainly in the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 249). In addition to appropriate and effective communication, culturally appropriate behaviours should be adopted, even if the target culture's behaviours seem to be unfamiliar. In this regard, the adaptability and flexibility of behaviours should be highlighted. Overall, Deardorff (2006, p. 249) contends that intercultural competence entails behavioural appropriateness, cognitive awareness of cultural differences, and emotional readiness to accept and respect such differences. Accordingly, it is assumed that each set of respondents had a correct, although different, the perspective of defining the concept. Overall, the teachers referred to the communicative, behavioural, cognitive awareness, and emotional aspects of intercultural competence, which are all elements agreed upon in defining the concept.

The third question of the present questionnaire is intended to determine the level of importance of developing EFL students' intercultural competence from the teachers' perspective (how important do you think developing intercultural competence is necessary for EFL students?). The findings indicate that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (55%) believe that it is essential to develop EFL learners' intercultural competence, and 32% of the teachers agree that it is important to do so. On the other hand, only 3% and 10% of them are either neutral or believe in its slight importance, respectively. None of the respondent teachers (0%) believe that intercultural competence is not at all important for EFL students. The next figure (Figure 3) portrays these results.

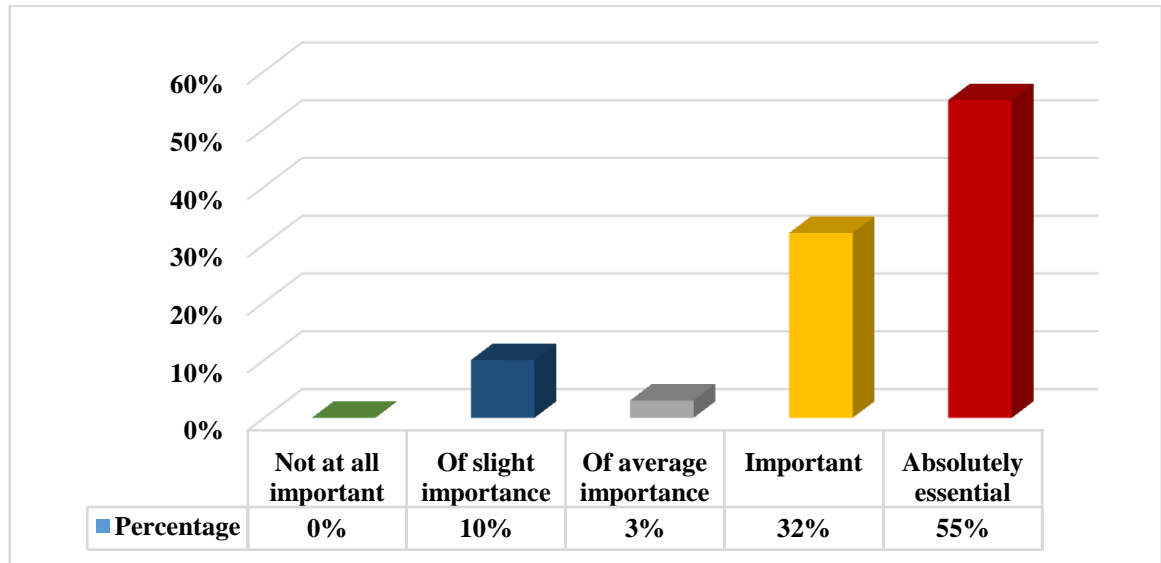


Figure 3: Teachers’ perceptions of the importance of teaching intercultural competence

Based on their responses to this question, many EFL teachers advocate and recommend the development of EFL students’ intercultural competence. This finding is in line with many other researchers. For instance, the participants in Karabinar and Guler’s study (2013) report that teaching cultural aspects to language learners is important because it is perceived “(...) as a means of accurate communication, and it helps acquire a wider perspective and culture-specific knowledge”, and a means to avoid misinterpretation of messages (Karabinar and Guler, 2013, pp. 1325-1326). From a general, professional perspective, Collier (n.d.) argues that employees should be interculturally competent as they should be able to appropriately interact and deal with “(...) co-workers, vendors or customers from different cultures and countries, and need to work productively with people who have been shaped by different values, beliefs, and experiences”. Therefore, EFL learners, viewed by future, professional lens, and considering such professional needs, are required to develop this competence. Additionally, Samovar, Porter, Daniel, and Roy (2017; cited in Ilie, 2019, p. 264) refer to the current world changes, such as migration, globalization, ICT, employment at the international level, programs of study exchanges, travelling, and tourism, and international economics are all among the factors that lead to a necessity in fostering the skills and knowledge of intercultural operations. In addition to such reasons, language use is governed by cultural values, norms, and attitudes (Ilie, 2019, p. 265). Therefore, it was found that the majority of middle school EFL teachers acknowledge the necessity of developing such competencies in their EFL learners.

The next question (do you, implicitly or explicitly, integrate the teaching of intercultural competence into your EFL classroom?) is intended to reveal whether or not the teaching of intercultural competence is emphasized in the language classroom by Algerian middle school teachers. The findings, as displayed in Figure 4, indicate that the majority of the respondents (80%) teach their EFL students intercultural competence, either implicitly or explicitly. On the

other hand, (20%) of the teachers do not teach intercultural competence. A follow-up question was targeted to those who answered affirmatively to seek further details of the types of teaching practices/tasks that encourage intercultural competence.

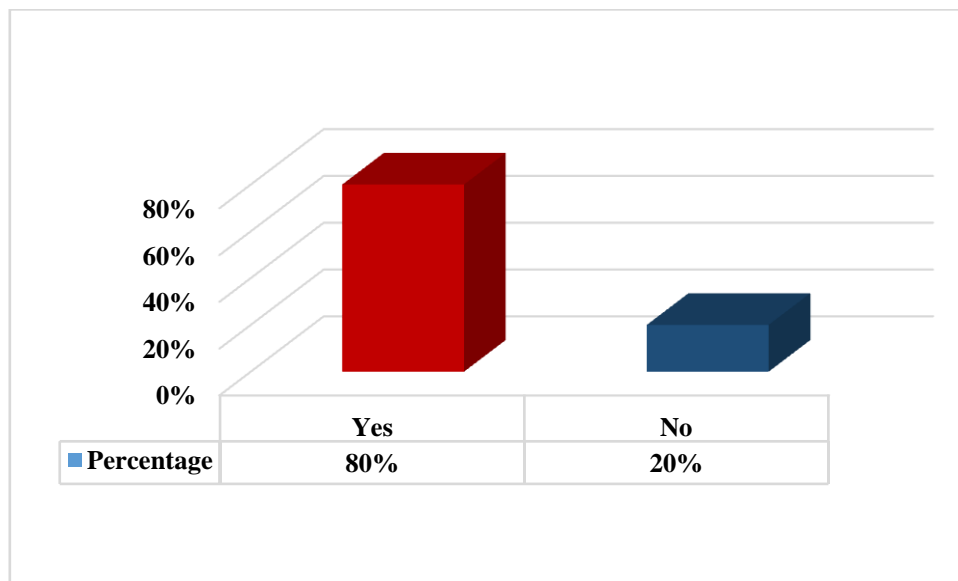


Figure 4: The teachers adopted practices in teaching intercultural competence to EFL learners

The teaching of cultural aspects in a language classroom, particularly in the traditional language education, is perceived as “(...) limited to the transmission of information about the people of the target country and their general attitudes and worldview” (Kramsh, 1993, p. 205). The author further adds that to teach culture, both the mother and the target culture should be dealt with. Moreover, teaching culture should adhere to the social constructivist view, which suggests that meaningful learning is a matter of social interaction and communication instead of rote learning of fixed facts (Kramsh, 1993, p. 205). Third, it should be made aware that, even within the same culture, varieties exist, and that a variety of other aspects should be considered to define cultural identity. Kramsh (1993; cited in p. 206) further contends that L2 teachers should broaden their knowledge base and not focus solely on the teaching of the linguistic aspect of the target language; rather, referring to the target society can motivate L2 learners to learn the language (Habinakova, 2015, p. 254). To shed light on the way EFL teachers present their learners with intercultural competence, the following sub-question was asked (if yes, please describe how -you can tick more than one option-).

This multiple-choice question asks the respondents who opted for ‘yes’ to the fourth question to select from among the list below the practices they usually adopt in helping their EFL students develop their intercultural competence. Below is a list of the choices provided for teachers.

- a. By devoting lessons that provide students with comprehensive facts related to aspects of the mother/target culture to be memorized (such as food, customs, manners, etc.).
- b. By briefly introducing L2 cultural facts when students come across them in the course.

- c. By requiring students to inquire about the cultural aspects, practices, and events and present them to their mates.
- d. By raising discussions in the L2 about cultural differences and similarities.
- e. By using materials (such as pictures, videos, movies, TV shows, etc.) that expose students to the target language, and, simultaneously, to aspects of the target culture and allow them to depict cultural diversity (i.e., differences in aspects of the culture).
- f. By involving students in communicative situations that deal with cultural themes and that require them to use appropriate communication to address others from a different cultural and societal background.
- g. By organizing cultural activities in the classroom (such as celebrating an event, etc.).
- h. By presenting culture-related expressions and lexical items.
- i. By involving students in performing real-life tasks in the classroom.
- j. By focusing solely on aspects of the mother culture.

Based on the findings displayed in Figure 5, the majority of the responses provided by teachers indicate that they opt to teach cultural aspects implicitly. This assumption is made as the minority of the responses (1.67% and 10%) indicate that they explicitly and directly teach cultural facts, either intensively or briefly. Moreover, only 11.67% of the responses refer to the direct presentation of the lexical items/expressions that are related to specific cultures. Additionally, 18.33% of the teachers require their learners to conduct cultural events as part of their language class. Only 25% of the sample opt to require their learners to research cultural matters to be presented to the class. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of the respondents tend to integrate the teaching of both language and culture through their responses that indicate their attempts to encourage discussion between the learners (68.33%), to use authentic materials that provide learners with L2 input (58.33%), to foster appropriate communication related to cultural aspects (76.67%), and to provide authentic tasks that simulate learners' real-life situations (80%). As far as the cultural focus included in language courses, only 5% of the responses indicate that teachers neglect to teach aspects of the target culture. Such teaching strategies imply that teachers focus the goal of the lesson on developing EFL learners' communicative abilities, without neglecting the cultural aspect of the target language.

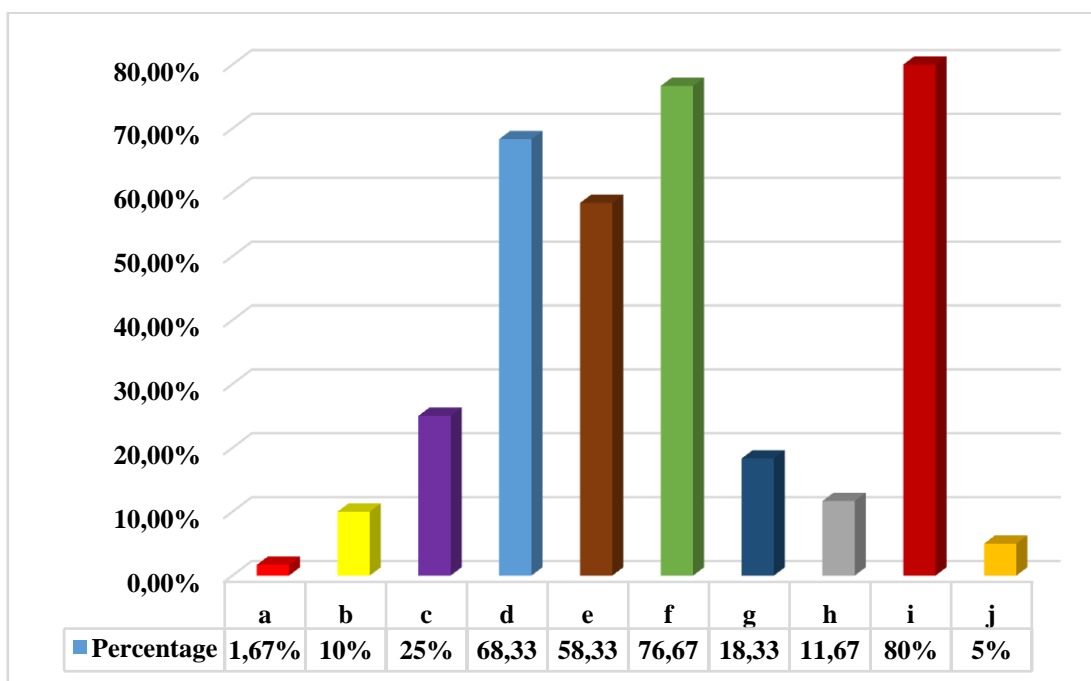


Figure 5: Teachers’ instructional practices to teach intercultural competence

Indeed, EFL teachers across various studies suggest different ways of teaching intercultural competence. In a study conducted by Karabinar and Guler (2013), the participants reported that they use aspects of the mother culture as a starting point when teaching the foreign language, then they shift to deal with cultural aspects derived from both the mother and the target cultures (p. 1326). They also indicated that they attempt to raise their learners’ cultural awareness and highlight cultural differences (p. 1326). Moreover, the results of the current study are consistent with the practice that teachers in Karabinar and Guler’s study (2013, p. 1326) adopt, which refers to their emphasis on both the L2 linguistic aspect and the cultural aspect of the social use of the language. This practice implies that these participants refer to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the communicative aspect from a cultural perspective. Karabinar and Guler (2013, p. 1326) further add that “the data obtained through the interviews also pointed out that to promote cultural interaction among learners in class, most of the participants benefit from various speaking activities such as discussions, role-play, competitions, and using visual materials like posters”. This finding echoes the responses provided by many EFL teachers in the current study, who opt for the use of such teaching activities as discussions, and such learning materials as pictures and videos, in order to serve the development of intercultural communicative competence. Such practices are significant in that, “when language skills and intercultural competency become linked in a language classroom, students become optimally prepared for participation in a global world” (Moeller and Nugent, 2014, p. 2). In addition to the teaching practices adopted by EFL teachers, the next question seeks to spot light on their assessment practices of the intercultural competence.

The fifth question of the current questionnaire (do you assess your EFL learners' intercultural competence?) sought to highlight EFL teachers' practices in assessing their learners' intercultural competence. Surprisingly, it was found that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (95%) do not assess their learners' intercultural competence. Only (5%), an insignificant portion of the population, do assess their learners' ability to be interculturally competent. These results are displayed in Figure 6 below.

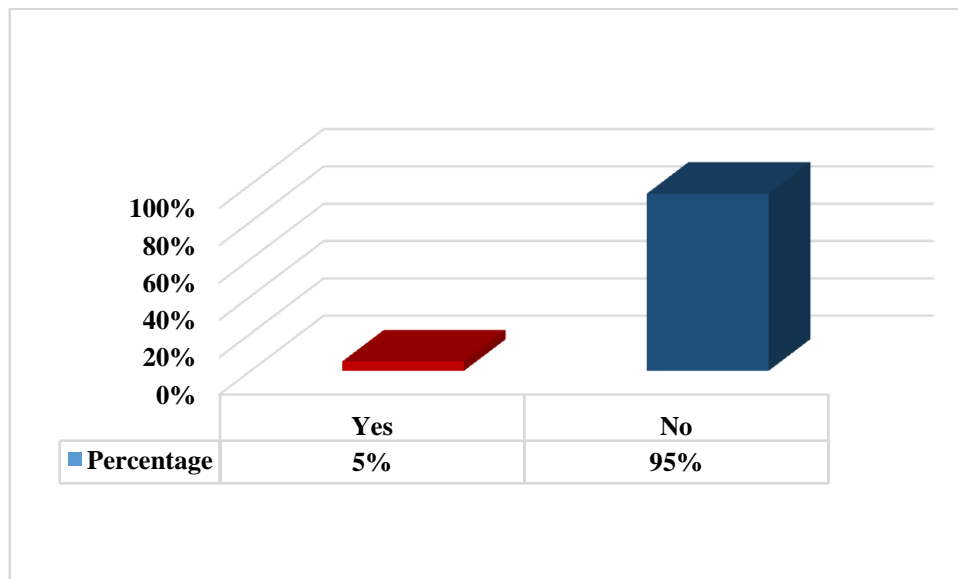


Figure 6: Teachers' assessment of EFL learners' intercultural competence

Based on such findings, it is assumed that assessing EFL learners' intercultural competence is not an emphasized goal in L2 educational curricula in the Algerian middle schools. However, Borghetti (2017) contends that teachers should adapt their teaching goals so that they can measure this concept because not only does teaching requires an assessment process, but also learning benefits from assessment. It can raise their awareness of their learning, their autonomy in acquiring intercultural competence, and their motivation to do so (Borghetti, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to raise EFL teachers' awareness of the significance of assessing their learners' intercultural competence, and of the principles and assessment tools that exist in order to maximize the benefits of the L2 course. A follow-up question was asked to depict the assessment procedures adopted (if yes, how?).

The three teachers opting for 'yes', and who represent (5%) of the respondents, suggested that, to assess their learners' intercultural competence, they use certain activities. Based on such activities, they form a general overview of their learners' level of intercultural competence. The suggested activities include: explaining the meaning of English proverbs and comparing them to proverbs found in Arabic to detect differences and similarities, ability to describe cultural events and to distinguish between those relating to their local culture and those that pertain to the target culture, and role-plays that address cultural topics using L2. It is believed that such activities, as

described by the three teachers, are likely to provide a general view for the teacher about his/her learners' intercultural ability. This assumption is based on the belief that more sophisticated and well-structured tools of assessing intercultural competence exist, and which adhere to a theoretical foundation of the concept. Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, and Liu (2016, p. 7) maintain that the most predominant assessment tools for intercultural competence are surveys and portfolios. Yet, the importance of simulations (role-plays) should not be underestimated in assessing intercultural competence (Griffith et al., 2016, p. 14).

Lussier et al. (2007) contend that traditional procedures of assessing intercultural competence, such as using summative tests, can only provide information about the learners' cultural knowledge. However, as constituting dimensions of assessment, the authors argue that a student should possess, in addition to the cultural facts (*savoir*), their ability to use the language to communicate appropriately and adjust to social differences (*savoir-faire*), and their attitudes towards and critical awareness of cultural aspects (*savoir-être*) (p. 27). Based on these intercultural competence dimensions, Lussier et al. (2007) made a list of assessment methods. For instance, assessments of the intercultural competence should be formative and continuous (Lussier et al., 2007, pp. 29-30). In addition, assessment can either focus on cultural facts (assessing *le savoir* through indirect tests) or require students to perform a task related to culture (direct assessment), such as discussing one's beliefs and attitudes towards the culture (*savoir-être*), or acting in a role-play (*savoir-faire*) (Lussier et al., 2007, p. 30). Accordingly, EFL teachers should pay close attention to such dimensions and encourage the adoption of practical and relevant assessment methods. To investigate whether or not TBLT fosters EFL students' aspects of intercultural competence, the next question was asked.

The sixth question of the current questionnaire (to what extent do you agree with the following statements?) intended to capture EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the implementation of the TBLT approach to foster EFL students' overall intercultural competence, concerning some of its constituting elements, such as awareness and knowledge, appropriate and effective communication skill, and behavioural considerations. The following lines list these statements:

- a. TBLT raises EFL students' awareness of their mother culture and the target culture.
- b. TBLT is effective in enhancing EFL students' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from an English-speaking country.
- c. TBLT enables EFL students to compare, evaluate and consider their own and others' cultures when communicative in English.
- d. TBLT encourages students to consider their societal and cultural behaviours when they communicate in English.

This first statement sought to reveal EFL teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of TBLT in raising their EFL students' knowledge of the mother/L2 culture. Indeed, developing awareness about cultural heritage is advocated. For instance, Kuo and Lai (2006, p. 1) state that teaching L2 learners knowledge about cultural diversities and the way potential cultural gaps should be dealt with is essential. The authors support the idea stating that the teaching of language and culture

should be inseparable in order to serve a better linguistic comprehension (Kuo and Lai, 2006, p. 2). The results, as shown in Figure 7, indicate that 38.33% of the respondents strongly agree that TBLT develops awareness of the mother/target culture; 33.33% of them agree with the statement, 23.33% are neutral, and 5% of them disagree with the assumption. On the other hand, none of the respondents (0%) strongly disagree with this statement.

Apart from developing EFL students' cultural awareness, an integral teaching goal of EFL is developing the learners' ability to communicate fluently and appropriately with natives of the language. Heidari et al. (2014) maintain that:

Language learners must know what forms are culturally appropriate to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should realize that behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own discourse community may be perceived differently by members of the target discourse community.

Therefore, the second statement of the current question intended to spot light on the teachers' perceived effectiveness of TBLT in enhancing EFL learners' appropriate and effective communicative ability. The data displayed in Figure 7 show that the highest group of respondents (85%) strongly agree with this assumption. Only 8.33% and 6.67% of the teachers agree and are neutral with, respectively, the idea stating that TBLT can foster the quality of communication. However, none of the teachers (0%) expressed his/her disagreement (disagree/strongly disagree) with the statement.

The third statement is an attempt to investigate whether or not the respondent teachers view TBLT as a facilitator of acquiring the skill of cross-cultural comparison and evaluation, which contributes to the general development of EFL learners' intercultural competence, as stated by Barrett et al. (2014, p. 23). The data, as shown in Figure 7, portray that the highest rates of the responses of the participants (30% and 41.66%) strongly agree/agree, respectively, with the statement arguing that the acquisition of such skills is the result of implementing TBLT. A minority number of the respondents (11.67%) are neutral about the matter. On the other hand, another very small portion of the teachers (16.67%) disagree that TBLT is capable of encouraging EFL students to compare, evaluate, and consider cultural differences and similarities when using L2. However, none of the participants opted for 'strongly disagree' when asked about this matter.

Considering the societal and cultural behaviours during intercultural encounters, and being aware of the cultural appropriateness of some behaviours are important skills that need to be considered in the building of EFL students' intercultural competence. Basically, in order to possess intercultural competence, an individual's behaviours need to be adapted in favour of avoiding any potential of acting inappropriately in a culturally different environment (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 20). Therefore, this question seeks to investigate EFL teachers' views about whether TBLT provides students with the opportunity to acquire and to pay close attention to such behaviours when using the L2. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents (43.33%) strongly

agreed with the statement indicating that students, in TBLT, get to consider their behavioural appropriateness when using the L2 to communicate. 28.33% indicated that they agree with the statement. Some of the respondents (21.67%) are, however, neutral about the matter. On the other hand, a minority of the respondents (5% and 1.67%) opted for ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’, respectively, to express their perceptions towards this statement. The findings are displayed in the following figure (Figure 7).

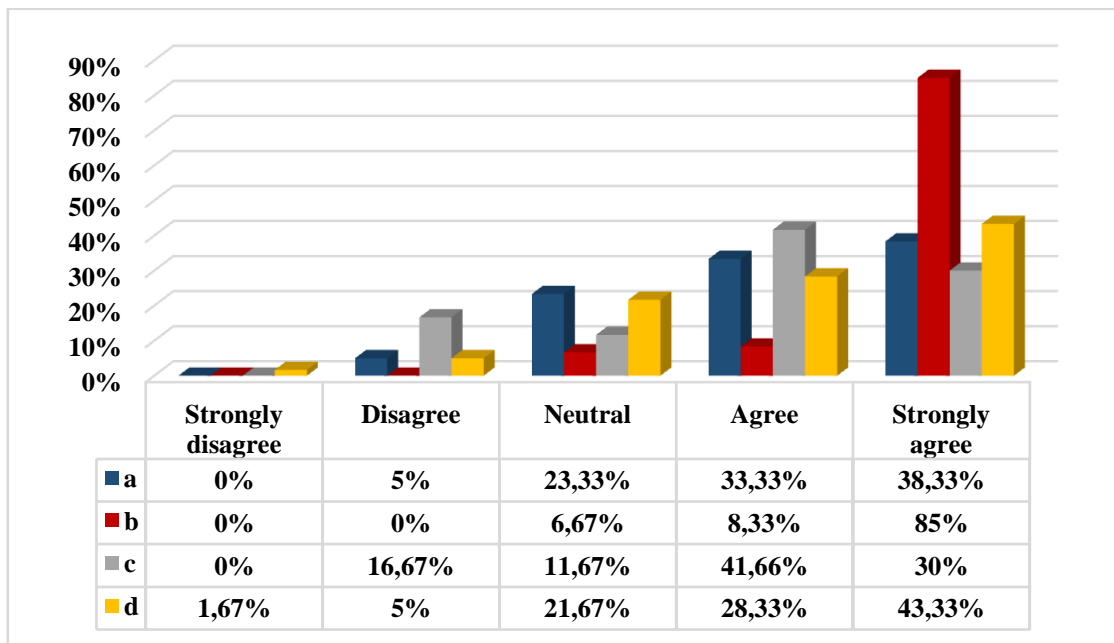


Figure 7: Teachers’ attitudes towards the use of TBLT to develop aspects of EFL students’ intercultural competence

Culture is defined as the “(...) ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a group of people in a given period; it is also the beliefs, values, and material objects that create our way of life” (Kuo and Lai, 2006, p. 2). Based on the assumption made by Rodriguez (2003, p. 69), the cultural aspect cannot be explicitly taught within the L2 classroom. Instead, the author suggests engaging EFL learners in a series of activities that deal with and discuss elements and events of the culture and whose goals serve the development of the L2 elements. Barrett et al.(2014, p. 25) state that direct intercultural exposure is not sufficient in teaching intercultural competence. Instead, they argue that this concept is acquired through a developmental process that consists of engaging in experiences and intercultural events, and through certain educational training. Indeed, it was found that, since cultural awareness cannot be taught explicitly, the implementation of communicative tasks can provide “(...) opportunities for exploration of the home and target culture” (Ramirez, 2009, p. 75). According to the author, the participants were able to develop their cultural awareness, though at a primitive level; they moved from forming superficial stereotypes about cultures to detecting differences between facts (Ramirez, 2009, p. 72). In a similar vein, Heidari, Ketabi, and Zonoobi (2014) add that such teaching approaches as TBLT greatly consider cultural awareness in teaching the L2.

Barrett et al.(2014, p. 29) assume that, generally, learners judge the unfamiliar as being awkward and bad. Accordingly, fostering cultural knowledge, which contributes to students' perceptions that no culture is better than the other, allows them to consider and respect cultural differences (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 70). Similarly, Barrett et al.(2014, p. 29) contend that, in order to develop the skill of effective comparison and evaluation of others' cultural affiliations, learners need to be encouraged "(...) to develop an understanding of how what is normal for them can be regarded as bizarre or uncivilised from someone else's perspective and vice versa", which, in turn, leads to their understanding of how others' different cultures are constructed. Based on teachers' responses, such skills can be fostered by engaging EFL learners in a task-based course when learning the L2. In addition to the skills discussed above, teachers were asked about the potential benefits of TBLT in developing EFL students' ability to appropriately communicate with the native of the L2, which is viewed as a component of the intercultural competence concept.

Indeed, developing the students' communicative ability is not limited to accurate and correct language use; rather, communicating is also a matter of appropriately conveying and negotiating meaning in a particular social context (Sun, 2013, p. 372). The findings obtained from this question are consistent with the study of Heidari et al. (2014), who assert that TBLT allows students to work collaboratively, to use authentic materials, and to be engaged in classroom tasks that serve their real-life language use. Therefore, developing appropriate language use, which constitutes the overall intercultural competence notion, can be achieved by integrating communicative tasks into language teaching.

The findings to this question indicate that EFL teachers view TBLT as a teaching approach that leads to EFL students' enhanced intercultural competence. Indeed, learning environments where lecturing is replaced by actively involving learners in a process of discovery, collaboration, challenge, and reflection can better encourage their communicative as well as intercultural abilities (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 30; cited in Castillo Fuentes, 2015, p. 28). This issue is investigated by various studies conducted on the matter. For instance, Wongwichai and Tachom (2021) found that students involved in a TBLT business class were satisfied with their development of intercultural email writing ability. The authors indicate that "in business writing class, learning intercultural communication is necessary for students to prepare for their future work in order to cope with problems when dealing with people from different cultures" (p. 348). Indeed, the nature of communicative tasks, which constitute the TBLT approach, can create an environment that is supportive to develop intercultural competence. Castillo Fuentes (2015, p. 29) states that tasks are likely to foster intercultural competence as they encourage students to "(...) express themselves, to share their knowledge and opinions, to interpret and compare other cultures concerning their own cultural affiliations and to reflect on their attitudes and feelings".

Another study was conducted by East (2012), it was found that TBLT is likely to encourage the study of the cultural dimension of the language; the author recommends teachers broaden their understanding of the necessity of developing intercultural competence in order to achieve a comprehensive communicative ability (p. 70). In a similar vein, Mezger-Wendlandt (2013, p. 2; cited in Castillo Fuentes, 2015, p. 28) states that "with their focus on meaning, interaction,

sharing and negotiating, tasks create an effective and motivating learning environment for intercultural learning”.

5. The Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

Traditional conventions of second language acquisition (SLA) approaches have generally focused on the teaching of the linguistic aspect of the target language. Such trends have disregarded the significance of the social context features that characterize the setting of language use. With the current increasing process of globalization, cultural differences are increasingly emerging. Accordingly, current second language teaching approaches, such as the task-based language teaching approach, have attempted to consider the cultural and societal dimensions of the language learning process. This article attempted to highlight middle school teachers' perceptions of the use of TBLT to foster EFL learners' intercultural competence. To fulfill this aim, both qualitative and quantitative data analyses were conducted. Based on the findings obtained from such analyses, it was found that EFL teachers view TBLT as a fertile environment that encourages students' acquisition of intercultural competence. More specifically, through the data gathered, and from the teachers' perspective, EFL students' cultural awareness and knowledge, their skills and strategies for dealing with cultural differences through appropriate communication, and their attitudes towards cultural diversity can be fostered towards the achievement of effective intercultural exchanges. In this regard, misunderstandings that result from the misinterpretation of messages can be decreased.

The findings obtained from this study can be summarized in three major headings. First, TBLT can lead to developing students' intercultural communicative competence, which entails their ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with people belonging to the target culture. Second, using a task-based approach to teaching a second language can result not only in enhanced communicative ability, but also in better cultural understanding and adaptation, ability to deal with cultural differences, and consideration and respect of such differences in dealing with others holding a different cultural identity. This is mainly because TBLT not only focuses on the linguistic aspect of the language but also emphasizes the use of language in real-life contexts. Finally, EFL teachers' practices that target students' intercultural competence are primarily integrated with language use and reception through communicative tasks, provide real-life tasks, use the teaching tools that target cultural themes, and immerse students in cultural exchanges and adaptation of behaviour appropriate to cultural meetings. Nevertheless, intercultural competence assessment should be more emphasized and considered in the language classroom.

Accordingly, the use of communicative tasks, which constitute the TBLT approach, can have a significant impact on the intercultural dimension of using the L2. If well implemented, the communicative nature, real-life-connectedness, collaboration, and provision of authentic language tools can lead to enhanced intercultural competence in the language classroom.

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