

Exploring the Cultural Dimension in the Palestinian University EFL Context: A Case Study

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Abstract This paper explored teachers' beliefs regarding the concept of culture in the Palestinian university English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Using a qualitative case study of a leading university in Palestine, the research investigates how teachers' perceptions of culture impact their cultural goals and classroom practices. Analyzing data from multiple sources (e.g., interviews, observations, and instruction materials), the study revealed that Palestinian EFL teachers perceived culture as a way of life that comprises a shared system of values, beliefs, ways of thinking, and behaviours. Language and culture were regarded as interwoven, and without culture language acquisition might be difficult to achieve. EFL teachers identified various goals for teaching target culture(s), including developing students' cognitive competence, effective communication skills, and personal growth. Teaching culture in EFL classes was also seen as promoting openness, tolerance, and respect for other cultures. The study also revealed that linguistic competence had the upper hand in classroom teaching practices, and that the target culture(s) were used as a background to assist language learning.

Key Words: culture, teaching English as a foreign language, teachers' beliefs, communicative competence, cognitive development, identity, hegemony

كشف البعد الثقافي في سياق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية في الجامعات الفلسطينية

ملخص: يهدف هذا البحث الى كشف تصورات مدرسي اللغة الانجليزية في الجامعات الفلسطينية عن مفهوم الثقافة وأهدافها و أثرها في الممارسات الصفية. فبعد تحليل بيانات من مصادر مختلفة (المقابلات ، الملاحظات، تحليل المواد التعليمية)، تبين ان تصور الثقافة لدى المعلمين هي طريقة حياة تشتمل على نظام مشترك من القيم و المعتقدات وطرق التفكير والسلوكيات، كذلك نظروا الى أن تطوير الكفاءة المعرفية ومهارات الاتصال الفعال ونمو الشخصية و تعزيز الانفتاح و التسامح واحترام الآخر هي أهم الأهداف الثقافية المرجوة، وهذا من شأنه رفع الكفاءة اللغوية التي حظيت بالنصيب الأوفر من عملية التدريس.

I Introduction

Presently, with the spread of English as a global medium of communication, the question of the relationship between teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and culture has been a focus of study as well as debate for scholars (e.g., Byram, 2008; Corbett, 2003; Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2006; Schultz, 2007). Some scholars believe that the teaching of culture has to present not only cultural facts in a structural way but should present understanding processes, values, beliefs, or attitudes (Kramsch, 1993). Applied linguists and language teacher practitioners have become increasingly aware that a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) can hardly be taught without addressing the target culture of the community in which it is used (Hinkel, 1999).

On the other side of the debate, other scholars argue that culture can be a type of neo-colonization and linguistic/cultural imperialism, which may have a negative impact on learners' native culture, identity, and worldview (Alptekin, 2002; Phillipson, 1992). Concerns of cultural hegemony are accentuated for the English language, which has rapidly become the lingua franca of globalization.

As scholars continue to debate, little is known about beliefs and practices of EFL teachers in post-colonial countries. This paper contributes to bridge the gap in the literature by exploring Palestinian university teachers' beliefs regarding the concept of culture and how their perceptions impact teaching goals and practices. Using qualitative research methods, the paper investigated 10 EFL university teachers' beliefs regarding the concept of culture and their goals in presenting the target culture.

II Literature Review

The acquisition of linguistic competence of a certain language versus using it communicatively and effectively has been one of the main foci for many scholars. Hymes (1972) argues that in order to understand first language acquisition, it is essential to take into consideration not only the mastery of grammatical competence but also how to use the language appropriately. Hymes coined the concept of 'communicative competence' as a response to Chomsky's linguistic competence and linguistic performance dichotomy.

In the state-of-the-art scholarship, however, the integration of cultural knowledge into FL education has been advocated strongly (e.g., Corbett, 2003; Sercu, 2006). Educators and language teacher practitioners, especially teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), have a special role in the shared leadership needed for this change as emphasized in recent calls to integrate the

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cultural dimension into the teaching of EFL (Byram, 2008). Further, Bennett (1993) argues that learning a language without its culture is a recipe for becoming a *fluent fool*. A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well but does not understand “the social or philosophical content of that language” (p.16). According to Kramsch (1993), culture is always in the language learning process, but it should not be considered as a fifth skill. Nault (2006) argues that language and culture link has great significance for language education because if learners are to become effectively proficient in their target language, it is logical that they must be familiar with the culture of that language.

Moreover, ethnographers of communication have shown that many speech events have their ‘culture-specific structures and routines’; for example, in-service encounters (e.g., shops, banks, government agencies, restaurants, etc.), phone interactions, and classroom interactions, and many speech acts (e.g., apologies, compliments, expressing disagreement) use culture specific variations (Schultz, 2007, p.9).

However, because of the history of colonization in the region and desire to protect native cultures and national identity, some teachers have not emphasized teaching the target culture(s) of English language (Yamchi, 2006). These factors can also deter students’ acquisition of the different competencies of language. Further, the unprecedented position of English is unparalleled in the history of human languages. English is one of 5,000 to 7,000 languages existing on the planet, yet it is the most widely used and constantly spreading language in the world today (Crystal, 2003; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Phillipson, 2008). Yet, according to Crystal (2003) the most frequently asked question is: Why English? The present-day world status of English is essentially the result of two major factors: the expansion of British colonial power which ‘peaked’ towards the end of the 19th century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century (ibid, p.120).

1 Definition of Culture

One of the major conceptual issues facing a researcher or teacher dealing with culture is establishing a definition of culture (Matsumoto, 2009). For many years, scholars have defined culture, but because of the wide scope of the concept of culture, more definitions are still being generated. Therefore, Matsumoto (2009) maintains that “there will probably never be ‘the’ definition with which all scholars agree” (p.3). Hinkel (1999) points out that

anthropologists, for example, are concerned with culture as “a way of life of a people, the social constructs that evolve within a group, the ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving that are imparted to members of a group in the socialization process” (p.3).

Geertz (1973) defines culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life” (as cited by Kachru & Smith, 2008, p. 31). Geertz’s definition of culture illuminates that language and its uses are crucial part of human behavior that represents “symbolic action in regard to the social structure and interactions within the group”. Further, for Geertz, behavior articulates culture and determines how language is used to express meaning (Hinkel, 1999). Therefore, through language analysis, anthropologists try to have access to cultural frameworks, and therefore, achieve understanding of the conceptual world in which members of a certain group live.

Similarly, Byram (1989) refers to culture as: ‘the whole way of life of the foreign country, including but not limited to its production in the arts, philosophy and high culture in general’ (p.15). For Byram, the term comprises a wide area of cultural phenomena, ranging from whole way of life, literature, arts, popular music, to issues of customs, norms and values, and beliefs. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) define culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group or category of people from others” (p. 4).

It is obvious that these definitions illuminate the interfusion between language and culture and how they interchangeably impact each other. The role of language, as a social behavior, can delineate the cultural framework and conceptual worldview of a certain social group. The main objective of providing different definitions of culture from various disciplines is to articulate the link between language and culture from one hand and to show how intercultural communication can be immensely affected by various languages, worldviews, and cultural differences.

2 The relationship between language and culture

The relationship between language and culture has intrigued many researchers in the fields of communication and FL education. Throughout their observation and field experience, Sapir and Whorf argue that language mediates individuals’ experience of the world, referring to interrelation between language

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and human recognition. Sapir (1949) states, “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality,” and so “we hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (p.162). In addition, Whorf (1956) believes that language shapes ideas and guides all thoughts and worldviews. It is clearly noticed that Sapir and Whorf maintain that languages shape thought, and therefore speakers of various languages have different worldviews. Sapir-Whorf’s hypothesis has fostered the notion that language determines thought (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). In other words, the way individuals think and behave is conditioned and restricted by the language they use (ibid).

The relationship between language and culture in FL education is one of the most hotly debated questions nowadays: “Language is intimately related to the way we think, and to the way we behave and influence the behavior of others, the notion that ‘our sense of reality’ may be but a construction of language or language game” (Kramsch, 1998, p.79). Bada & Bilal (2005) argue that the “pendulum of ELT practitioners’ opinion has swung against or for teaching culture in context of language teaching” (p.73). Some scholars in the field of applied linguistics and EFL perceive culture as an integral part of foreign language teaching. Their perspective rests on some theoretical linguistic and empirical grounds.

The main purpose of this section is to shed light on the relationship between language and culture in the scholarship. Sapir-Whorf’s ‘linguistic relativity’, for instance, evidently supports this interwoven relation; however, whether language determines thought and behavior is a debatable issue. Nonetheless, it is clear that people of different languages and cultures show various ways of thinking, behaviors, and worldviews. Therefore, understanding teachers’ perception of culture and its relationship to language seems vitally important to FL teachers, and the Palestinian EFL teachers are no exception.

3 Teachers’ Beliefs

Educational research has provided substantial support through empirical evidence for the assertion that teachers’ classroom practices are affected to a large degree by their personal pedagogical belief system (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Richards & Gallo & Renandya, 2001). Pajares (1992) maintains that investigation of teachers’ beliefs is a significant approach to educational inquiry. Further, Donaghue (2003) argues that teachers’ “personal theories,

beliefs, and assumptions need to be uncovered before development can occur, enabling critical reflection and then change” (p. 344). Previous researchers have noted the influence of teachers’ beliefs on classroom instruction in some subject matters, such as math, reading, grammar, science, and second language acquisition (Kajala & Barcelos, 2006), yet little research has been conducted to establish a link to the understanding of the concept of culture in EFL university contexts.

To conclude, this section highlights how teachers’ personal pedagogical belief system can impact their teaching practices. Therefore, uncovering their beliefs regarding the concept of culture can be a preliminary step towards FL language development and creating a critical reflection amongst the Palestinian EFL teachers.

III Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study has in essence an educational disciplinary orientation, and therefore the concepts, vocabulary, and theories address the field of teaching English as a foreign language. In addition, the study draws on Piaget’s theory of cognitive development and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony.

1 Theory of cognitive development (Jean Piaget, 1920)

The educational implications of Piaget’s theory are closely related to his concept of intelligence as the dynamic and emerging ability to *adapt* to the environment with continuously expanding competence (Web, 1980). Moreover, the theory explicates the emergence and construction of *schemata* of how one perceives the world in *developmental stages* (i.e., sensorimotor, preoperations, concrete operations, and formal operations).

According to Matsumoto et al. (2007) Piaget suggests that infants and children usually attempt to adapt to their environments by first assimilating the environment into their existing cognitive schemas. However, when the environment does not match their schemas, they will accommodate, that is, modify their existing schemas or add to them, and consequently developing their cognitive skills.

Kotthoff and Spencer-Oatey (2007) argue that by engaging in critical thinking about cultural differences and being open and flexible to new ways of thinking, people constantly add new cognitive schemas in their minds to represent the world. These new cognitive schemas develop people’s competence to interact and cope with diversity and help them in creating new expectations and greater

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cultural awareness of similarities and differences (ibid). Further, Matsumoto et al. (2007) argue that the key to achieving successful intercultural communication is adjustment, personal growth, respect for cultural differences, and ability to regulate one's emotional reactions. Adaptation, on the other hand, is the process through which individual's worldview is *expanded* through development of knowledge and skills to include behavior and values appropriate to other cultures (ibid). Hofstede (2009) maintains that adapting does not mean to act like somebody else, but it means respecting the local customs and investing in learning appropriate behavior.

In brief, the main purpose of emphasizing the theory of cognitive development is to highlight certain cultural goals from the vantage point of those who support the teaching of the target culture(s) in EFL classes. According to the cognitive theory, the key to achieving effective intercultural communication is adjustment, personal growth, and respect for cultural differences. Unlike assimilation, which calls for replacement of native languages and cultures, adaptation is the process through which individual's worldview is *expanded* through development of knowledge and skills to include behaviors and values appropriate to other cultures. Further, developing their critical thinking about cultural differences and being open and flexible to new ways of thinking, learners constantly add new cognitive schemas in their minds to represent the world and cope with diversity of cultures.

2 *Theory of hegemony (Antonio Gramsci, 1891-1937)*
Gramsci argues that the relationship between economy and culture is *reciprocal*; that is, delineating mutual influence and that one of the social groups dominates and exercises power in a certain society. Therefore, through analyzing which power operates in the modern state, Gramsci developed a new conceptual framework for materialist discourse (Surber, 1998). According to Gramsci, power in modern societies can be perceived as having two functions: First, a state controls its citizens through direct domination, that is, through threat or physical force. Second, a state can control its citizens in a less overt but a more effective manner, i.e., through cultural formation. Cultural formation can include education, organization of family life, association in workplace, religion, and popular culture (Surber, 1998). Gramsci has coined the terms *intellectual hegemony* and *counterhegemonic intellectuals* to refer to the forms of resistance to the hegemonic culture (ibid).

Guo and Beckett (2007) argue that the English language has been perceived by some people as a form of neo-colonialism and hegemonic power, and due to the cultural superiority the language represents and that learning may lead eventually to the loss of cultural identity of the learners through the process of *acculturation* imposed upon them by the hegemonic powers. The English language and culture are also looked at as linguistic imperialism and potential threat to the native languages, national identities, and contributing to the devaluation of the local knowledge and cultures of other countries (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992, 2008).

Given the various perspectives about the perception of culture, cultural goals, and hegemonic threats to native languages and cultures, this study explores Palestinian EFL university teachers' beliefs regarding the concept of culture and their main goals in teaching the target culture(s).

IV Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do Palestinian teachers of English perceive the concept of culture in EFL university context?
- 2) How do Palestinian teachers of English perceive cultural goals in the EFL classroom?

V Methodology

The qualitative case study was chosen for the following reasons: 1) the research questions were addressed in naturalistic setting, using exploratory approaches, 2) little was known about this phenomenon (teachers' beliefs) in the Palestinian context, and 3) to the best of the author's knowledge, since there was a shortage of research in this field in the Palestinian EFL context, the relevant variables for this research had yet to be identified.

1 Participants

The participants were 10 teachers in a department of English at one of the leading Palestinian universities. The teachers varied in terms of educational background, age, gender, and teaching experience. Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that decision about sampling people is usually based on information-rich cases, or individuals who manifest the phenomenon intensely. To protect the participants, several pseudonyms were used throughout the research.

2 Data Gathering

This study primarily used three sources of data, namely, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. This triangulation served to provide compelling evidence and promote the scientific rigor, validity, and credibility

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of the study. In brief, the study was committed to the rigor and standards of qualitative research methods.

a) Interviews

The main objective of interviewing participants was to uncover their beliefs about the concept of culture and how their perception affects their teaching goals and practices. *Semi-structured interviews* were used to elicit as much information as possible from the participants.

b) Observation

After observing 40 hours of actual classroom instruction, 25 field notes were generated and recorded. Additionally, some teachers' handouts were collected during class discussions and activities. The main unit of analyses and observation focus of this study were EFL teachers and how they tackled the concept of culture and their cultural goals in English language classrooms.

c) Documents

The examined documents included 13 textbooks, syllabi, previous exams, and material extracted from teachers' websites and blogs. The study used the content analysis approach to analyze the cultural components of each document.

3 Analytic Procedures

a) Organizing data

Note cards were used to organize and clean up interviews and observations events. This process was very helpful in stimulating the researcher's analytic thinking through writing down hunches and analytic ideas throughout the study. All observations and interviews were dated with names of interviewed participants.

b) Familiarity with data

After transcribing all the interviews, writing clear observations notes, and analyzing all documents, the researcher started familiarizing himself with the data through reading and rereading and listening to sound files. During that process, he felt as if the data were speaking to him and this led to more data gathering, insights, and analytic thinking. He reflected on his data and possible categories and themes all the time.

c) Generating categories and themes

The researcher started with some preliminary categories to focus data gathering and analysis. These categories depended on interview questions and

observations. After gaining a deep familiarity with the data, themes started to emerge from the different categories. Those themes were expressed by the participants themselves, and the researcher discovered them through inductive analysis of the participants' beliefs, perception of culture, and in-class-teaching practices.

d) Searching for alternative understanding

To search for other possible explanations and sound interpretations, the researcher asked his participants, a critical friend, and community of practice whether they agreed with his interpretations or had different understandings. The researcher's critical friend and community of practice played significant roles at different phases and helped in identifying the *blind spots* and suggesting various ways of seeing the data.

VI Findings and Interpretations

1 Research Question 1: How do Palestinian teachers of English perceive the concept of culture in EFL university context?

a) Culture is a way of life

A significant number of participants indicated that culture is a way of life that encompasses all aspects of life. For example, Hakeem argued that culture can be a way of life which is based on a system of values and beliefs, and these values and beliefs are embodied in behaviors and acts:

The simplest definition to culture is 'it is a way of life.' A way of life in the meaning of how you speak,...how you eat, how you socialize, how you dress, how you invite people, how you deal with people, how to say goodbye, everything. It is the system a person is accustomed to, how to eat, what to eat, how much you eat, with whom, so it is a way of life as a result of beliefs. ... I live the way I live because I have beliefs about certain things...so these beliefs and values are embodied in behaviors.

In addition, Tameem emphasized the communicative aspect of culture in terms of perceiving ourselves and the outside world. He also pointed out that cultures can be the inherited traditions including religion which may impact people's worldview and way of communication.

Several participants referred to culture as a distinctive shared system of behaviors that distinguishes a certain group of people from another. Hadeel, for example, stated that "culture means a shared system of behaviors, beliefs, values, um... mainly behaviors. I think, and yes attitudes maybe...and I read a good definition about that; it is the software of the mind." Consequently,

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according to these participants, culture is a way of life that comprises all shared systems of values, beliefs, and behaviors in a certain social group. It also includes people's way of thinking, communicating, and perceiving themselves and the world.

Similarly, Byram (1989) defines culture as "the whole way of life of the foreign country, including but not limited to its production in the arts, philosophy and high culture in general" (p.15). Although some participants mentioned values and beliefs as part of their definitions of culture, the vast majority of definitions anchored on aspects of daily living such as housing, food, clothing, and transportation. Unlike his colleagues, Tameem indicated that culture means the way people communicate and perceive the world. To some extent, this definition resonates with Kramsch's (1998) definition of culture which has been recommended as insightful to ELT and connected to "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting" (p.127). In general, the participants articulated many definitions that showed several examples of human behaviors, values, beliefs, arts, politics, history, literature, language, and worldview.

b) Language and culture are interrelated

Most participants gave prominence to the interwoven relationship between language and culture. They suggested that without understanding culture, foreign language teaching and learning might not take place. Sameer argued that "there is no way to study any language without going deep into the culture...This integral component is necessary in any syllabus in teaching any language." Further, Abdullah noted that English is an international language and in order to understand this language, students should understand its culture as well as other competencies:

You must learn this language with all its domains. The cultural domain is very important. We cannot understand the language without understanding its culture. How can you speak English using the Arabic culture? This comes out with negative interference, and you will definitely produce ambiguous sentences or ambiguous dialogues which will never be understood by others. Grammar without implementation in real context comes out to zero understanding of the language, and communication without grammar comes out with a mad language.

Further, Sohad gave many examples of socio-cultural rules of language use and how the rules and cultural knowledge differ from one culture to another:

If you want to talk to foreigners, you need to know what language to use, even if you want to invite, how to invite people... if you want to apologize, how to apologize. Language expresses functions and functions are related to beliefs and principles and so on. So, expressing politeness is related to culture; how to express politeness in one language differs from one language to another, and knowing only rules of the language does not necessarily lead to communication.

She maintained that not teaching culture is a weakness in the educational system, and therefore the Palestinian EFL teachers are invited to focus on the socio-cultural rules of language use and cultural knowledge as two main aspects in the teaching of EFL.

The sentiments of the teachers comport with similar observations of the scholars. Hinkel (1999) noted that applied linguists and language teachers practitioners have become increasingly aware that a second/foreign language can hardly be taught without addressing the target culture of the community in which it is used. Likewise, Risager (2006) pointed out that there has been a recent focus on uncovering the culturality of language through the close relationship between language and culture. This relation is clearly shown in the frequently quoted 'motto expressions' such as: 'language and culture are inseparable', 'language and culture are intimately linked', 'language is culture and culture is language' (p.1).

Although the participants were able to articulate the strong relationship between language and culture, they could not elucidate clearly how culture can be developed constantly and systematically. For example, they did not show a stated plan or cultural objectives to be achieved. Therefore, there seemed to be a lack of constancy and systematicity between participants' perception of the strong relationship between culture and language and the way culture was introduced to students. In order to help learners acquire cultural skills, a language course interested in culture broadens its scope from focus on developing the language four skills to strategies for the systematic observation of behavioral patterns (Bennett, 2008). As learners come to a deeper understanding of how the target language is used in the foreign language community, they should be encouraged to reflect on the ways in which their language and community function. It can be argued though that the

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participants' awareness of the interwoven relationship between FL and its culture is a preliminary first step towards integrating the cultural dimension in FL education and using innovative approaches in classroom practices.

c) English and American cultures as sources of reference

A significant number of participants indicated that they considered English and American cultures as sources of reference in their teaching. Kareem pointed out that "we teach English, so we have to teach the cultures associated with it, mainly British and American." Ali argued that the United States is dominating the world, "this makes us focus on this culture not that culture; it is part of the domination and the American influence in our age. Because of their history and domination in the past, this is something we cannot ignore."

Basheer and Anwar focused on both the American and British cultures. Basheer explained, "Because we are teaching American and British literature, so we focus on, like, American and British cultures. The purpose of this is not to show the clash of cultures but to promote the harmony of cultures". In addition, Anwar referred to the colonial history of Britain and the United States in the Middle East as part of the domination of their language and culture, "Great Britain...was influential in the Middle East, and it was a colonial power for a long time. [It] has been substituted by another imperial power, the United States". Further, he considered British English as the origin and other countries as former colonies: "originally the English language is British... Canada and Australia are just colonies to Britain." Ibtisam agreed with Anwar that she teaches both American and British cultures, and that these languages have spread because of their domination and colonial history: "I teach both British and American cultures. This is maybe because of their history of colonies in this place; maybe because America is the greatest country in the world." Although the participants maintained that they had no preference in selecting British or American textbooks, it was clear that the British English dominated their textbooks. Eight of the books used by the participants were British English, and only five were American. They used many textbooks published by British publication companies such as Cambridge University Press, Edward Arnold, Penguin Books, and Oxford University Press.

Crystal (2003) indicates similar observations about the status and spread of English in present-day world. He maintains that the spread of English is essentially the result of two major factors: the expansion of the British colonial

Empire towards the end of the 19th century and the emergence of the United States as a leading economic power of the 20th century.

Zughoul (1999) argues that language dominance is associated with cultural dominance, and cultural imperialism usually goes hand in hand with linguistic imperialism. Although the Palestinian participants may take issue with the hegemonic and neocolonialist dominance of English (Philipson, 1992; Tsuda, 2008), they would definitely agree on the significance of English in the development of Palestine and enhancing international cooperation. It can be argued that most teachers are seeking a balance between maintaining the national identity and learning something beneficial about American/British culture(s).

d) Culture is comparative

Using the ‘compare and contrast’ strategy, the vast majority of participants stressed the importance of developing cultural awareness of the target culture(s) as well as the Palestinian native culture. They illuminated that through a compare- and- contrast approach, students can develop a deeper understanding of their native culture. Participants also maintained that when new cultural examples are presented, whether consciously or unconsciously, students will start to compare their culture with the target culture. The following excerpts may serve as illustration:

When we learn any new culture, we value our culture, of course. We realize how our culture is, and if we teach students to respect other people’s cultures, this means they will respect their own culture. When they realize these differences, they will look at their culture, and they will find it not better. I do not want to say this word, but at least you will find something different, and this will make them value their culture more and more (Hatim).

By comparing and contrasting cultures, students’ awareness will increase and bring positive things to students...By looking at things in a comparative way, this will widen the horizon of the students and draw their attention to something they have never thought about. And, of course, the result will be what we call ‘marriages of cultures’ (if it is possible to use this term), or adaptation of cultures (Abdullah).

Hinkel (1999) maintains that learners are encouraged to talk about their culture as this may develop an awareness of their own cultural identity. Identity may be particularly salient for Palestinian students. Further, Khalidi (1997) argues that the Palestinian identity and nationalism were developed in the early British

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Mandatory Period on Palestine (1920-1948). However, *keeping identity* is one of the challenges that the Palestinian teachers as well as students strive to maintain under the Israeli occupation.

According to Thanasoulas (2001) focusing on the native culture and the target culture(s) can help students pinpoint the differences between cultures, and there is nothing inherently good or bad about either one. The compare-and-contrast approach can be constructive when the overarching goal is to find similarities/differences between cultures or talk about the uniqueness of each culture, which could lead to common understanding and tolerance. Thanasoulas (2001) points out that the aim of teaching culture is to promote students' cultural awareness and develop their curiosity about the target culture and native culture. This can possibly be achieved by helping learners to make comparisons among cultures, which may serve to enrich their experience and *sensitize* them to cultural diversity. Therefore, it can be argued that the integration of culture in FL education reinforces tolerance, a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the richness of diverse cultures.

2 Question 2: How do Palestinian teachers of English understand cultural goals in EFL classes?

a) Cultural knowledge develops cognitive abilities and personal growth

Several participants indicated that the target culture knowledge develops students' cognitive abilities and personal growth. For example, Mahmoud explicated that acquiring two languages means acquiring two ways of thinking, and that gaining new cultural knowledge makes a person international, successful, and more open:

Cultures widen the thinking and cognitive abilities of learners and make them successful. Sure, I believe that if you know two languages, you have two ways of thinking. I believe in that, and the more you are aware of other cultures, the more you become international, the more international, the more successful, the more experienced. There are lots of things that could be source of awareness, developing intellectuality among learners, so they can see things in different ways. Once you see things in different ways, I think your cognitive abilities become better and can even cope with uneasy situations.

Similarly, Heba noted that gaining knowledge of new cultures improves students' thinking and widens their horizon: "Of course, knowing different cultures widens our horizons and ways of thinking. It enhances our abilities, our skills, and our aptitude to show our culture." In addition, Adnan maintained that

teaching culture through literature promotes students' personal growth by learning from others' experiences: "It is the personal growth model of learning from others, to improve your personality, your career and the like." He also indicated that studying literature of other cultures improves students' critical thinking, "One of the goals is to know about other cultures and to be able to think and to be critical." Moreover, in observing Adnan's English novel classes, I noticed that students were using *Animal Farm's* critical approach to criticize and comment on some Palestinian and international historical and political events.

Those findings echo Matsumoto's et al. (2007) observation that the key to achieving successful intercultural communication is adjustment, *personal growth*, respect for cultural differences, and ability to regulate one's emotional reactions. In addition, Kotthoff and Spencer-Oatey (2007) argue that by engaging in critical thinking about cultural differences and being open and flexible to new ways of thinking, people constantly add new cognitive schemas in their minds to represent the world. These new cognitive schemas develop people's competence to interact and cope with diversity and help them in creating new expectations and greater cultural awareness of similarities and differences.

b) Promoting openness, tolerance, and respect for other cultures

A significant number of participants reported that one of their cultural objectives in Palestinian EFL classes was to promote tolerance, openness, and respect for other cultures. According to Saleh, there should be mutual respect, acceptance, and understanding between the native culture and target culture(s):

The main purpose is to develop inference of common understanding between the two cultures. You need the other people as they need you, so in order to understand them and cooperate with them, in order for them to respect you, you should accept them. You say simply that we just have different cultures. Yes, I am proud of my culture, and they are proud of their culture, but it is not easy to say my culture is better than yours. This will never achieve mutual understanding; you need to build bridges between our cultures, you need to accept their culture, you need to respect their culture, but you should not say yours is better.

Likewise, Shaheen pointed out that one of the main objectives of cultural awareness is helping students to be liberal and understand others: "I think this is very important because one of the targets of teaching English in the department

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is to have them being liberal and understand others very fairly.” Heba stressed the need to meet people from other cultures without previous conceptions, prejudices, or stereotype images, and therefore meet them with open-mindedness, and respecting the fact that they are different can be a key in effective communication:

I just come and meet them without any, like, previous assumptions or previous prejudice, of course, sometimes there are some stereotype images about people in every culture, but usually even in our culture I do not like building my point of view or the way I am dealing with people, you know, with open-mindedness, regardless of preconception or stereotypes, I think it is very important to be, like, good listener and to listen to people, to respect the fact that they are different from you. We have been teaching students how to be democratic; we teach them how to give a space for the others.

Therefore, one of the overarching goals of teaching culture/ cultural awareness according to the Palestinian EFL participants was to develop and promote positive attitudes of openness, tolerance, and respect for other cultures.

c) Behaving and communicating effectively

Eight of the participants placed developing communication skills as one of their main goals. Hakeem explained that cultural knowledge helps learners in their future communication, so if both conversation interlocutors acquire cultural knowledge, their communication can be smooth. Cultural knowledge is seen as a resource to learners in their communication and cooperation with *the Other*. Hakeem added that “it will make communication easy because such mutual awareness would facilitate communication and perhaps diffuse the tension, which can be induced by lack of awareness.” Interestingly, besides developing effective communication skills, the Palestinian teachers voiced concerns about *otherness*, and how the *self* is perceived by *the Other*. Hakeem thought that the Palestinians are misrepresented by *the Other*, and they have a communication crisis with the outside world. Therefore, adequate cultural knowledge may help them convey their message:

We have a crisis in communicating with the outside world, mainly using English. English is perhaps spoken everywhere; it is an international language, and like, we as Palestinians are misrepresented by others, mainly by the occupation, mainly by those who occupy our land, the Israelis. They always denigrate us. I think we should, like, learn the language. We cannot learn the language without learning the culture. Without understanding, like, the

channels of communication, they will not be able to convey our message. It is, like, they discover that the main objective is rapprochement among cultures.

Abdullah differentiated between speaking and communicating effectively and successfully. While speaking might have the risk of having miscommunication, communicating effectively requires being aware of the cultural knowledge and socio-cultural rules of language use. According to Saleh, the English culture maybe similar, to some extent, to European cultures, while the American culture can represent North American cultures. Accordingly, this cultural knowledge was viewed as helping students to communicate with a wide variety of people.

In brief, the majority of participants highlighted the importance of cultural knowledge to help their students develop their communication skills. Acknowledging the significance of cultural differences and lack of cultural knowledge as two main factors for communication problems, the participants wanted to develop awareness of these areas through promoting cultural knowledge of the target culture. As cultural knowledge represents a resource for learners in their communication with *the Other*, several participants elucidated that one of their goals in teaching cultural knowledge was to help learners become effective communicators.

d) Culture in the background to assist language learning

Several participants indicated that culture is incorporated in various literary and linguistic courses. For example, Reem emphasized a genuine interest in introducing the target culture(s) ‘comparatively’ with the native culture. Mahmoud concurred with Reem in that culture should be incorporated in all courses, and not taught as a separate course. He noted that “these things should be integrated. If I teach poetry, grammar, or communication skills, I will include some cultural skills. Culture is not just one class or three- credit- hour course.” Further, Zain maintained that using culture in classes is a way to promote language learning: “we use the culture as a tool, or as a means...for the profound understanding of the language.” Moreover, Abdullah illustrated that many courses develop cultural knowledge and cultural awareness:

In fact, we have many courses that enhance teaching culture, either directly or indirectly. One of them is literary courses. Through literary works, you learn a lot of things related to culture- the way people dress, the way they think, the way they eat, the way they deal with each other, the way they seek marriage, the way they seek divorce,...and so on. This is one thing. Also, in courses like

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listening and speaking or oral “communication I” and “oral communication II”...we teach language and culture [for example], how to invite, how to apologize, how to condole, how to congratulate... even time -related concepts such as punctuality. Everything in such courses is, I would say, good to connect language and culture, not to teach separate course on culture because we want to prove that language and culture are integrated.

Given the interconnectedness between foreign language acquisition and its culture, the majority of the participants noted that presenting certain cultural components from the textbooks can aid linguistic or literary competence. Nonetheless, this process is controlled, to some degree, by the teacher’s cultural experience, time availability, and restrictions of students’ native culture. Through the researcher’s observations in one of the reading classes, for example, the reading passage was about househusbands in the United States. The class started with a brief discussion about exchanging roles between husbands and wives in the American culture. Then students talked about the issue of working wives from their native cultural lenses. After a brief discussion, the teacher moved to the reading passage and comprehension questions, which took the majority of class time. Evidently, the focus on language skills was dominant in the class and introducing the cultural element was fundamentally to explain the term househusbands.

Further, cultural components introduced to learners did not shed enough light on values of cultures, beliefs, and worldviews, nor did it show tangible change in learners’ attitudes toward other cultures. Rather, teachers were interested in changing others’ attitudes towards the *self*. Although some teachers highlighted the communicative competence and socio-linguistic rules of language use, the majority of them did not clearly articulate how culture should be taught in EFL Palestinian classes. However, Sameer indicated that if culture is presented in a way that does not show *superiority* and *inferiority* to the native culture, it can promote culture learning and decrease attitudes of bias, prejudice, and stereotypes. Thanasoulas (2001) suggests some similar practical notes for teaching culture in EFL classes:

Culture teaching should allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people’s way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and how these manifest themselves or are couched in linguistic categories and forms. More specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behavior, as

well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture (p.1).

All in all, the participants perceived culture teaching in Palestinian EFL classes as background knowledge to assist language learning. Obviously, the participants depended on textbooks and their cultural experience as primary sources for cultural knowledge. However, presenting cultural components was controlled, to some degree, by teachers' experience, cultural knowledge, time availability, and restrictions of students' native culture. Further, the participants did not involve or guide their students to search for cultural knowledge from other sources. Sercu (2005) uses the term 'passing on information' as an approach to foreign language culture teaching, which may explain that the participants themselves, possibly, had been taught in the same approach when they were students.

VII Conclusion

Within the context of globalization, English has become an international language and main medium of communication between people from various cultures. The purpose of the study was to uncover Palestinian EFL university teachers' beliefs regarding the concept of culture and their main cultural goals in presenting cultural components. It seems that culture was an important and even necessary dimension of their language teaching. However, the problem was that teaching culture relied primarily on the personal experiences of the teachers rather than certain academic resource materials or systematic pedagogical approach.

The study used case study qualitative research method to conduct the research. The researcher chose this method because the different variables impacting teachers' beliefs regarding the concepts of culture in Palestinian EFL context may have not been unlocked. The participants were ten university teachers in the department of English at a leading Palestinian university. The site of the study was selected for its representativeness and academic prominence. Data gathering depended mainly on interviews, observations, and documents analysis.

The study revealed that Palestinian EFL participants perceive culture as a way of life. In addition, the British and American cultures were emphasized explicitly as sources of reference. The target culture(s) were taught in a comparative and contrastive way with the native culture so as to deepen culture

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understanding of the native culture as well as enrich and foster cultural knowledge of the target culture(s).

According to the participants, teaching target culture(s) has various objectives; for example, it can develop cognitive abilities and personal growth of students. Through cultural knowledge, participants aimed at promoting openness, tolerance, and respect for other cultures. Moreover, cultural awareness promotes learners' effective communication skills. Developing cultural knowledge and promoting attitudes towards *the Other* were constrained by class time, teachers' cultural experience abroad, and being in harmony with students' values and beliefs.

The experience of colonization and desire to protect native cultures and national identity has been a source of concern for EFL teachers in post-colonial countries. The special situation of Palestinian students appears to have accentuated concerns about identity, however it appears to have raised rather than reduced the drive for language learning. Potentially, the findings of this research can expand and intensify discussions amongst university teachers related to the appropriateness and relevance of current foreign language goals and practices in Palestine, taking into consideration the new innovation in the field of EFL. Hopefully, this research and the potential discussions it will generate amongst university teachers may inspire departments of English, policy makers, and university teachers to reevaluate their existing programs.

VIII Recommendations for Future Research

Culture and teachers' beliefs in EFL context were two domains integrated in this study. These domains contain plenty of interesting topics for further future research. The voices of students can be explored in order to shed more light on their perception of this concept, which can be later compared to teachers' beliefs leading to more knowledge about classroom practices. Quantitative research methods can be used to conduct large-scale studies to include more Palestinian university teachers and students. Further research can also tackle the effective approaches to target culture teaching and foreign language teaching in general. Another study can investigate how Palestinians focus on political and economic aspects while other studies are purely socio/cultural. Since the issue of identity is vitally important in the Palestinian context, future research may also study the importance of 'identity' in EFL education.

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