

# Culture in EFL Teaching: Teacher Beliefs and Practices in Ivorian Secondary Schools

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**Abstract** Our world is now global and diversified. There is a need to prepare students for interactions with people of other cultures. So, language instructors are encouraged to consider linguistic competence as equally important as intercultural competence. This study was conducted during the school year 2017-2018 to explore EFL teachers' beliefs about the importance of culture teaching and how these beliefs reflect in their classroom practices. It involved fifty-three (53) Ivorian EFL secondary school teachers who were asked to answer a Likert-type questionnaire. The results showed that the participants believed that culture was important in EFL teaching and learning. Yet, a mismatch was found between their beliefs and their actual classroom practices. These preliminary findings are hoped to contribute to a better understanding of the place of culture in EFL teachers' current practices and to start the reflection on an Ivorian EFL curriculum that matches the new demands of the world today.

**Keywords:** culture, intercultural competence, language, teaching, learning, beliefs, practices

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of culture in language teaching has been widely acknowledged in foreign language education in Europe and elsewhere in the world since late 1980s [1]. Culture has even received more considerable attention in this era of globalization where diversity and inter-cultural contacts have become facts of modern life. So much so that the Council of Europe [2] has decided that educators and education authorities in member states should aim to develop intercultural competence as a core element of school curricula. This decision, was taken, not only as a response to the growing diversity within countries and communities [3] but also to cope with the urgent need to educate "successful bilingual and intercultural individuals who are able to function well in both local and international settings" [4] (p.63). Beyond the simple exchange of information, the development of relations with others and their cultures has now become "an instructional objective equally as important as communication" (Moore, as quoted by [5] (p.76). This new kind of literacy, on a par with the importance of reading and writing skills or numeracy [3] appears as a fifth skill [6] without which teaching a language would be teaching meaningless symbols (Politzer, as cited by [7] (p.85-86).

Culture can be defined as a set of attitudes, values, lifestyles, ways of living together, traditions, beliefs, and behaviors, which distinguish a group of people from others not belonging to the same society [8]. Thus, it

encompasses the "distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group." [9] (p.10). Put otherwise, culture is about, «the ways of a people» [10], be they 'material' or 'non-material' [11]. As such it 'determines how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted' [12] (p.3); meaning that, so far as language is concerned, culture constrains both what is acquired and how it is acquired. It also 'dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how communication proceeds' [13].

Language acquisition can therefore not be separated from culture learning lest losing the significance of either language or culture [14]. As [15] assert, "The person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool". Likewise, intercultural competence or the abilities to perform "effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" [16] is crucial in language learning.

To date however, many teachers in different classrooms around the world disregard the importance of culture in language learning [17]. What's more, in a country of diversity like Côte d'Ivoire, although it is officially acknowledged that: "The learner (...) should know how to exploit the information of his interlocutor and show respect for the social and cultural values conveyed" [18], very little is known about Ivorian EFL teachers' perceptions and practices so far as culture is concerned.

With the need for greater research in the area of culture, and particularly as it applies to EFL teaching in Côte

d'Ivoire, this study aimed to investigate the perceptions and practices of Ivorian teachers of English regarding culture and intercultural competence in EFL classes. It also aimed to see how and to what extent these beliefs are reflected in teaching English as a foreign language. Another aim of this research was finally to contribute to the data base of studies of culture and provide some insight on the actual practices of teachers in Côte d'Ivoire so that foreign language teaching in this country can be improved to match the new global educational demands. Based on these aims, the following questions were addressed:

- What are Ivorian teachers' beliefs about the importance of culture and inter-cultural competence in EFL teaching and learning?
- What are their beliefs about the learning outcomes of intercultural instruction?
- To what extent do these beliefs reflect in their teaching practices?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of the present study, conducted during the school year 2017-2018, were 53 Ivorian teachers of English from various schools in different regions of the country. As a teacher educator, the researcher often visits teacher-trainees and in-service teachers in different schools in the country. Participants with different characteristics in terms of teaching experience and level taught were therefore randomly selected according to their availability and the researcher's schedule. Their teaching experience was as follows: 1-5 years (5.66%), 6-10 years (49.05%), 11-15 years (24.52%), 16-20 years (9.43%), and more than 20 years (11.32%). 34(64.15%). As regards the levels taught, 19 (35.85%) were high school teachers, and 34 (64.15%), junior secondary school teachers.

### 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In order to elicit EFL teachers' beliefs and practices related to culture teaching and learning, a 5 point scale likert-type questionnaire partly inspired from [19], was designed. It consisted of 22 propositions divided into four sections: 1-teachers' beliefs about the importance in teaching EFL (4 propositions), 2-teachers' beliefs about culture in EFL learning activities (6 propositions), 3-teachers' beliefs about the outcome of intercultural instruction (3 propositions), and 4-culture and interculturality in teachers' practices (9 propositions). For sections 1, 2, and 3 of the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the propositions by circling 1-Not Important, 2-Slightly Important, 3-Moderately Important 4-Important or, 5-Very important 5. So far as section 4 is concerned, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following scale items: 0-Uncertain, 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, to 4-Strongly Agree.

The data collected were then analyzed using the software SPSS 21 to find out scores in terms of percentage, sum, means, mode, and standard deviation. These results were then put in tabular forms.

## 3. Results

Section 1 of the questionnaire aimed at collecting data about teachers' beliefs related to the importance of target language culture in EFL textbooks. Table 1 below provides the summary statistics for this section.

**Table 1. The importance of culture in FL teaching**

5	4	3	2	1	Sum	Mean	Mode	SD
1. Knowledge about the target culture should be in the textbooks.					228	4.30	4	0.72
23%	24%	9.4%	1.9%	0				
2. Textbooks should include knowledge about students' own culture.					193	3.64	5	1.48
20%	30.2%	7.5%	7.5%	17%				
3. The program should include knowledge about the target culture.					215	4.06	4	0.90
18%	24%	15.1%	3.8%	1.9%				
4. Textbooks should include knowledge about other cultures.					191	3.60	4	0.96
15.1%	28.3%	24%	7.5%	3.8%				

It can be seen from the data in Table 1 that most teachers believed that knowledge about the target culture and students' own culture should be part of textbook content. This is illustrated by the mode 4-for proposition 1. The standard deviation score of 0.72 for proposition 1 also indicates that most answers are clustered around scale item 4-important. As regards students' own culture, the mode 5-very important, clearly indicates teachers' agreement with proposition 2. But the standard deviation (SD) score of 1.48 for this proposition suggests a wider dispersion of teachers' answers. Also, the mode 4-important for proposition 3 regarding knowledge about the target culture and the standard deviation score 0.90 indicate that many teachers viewed target language culture as important. Finally, Table 1 shows that most teachers favored the idea that textbooks should include knowledge about other cultures (Proposition 4; Mode=4; SD=0.96).

The second section of the questionnaire aimed at collecting data about teacher beliefs related to culture and inter-culturality in learning activities.

The results obtained from the preliminary analysis of these beliefs are shown in Table 2.

A striking result to emerge from the data in Table 2 is the mode 5-very important, and the sums (240 and 234) for propositions 6 and 5. What's more, the standard deviation scores for these propositions are respectively 0.69 and 0.98, and their mean scores are 4.53 and 4.42. Consequently, for a large majority of the respondents, classroom activities should allow students not only to reach a proficient level in the target culture, but also to interact with people have an appropriate communication in that culture. Similarly, the teachers involved in the research also considered that classroom activities should allow students to proficiently and appropriately use written communication in the target culture (Proposition 4; Mode= 4). These activities should also permit learners to reflect upon the practices of their own culture (Proposition 2; Mode=4). However, the mean scores for propositions 4 (Mean=3.75) and 2 (Mean=3.51), suggest that many among the respondents circled scale item 3-moderately important.

Another interesting result in Table 2 is the mode 1-not important, for proposition 1-Activities should include similarities between the learner’s native language and English. Correspondingly, the mode 3-moderately important for proposition 3 indicates that teachers seemed in doubt whether learners needed activities on differences between their own language and the target language.

The third section of the questionnaire was used to collect data about teacher beliefs related to the outcomes of intercultural instruction.

The results obtained from the preliminary analysis of these beliefs are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 2. Teachers’ beliefs related to Culture and interculturality in learning activities**

5	4	3	2	1	Sum	Mean	Mode	SD
1. Activities should include similarities between the learner’s native language and English?					145	2.74	1	1.33
9.4%	24.5%	20.8%	20.8%	24.5%				
2. Activities should permit learners to reflect upon the practices of their own culture?					186	3.51	4	1.38
18.3%	32.1%	17.0%	7.5%	15.1%				
3. Learners need activities on differences between their own language and the target language.					162	3.06	3	1.32
13.2%	28.3%	30.2%	7.5%	20.8%				
4. Classroom activities should allow students to reach a proficient level in a written way in order to have an appropriate communication in the target culture?					199	3.75	4	1.091.
30.2%	30.2%	28.3%	7.5%	3.8%				
5. Classroom activities should motivate the student to interact with people from the target culture? (Chinese, Japanese Etc.)					234	4.42	5	0.98
66.0%	18.5%	7.5%	5.7%	1.9%				
6. Classroom activities should allow students to reach a proficient level orally in order to have an appropriate communication in the target culture?					240	4.53	5	0.69
34%	24.5%	11.3%	0%	0%				

**Table 3. Teacher beliefs related to the outcomes of intercultural instruction**

5	4	3	2	1	Sum	Mean	Mode	SD
1. Learners should be able to interpret texts from another culture and related to texts from their own culture					189	3.57	4	1.26
28.3%	28.3%	24.5%	9.4%	9.4%				
2. Learners should be able to understand how to interact in an encounter with someone from another culture					227	4.28	4	0.81
66%	18.9%	7.5%	5.7%	1.9%				
3. Learners should be able to interpret events from another culture and related to events from their own culture					183	3.45	4	1.03
11.3	43.4	32.1	5.7	7.5				

What is interesting in Table 3 is that the majority of the respondents believed that it is important for learners to be able to interpret events from another culture and related to events from their own culture (Proposition 3; Mode=4). They also considered that it was important that learners be able to interpret texts from another culture and related to texts from their own culture (proposition 1; Mode=4), and

be able to understand how to interact in an encounter with someone from another culture (Proposition 2; Mode=4). It is also worth mentioning that the standard deviation score for proposition 2 (SD=0.81) shows that teachers most highly favored the idea of interaction with people from another culture. Now let’s turn to teachers’ classroom practices.

Section 4 of the questionnaire aimed at collecting data about culture and inter-culturality in teachers’ practices.

Table 4 presents the summary statistics for teachers’ answers as regards these teaching practices.

**Table 4. Culture and interculturality in EFL teacher classroom practices**

5 Always	4 Very often	3 Sometimes	2 Rarely	1 Never	Sum	Mean	Mode	SD
1. I share what I hear/read about foreign cultures with my students.					180	3.40	3	0.88
11.3%	30.2%	47.2%	9.4%	1.9%				
2. I ask my students to do some research (asking questions etc.) about foreign cultures					133	2.51	3	1.04
5.7%	7.5%	35.8	34	17				
3. We watch CDs/movies about foreign cultures in my classes					84	1.58	1	0.81
0	1.9	15.1%	22.6%	60.4%				
4. I talk about my own experiences with foreign cultures					142	2.68	3	1.05
1.9%	22.6%	32.1%	28.3%	15.1				
5. I invite people having lived abroad to the classroom					95	1.79	1	1.04
3.8%	1.9%	17%	24.5%	52.8%				
6. I ask my students to talk about their own culture in the foreign language					167	3.15	3	0.90
1.9%	35.8%	45.3%	9.4%	7.5%				
7. I put pictures about foreign cultures on the classroom walls					122	2.30	1	1.18
34%	18.9%	20.8%	24.5%	34%				
8. I ask my students to participate in pair work with students from foreign cultures					101	1.91	1	1.11
1.9%	9.4%	17%	20.8%	50.9%				
9. I discuss the prejudices towards the foreign culture with my students					133	2.51	2	1.03
1.9%	17%	28.3%	35.8%	17%				

Two types of data are apparent in Table 4. The first type of data shows what the majority of teachers never and rarely do. More specifically the table reveals that teachers never watch CDs/movies about foreign cultures in my classes (1-Never=64%), invite people having lived abroad to the classroom (1-Never=52.8%), put pictures about foreign cultures on the classroom walls (1-Never=34%) or, ask students to participate in pair work with students from foreign cultures (1-Never=50.9%). Also, they only rarely discuss the prejudices towards the foreign culture with my students (Mode=2; 2-rarely =35.8%).

The second type of data relates to what teachers sometimes do (Mode=3) namely, sharing what is heard/read about foreign cultures with my students (3-Sometimes=47.2%), asking students to do some research about foreign cultures; 3-Sometimes=35.8%), and talking about own experiences with foreign cultures (3-Sometimes=32.1%).

Overall then, Table 4 indicates that none of the propositions in section 4 of the questionnaire were either ‘very often’, or ‘always’, used in the classrooms. They were

rather never, rarely or only sometimes used. Thus, the most striking result to emerge from the data in this table is the scarcity of culture in the teaching practices of the respondents.

#### 4. Discussions

The current study first found that teachers in Cote d'Ivoire are aware of the importance of teaching culture in foreign language classes. They are also aware that learners should be given the opportunity, through learning activities, to reflect upon their own culture and learn how to interact proficiently with people from the target culture orally and in a written way.

A possible explanation for this is that teachers either intuitively, or with reference to their own culture and language, actually understand the strong link between culture and language learning. As they teach different classes, using the local English textbooks, they deal with readings and topics related to English speaking countries' cultures. So, it may be that they have come to equate learning English as a foreign language with learning another culture. Surprisingly however, they also believed that learning activities based on looking at the similarities and differences between the students' native language and the target language were not important. A reason for this, may be that the actual materials used for teaching English do not encourage discussions, comparisons and reflection on both students' own culture own and target culture. In junior secondary schools for example, a lesson is conducted in three steps: presentation/input, practice/activation and performance/integration. First, vocabulary is presented using visual or verbal explanations (students listen answer questions and repeat after the teacher), then language structures are presented (students listen answer questions and repeat after the teacher) and finally students practice the vocabulary and language structure learnt, before using them in communicative situations. The focus is therefore on knowledge of language form, function, and communicative use. Hence, though effective for survival and for routine communications, this approach does not focus the cultural dimension required to make communication really significant for native speakers. Also, in senior secondary schools, foreign language teaching is more focused on reading passages that student are asked to skim and scan to find general and specific information. They may also have to answer comprehensions questions, interact with the teacher or with their peers about the topic and content of the passage. In the end students may deal with a communicative situation derived from the text. Here again, the objective is not specifically to give learners the opportunity to develop cultural knowledge, competence or awareness of target culture or own culture, or even to help them acquire some cultural resources to deal with interlocutors of other cultures.

Another striking finding of this study is that there is a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. This inconsistency may be explained by the fact that teachers do not yet really grasp the relationship between culture learning and language teaching. Such a discrepancy could also be attributed to the negligence of the integration of culture in English EFL programs, together with the fact most materials in textbooks focus

more on the development of the four "traditional" skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking). Culture based learning activities are not actually carefully sequenced and incorporated into textbooks. So, for teachers, the textbooks suggest more focus on language than on culture. Besides, teaching culture can be 'time consuming' when students do not have the necessary language to discuss cultural issues in the target language. We may add that when teachers feel constrained to complete the textbook content within a time frame, they would rather put the emphasis on "more...practical aspects of communication" [20] (p.217) instead of teaching culture. As [21] (p.123-124) observed in an earlier study, textbooks are a knowledge base for teachers as to what to teach and what to exclude from teaching, and those areas that are not found in the textbook are perceived as difficult to teach if the required knowledge to teach them is also not available in the textbook. In the same vein, we believe that even though many EFL teachers may have an acceptable command of the language, they may lack an acceptable knowledge of the target culture and may not possess a good level of cultural awareness and knowledge related to the foreign language. Most of them have never travelled to the target language country, and so have not been sufficiently exposed to its culture. No wonder that these teachers have difficulties presenting the cultural features of the target language in a critical way. What's more, integrating culture in FL teaching and learning requires the teachers to find the appropriate content, learning tasks and materials, and use the appropriate teaching techniques. This requires them to provide learners with knowledge of facts and information about the target language, help learners be aware of similarities and differences between their own culture and the target language culture, help them develop their communicative skills and by the same token allow them to engage in intercultural interactions [22]. These teaching practices can be performed through reading, listening, watching movies, making students interact with natives, etc. But, when teachers have not been trained accordingly, they may either teach culture approximately, or choose not deal with it and ignore it completely in their practices.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study was designed to determine Ivorian teachers' beliefs about the importance of culture in EFL teaching and learning and to find out how these beliefs reflect in their teaching practices. The results suggest that teachers are aware of the importance of culture in language teaching and support the idea that target language culture should be incorporated in the program and that language teaching in classrooms should be based on communication and awareness raising activities on target language culture and on students' own culture. Interculturality was also believed to be important as teachers considered that students should be able to interpret texts from another culture, understand how to interact someone from another culture, and interpret events from another cultures with regard to their own culture. However, the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices do not match.

The findings of this study suggests that culture is still not part of EFL instruction in Cote d'Ivoire. Yet, in this era of globalization and cultural diversity foreign language learners need to be taught how intercultural interactions take place, and be helped to develop the required attitudes, knowledge, skills, and values, for this purpose. Teachers themselves also need some training on the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of culture teaching in EFL classes, especially the formulation of cultural objectives and the use of specific cultural activities to reach these objectives. Similarly, textbooks need carefully orga-nized cultural materials that can be incorporated into lesson plans. In other words, the decision should be taken to revise the existing curriculum so that culture and interculturality are emphasized in EFL classes. By the same token, cultural awareness, and approaches to teaching culture should be an integral part of teacher training program so that the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values involved in the mastery of cross-cultural interactions be mastered by teachers as they start the profession. Only then will they be willing to incorporate culture in their daily practices.

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