Exploring Middle School EFL Teachers' Practices and Challenges in Teaching Culture

Younes HALIM

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sultan Moulay Slimane – Beni Mellal, Morocco
Halimyounes666@gmail.com

Hassan ZAID

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sultan Moulay Slimane – Beni Mellal, Morocco
zaidhassan37@gmail.com

Abstract

Given the recent expansion of English to 7th and 8th grades in Moroccan middle schools, examining middle school EFL teachers' practices and challenges in teaching culture is crucial. To this end, forty-eight EFL teachers from public middle schools were surveyed. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. The findings show that EFL middle school teachers incorporate culture into their classrooms mainly through the 3Ps model (practices, products, and perspectives). The most commonly practiced activities for integrating culture include reading comprehension, watching videos, role playing, and discussions, with each activity serving a specific pedagogical objective. The findings also revealed that EFL teachers encounter both student-related and education-system-related barriers to teaching culture. The study urges stakeholders, supervisors, and trainers to support teachers in overcoming these challenges and recommends further research into classroom practices. It also anticipates the prudent use of L1 to address students' low level of English when the goal is to develop learners' intercultural competence, though this still also requires further research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Moroccan constitution made it clear that foreign languages are not only a means of communication, but also windows to other worlds and an empowerment of Moroccan citizens to be key players in contributing knowledge not only nationwide but also worldwide, as stated in Article IV, Section 3:
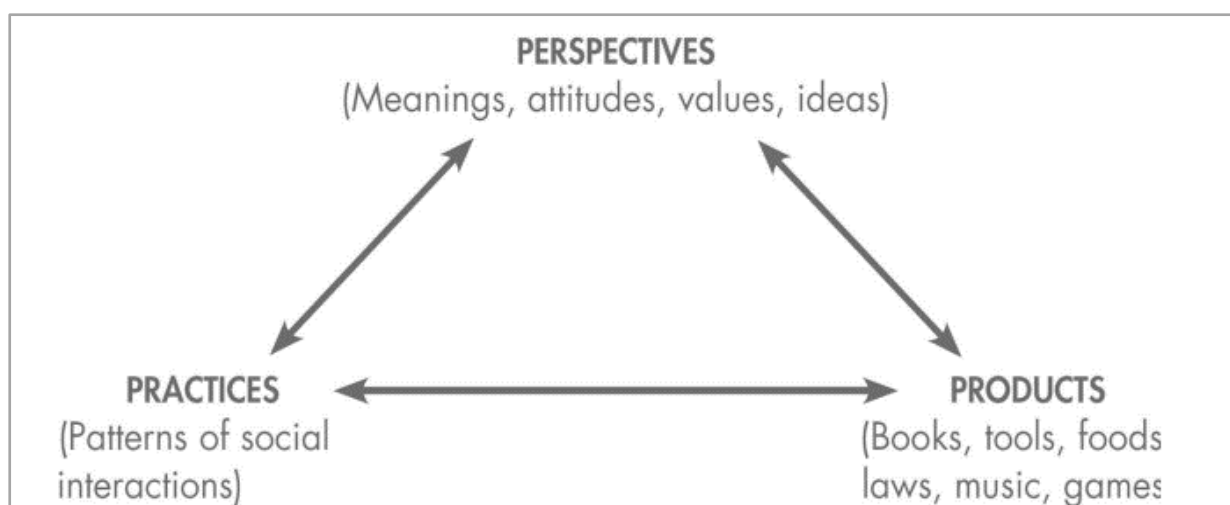
> [The state] sees to the coherence of linguistic policy and national culture and to the learning and mastery of the foreign languages of greatest use in the world, as tools of communication, of integration and of interaction [by which] society [may] know, and to be open to different cultures and to contemporary civilizations (Moroccan Const., art. IV, § 3, trans. Ruchti, 2012).

Indeed, English is now one of the foreign languages of greatest use and a common language being taught in Moroccan high schools and in middle schools, with weekly varying hours. In middle schools, English has been taught only in the third grade for nearly two decades now. However, on May 23, 2023, the Ministry of National Education, Preschool, and Sports (MNEPS) issued Circular No. 030×24 to extend the teaching of English to the first and second grades of middle schools. According to this ministerial circular, English has been gradually introduced in the seventh and eighth grades since the 2023–2024 academic year. Considering the shortage of qualified teachers, the Ministry aims to ensure that students in both grades have complete access to the English subject by the 2025–2026 academic year. In the first phase, English is taught in a limited number of 8th-grade classes, expands to 7th-grade classes in the second phase, and is expected to cover all classes in the final phase by 2025–2026. Following this plan, new textbooks for young learners have emerged in the field of ELT. These textbooks include sections entitled Culture, Global Citizenship, and Intercultural Communication, which reflect current trends in ELT in general and in culture teaching in particular. Therefore, this study aims to explore how culture is approached in middle schools and to identify the challenges that EFL teachers encounter when teaching it to young learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

So many endeavors have attempted to define culture that the term itself has become slippery, as Agar (1994) metaphorically described it, "culture is an elusive beast" (p. 21). In language teaching, Brooks (1968) was aware of the elusiveness of the term culture, for that he called for a definition that reflects classroom practices. Brooks further argued that not only should this definition be explicitly communicated to curriculum developers, syllabus designers, teachers and students, but it should also be embodied in the practices of teachers. In fact, for a long time, culture was marginalized and limited to the elitist view. For example, early methods such as Grammar-Translation treated culture as high culture and fine arts. Importantly, with the emergence of communicative approaches, culture started to gain attention, and it was perceived as the everyday lifestyle of people who use the language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). However, only when the standards movement thrived in the United States did culture explicitly push its way into EFL classrooms. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), in collaboration with various language education associations, developed the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996, 2006). These evolved to what is known today as *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages,* which aims to provide a framework that equips learners with communicative and cultural competence so that they can participate effectively in multilingual communities at local and global levels (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

At the heart of the bespoke standards lies the five Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Under the Cultures goal area, two standards were couched. The first standard encourages students to "use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied" while the second standard demands that "learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied" (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, Summary table). These two standards under the goal area of Culture, in effect, serve teaching culture to the language teaching community in terms of the 3Ps model (Practices, Products, Perspectives) and require language educators to highlight the relationship between them as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Cultural Framework

Source: (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015)

Culture is thus defined as including "the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products—both tangible and intangible—of a society" (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, Goal Area: Cultures chapter, Discussion section, para. 1). Culture also surfaced in other goal areas. For example, the Connection goal area includes a standard that makes students cognizant of "the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures." The Comparison goal area aims at helping learners to understand the concept of culture through comparison of their culture and other cultures (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, Summary table). Although Communication and Communities goal areas do not explicitly address culture, culture plays a significant role in communicating, collaborating, and interacting in multicultural communities around the world (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Phillips, 2003). Nevertheless, Moran (2001) was not satisfied with reducing culture to the three Ps and tried to be more elaborate, so he added the Communities and Persons dimensions. What Moran tried to do by adding Persons and Communities to the cultural phenomena is to recognize "specific social context, circumstances, and groups in which members carry out cultural practices" and individual identities that either connect people to a particular social context or distinguish them from it. This is reflected in his definition of culture as "an evolving way of life consisting of shared products, practices, and perspectives of persons within specific social settings and communities" (p. 9).

An important point to consider, however, is that the interest in practically integrating culture into language teaching represents a significant swing of the pendulum toward interculturality (Crozet, Liddicoat, & Bianco, 1999). During the 1970s and 1980s, language teaching was largely influenced by the concept of communicative competence, which emphasized learners' ability to use language appropriately in real-life situations rather than simply mastering grammatical forms. Yet, having recognized that immigration, technological advances, social media, and work bring people from different cultures together, and effective communication requires understanding and mediating between different cultural perspectives, Byram (1997) proposed an intercultural dimension to communicative competences. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) aims at developing "intercultural speakers".

The model comprises five interconnected components, referred to as the "five savoirs": (1) "savoirs" – knowledge, (2) "savoir être" – attitude, (3) "savoir comprendre" – skills for interpretation and connection, (4) "savoir apprendre/faire" – skills for exploration and interaction, and (5) "savoir s'engager" – critical cultural awareness.

The challenge, however, appears at the level of practice, and what teaching intercultural competence means for teachers and syllabus developers at each level of instruction. In other words, what students should gradually learn and what teachers should teach to develop intercultural competence becomes a major concern for educators. The National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL), in collaboration with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), stepped in and developed "Can-Do Statements" for communication and intercultural communication at all levels from novice to advanced. If communication is organized into three modes: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational, intercultural communication is presented through two modes: cultural investigation and interaction. The investigation mode aims to help learners understand perspectives by investigating products and practices, while the cultural interaction mode demands interacting with people from another culture. For novice learners, the proficiency benchmark for the cultural investigation mode outlines, "In my own and other cultures, I can identify products and practices to help me understand perspectives" (NCSSFL & ACTFL, 2017, p. 15). In the cultural interaction mode, it states: "I can interact at a survival level in some familiar everyday contexts." (NCSSFL & ACTFL, 2017, p. 15). In contrast, intermediate learners in the investigation mode are expected to be able to "make comparisons between products and practices to help [them] understand perspectives" in both their own and other cultures. In the interaction mode, they should reach a point where they "can interact at a functional level in some familiar contexts." (NCSSFL-ACTFL, 2017, p. 15). For more details, see *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements: Performance Indicators for Language Learners.*

In Morocco, the landscape is characterized by multiculturalism, multilingualism, and openness to different cultures, particularly European ones. Intercultural education is therefore a necessity; yet, the interest in it is still in its infancy and often becomes blurred in practice, which may present a significant challenge in teaching culture. Studies exploring the teaching of culture in the Moroccan context support this claim. For example, Akharraz and Tamir (2021) asked EFL teachers about their beliefs regarding culture, specifically asking them to define intercultural competence. The findings highlight that teachers view culture as intertwined with language and therefore perceive culture as communication, which reflects a traditional view of teaching culture. In line with this, Bellaarabi and Bouguerba (2024) also showed that the perceived objectives of intercultural education are at odds with EFL teachers' views; while teachers acknowledge the importance of the intercultural dimension in language teaching, its incorporation is often limited to teaching the target culture.

A similar gap between teachers' perceptions and classroom practices has also been reported in neighboring countries such as Algeria and Tunisia. In Algeria, although EFL teachers acknowledge the importance of culture in English language classrooms, its integration into actual teaching practices remains limited. Teachers include a few culture-related activities in English lessons, mostly focusing on capital "C" culture through literature, not to mention that activities promoting intercultural communicative competence are rarely used by teachers (Mahbouba, 2008; Meziani & Mahieddine, 2024). Hermessi (2016) pointed out that some

Tunisian EFL teachers believe "that culture is important to both communicative competence and intercultural competence", but they "wish to keep cultural content to a minimum" (p.115). Bouslama and Bouhass Benaissi (2018) went even further to relate the poor intercultural competence of Tunisian learners to the misconception of the intercultural approach by EFL teachers. In brief, EFL Teachers may sometimes say that culture, in general, and intercultural competence, in particular, are important, but what they say and do as far as their practices are concerned shows the opposite, which results in disparity between pedagogical aims and practice.

According to Baleghizadeh and Moghadam (2013), the tension between EFL teachers' beliefs and practices is engendered by decisions of stakeholders and teachers' and students' preferences. These include predetermined syllabi, lesson objectives, limited time, and preselected teaching materials. Additionally, teachers' definitions of culture and students' low level of tolerance contributed to the disparity between EFL teachers' beliefs and instructional practices. Michel (2018) also disclosed that mismatch between Ivorian teachers' beliefs and practices is attributed to syllabus at large, which does not promote reflections on cultural elements, and at the same time straightjackets teachers because they have to finish covering the textbook content at a given time, not to mention that teaching culture consumes time especially when learners lack language to discuss and reflect on their culture and other cultures. In Morocco, Akharraz and Tamer (2021) also revealed that high school teachers face obstacles related to the education system, including the negative washback effect of national exams and the syllabus, as well as time constraints. That is, teachers often feel pressured to cover the syllabus and ensure students are prepared for the national exams.

Regarding teachers' practices to integrate culture into EFL classrooms, Zaid (2025) revealed that comparing learners' culture with foreign cultures, demonstrating cultural experiences through role plays and ICT, and reflecting on cultural topics were among the more frequently used practices while cultural discussions, cultural projects, analyzing cultural phenomena presented in spoken or written texts, and writing about cultural topics were reported as less frequent. However, these less frequently practiced activities are particularly important for developing learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). For instance, Sabilah, Wicaksono, and Andini (2025) found that discussing cultural aspects, role-playing dialogues, and analyzing reading texts contributed significantly to the development of ICC among Indonesian high school EFL learners. Nevertheless, these reflective activities are demanding on the part of learners, as demonstrated by Yusri and Andriyanti (2025), who found that reflective writing, discussion, and portfolios did not attract much attention from teachers because they require a high level of proficiency. Even so, EFL teachers still attempted to introduce culture into their classrooms through PowerPoint presentations, films, and videos.

That said, previous research indicates that teaching activities rely heavily on cultural comparisons, mainly between the target and native cultures, although the aim is sometimes intercultural education. For instance, research by Bellaarabi and Bouguerba (2024) indicates a tendency among Moroccan EFL teachers to adopt a "comparative framework" in their classrooms. Makaoui & Mazari (2024) also reported comparing cultures as an activity to introduce culture to students, among other activities such as organizing extra-curricular activities, watching films and documentaries, assigning presentations, and project works. Although comparing cultures is one of the intermediate can-do standards and part of the goal

area of Comparisons, the activity of comparing cultures in EFL classrooms has been critiqued for its potential to reinforce power inequalities (R'boul, 2023), yet it depends on EFL teachers' objectives behind contrasting and comparing cultures. The power, in fact, resides in EFL teachers' cultural awareness and skill in crafting objectives that either reinforce or challenge inequalities. For example, Berkane's (2025) action research devoted three sessions to project work to teach culture to first-year baccalaureate students. The focus was on celebrations around the world. Berkane's overall goal was to make learners understand celebration practices in Morocco and in "different countries". This indicates her attention to move beyond the traditional UK/US-centrism and encourage learning of diverse cultures to promote intercultural understanding, which is demonstrated in another objective that aims to foster respect for diverse cultural practices.

Although culture, in general, and intercultural competence, in particular, have been the focus of many studies in the Moroccan context (Akharraz & Tamir, 2021; Bellaarabi & Bouguerba, 2024; Berkane, 2025; Makaoui & Mazari, 2024; Zaid, 2025), their scope of investigation was limited to high school levels. Importantly, given the recent decisions by the Ministry of Education to expand English to the seventh and eighth grades, the way culture is approached in middle schools remains an area worthy of examination. This is particularly significant since the Ministry's reform was accompanied by the introduction of new textbooks that foreground cultural content. Hence, investigating how culture is approached and the challenges EFL teachers may encounter when teaching culture to young middle school learners is crucial. This study, therefore, aims to examine how culture is being taught in Moroccan middle schools and the challenges EFL teachers encounter, by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. How do Moroccan middle school EFL teachers approach the teaching of culture?
2. What are the challenges Moroccan EFL teachers encounter in incorporating culture in middle schools?

3. METHODOLOGY

An exploratory qualitative approach is adopted to examine how Moroccan EFL teachers' practices in integrating culture into their teaching and the challenges they encounter in doing so. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that qualitative inquiry is concerned with "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Thus, the merit of the qualitative approach is that it allows participants to share their experience in their own words instead of being given predefined options to select from. It is a viable approach to gain an in-depth understanding of middle school teachers' experiences in teaching culture, especially in light of the recent reform that extends English to 7th and 8th grades in middle schools since the 2023-2024 school year and the limited research available at this educational level.

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study are 48 EFL teachers working in middle schools (28 male and 20 female), who are categorized into four groups based on their years of teaching experience. The sample included 35 *novice teachers* (72.92%) with 1 to 5 years of experience. Eight *professional teachers* (16.67%) have between 6 and 10 years of experience, while only one *experienced teacher* (2.08%) has between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience, and finally, four *expert teachers* (8.33%) have more than 15 years. Apparently, the sample of the study consists mostly of novice teachers, with only a very small number of experienced teachers.

This may be explained by the recent expansion of English to the 7th and 8th middle school levels since the academic year 2023–2024, which required the Ministry of Education to recruit more teachers in order to meet its plan of reaching full integration of English instruction into both seventh and eighth grades by the 2025–2026 academic year.

3.2. Instrument

The main instrument used in this study for data collection is a survey containing demographic questions and open-ended questions. The first section contains questions regarding participants' gender and experience. The second section of the questionnaire consists of open-ended questions that seek to collect data on EFL teachers' practices, including the aspects of culture they teach and the activities they employ to teach culture. The third section asks participants to describe a lesson in which they taught culture. The final section aims to elicit the challenges of teaching culture.

3.3. Sampling and Data Collection

The online questionnaire was created using Microsoft Forms to gather qualitative data relevant to the research objectives and questions. A purposive sampling approach was used to specifically select middle school teachers teaching at least the seventh or eighth grades in order to ensure relevance to the study's focus. In other words, the study concentrated on teachers working in schools where the Ministry of Education's policy has been implemented. Besides purposive sampling, convenience sampling was employed to facilitate the timely collection of responses from a specific and accessible population of EFL teachers. However, it is worth noting that due to the Ministry's recent language policy regarding English, which prompted the recruitment of new teachers to cover all middle school grades, purposive sampling has resulted in an overrepresentation of novice middle school teachers. It is also important to note that while convenience sampling facilitates the data collection process, it may limit the generalizability of the findings (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

3.4.Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software, using thematic analysis. There are two approaches to thematic analysis: inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down). This study adopts an inductive approach, which, according to Braun & Clarke (2006), involves coding data without fitting it into pre-existing themes or the researcher's preconceptions. It allows themes to emerge naturally from the data. To provide a more detailed understanding of the data, Creswell and Creswell (2023) suggest transforming qualitative themes into quantitative variables by counting and grouping them. This quantification allows for a thorough analysis of the themes identified in the participants' responses.
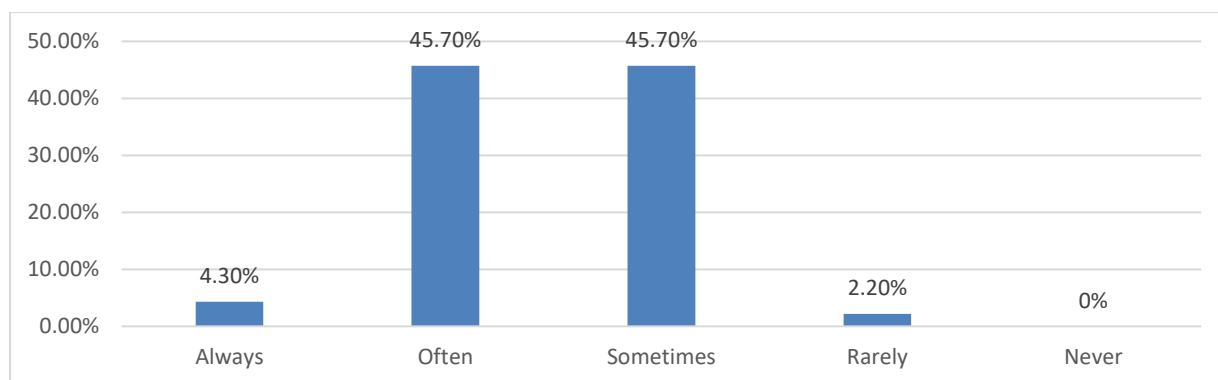
4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
4.1.EFL Teachers' Practices in Teaching Culture

The first research question seeks to explore how EFL teachers approach the integration of culture into their classrooms. In other words, it examines their teaching practices. Here, practices refer to all the efforts made by teachers to incorporate cultural content into their instruction. This includes the cultural aspects they address and the specific cultural activities they use to teach culture. First, the participants of the study were asked how frequently they integrate culture into their daily practices. The results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Descriptive Statistics of Culture Integration in Middle Schools.
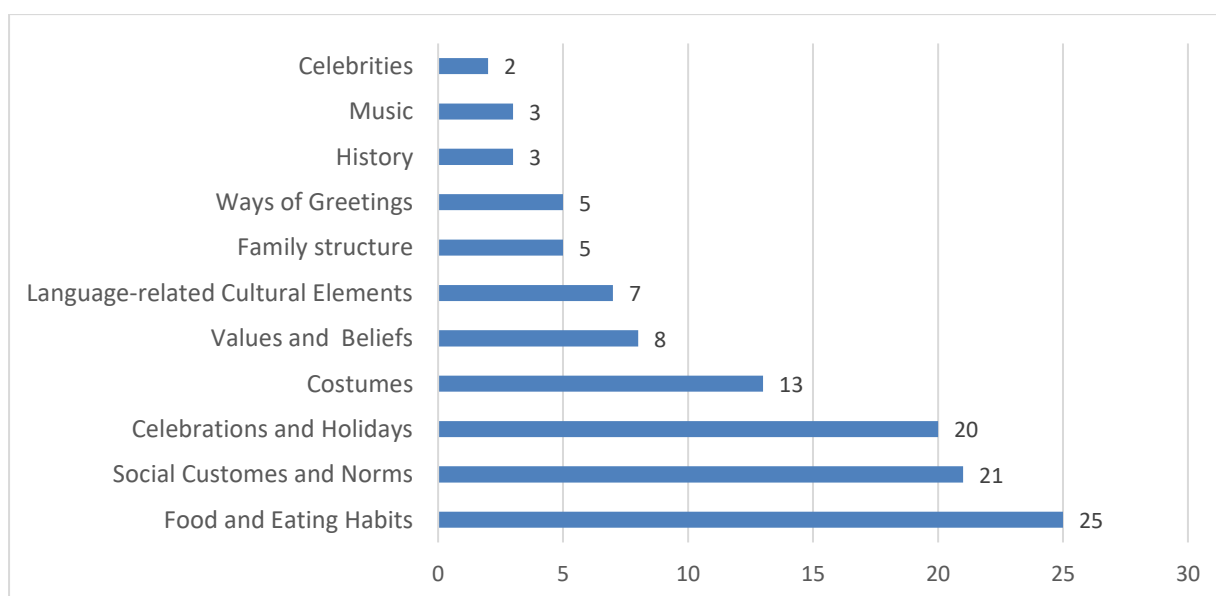

As illustrated in Figure 2, almost all participants integrated culture into their teaching to varying degrees. Only a small proportion of participants reported either always or rarely integrating culture, but no one cited not integrating it at all. Also, the results show that 45.70% equally cited either "sometimes" or "often". Overall, Figure 2 shows that the majority of participants integrated culture into their practices to a considerable degree. While Akharraz and Tamir (2021), Bellaarabi and Bouguerba (2024), and Makaoui and Mazari (2024) show that Moroccan EFL high school teachers believe culture is important in high schools, these findings show that culture is incorporated in middle schools as well. Yet, these findings are inconsistent with Hermessi (2016), who revealed that Tunisian EFL teachers marginalize culture.

In addition to how frequently culture is integrated in middle schools, it is important to explore the aspects of culture addressed in EFL classrooms. EFL teachers were asked to provide aspects of culture they cover. Their responses were coded in NVivo. Figure 3 presents the various aspects of culture that EFL teachers in middle school cover.

Figure *3*

Aspects of Culture Covered by EFL Teachers to Teach Culture in Middle Schools

---

At first glance at Figure 3 about the aspects of culture taught in middle school, it is revealed that EFL teachers tackled culture in terms of the three Ps, though with varying degrees. Some aspects of culture are more frequent than others. For example, there is a focus on products and practices such as food and eating habits, costumes, celebration and clothing, while perspectives (values and beliefs) are relatively frequent. These findings about aspects of culture generally reveal that culture is served to EFL learners in terms of 3Ps, which aligns with how the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2015) put forward the teaching of culture in EFL classrooms. Language-related cultural aspects such as idioms and slang have also emerged. Interestingly, celebrities and family structure are perceived as an aspect of culture that testifies to Moran's (2001) addition of two dimensions of culture, namely Community and Persons, despite being less frequent. Yet it is worth acknowledging that some participants cite two aspects of culture or fewer and end their responses with "etc," which entails that there may be more aspects of culture that they integrated into their EFL classrooms.

For teachers' practices, EFL teachers were first asked to list the activities they employ to incorporate culture in their classrooms. However, a simple listing of activities does not provide a full picture of how culture is actually taught. To address this, a subsequent question asked teachers to describe a lesson in which they incorporated cultural elements to gain insights into how activities were exploited to teach culture. Figure 4 presents the activities that were frequently mentioned by the participants of the study in response to the first question.

Figure 4

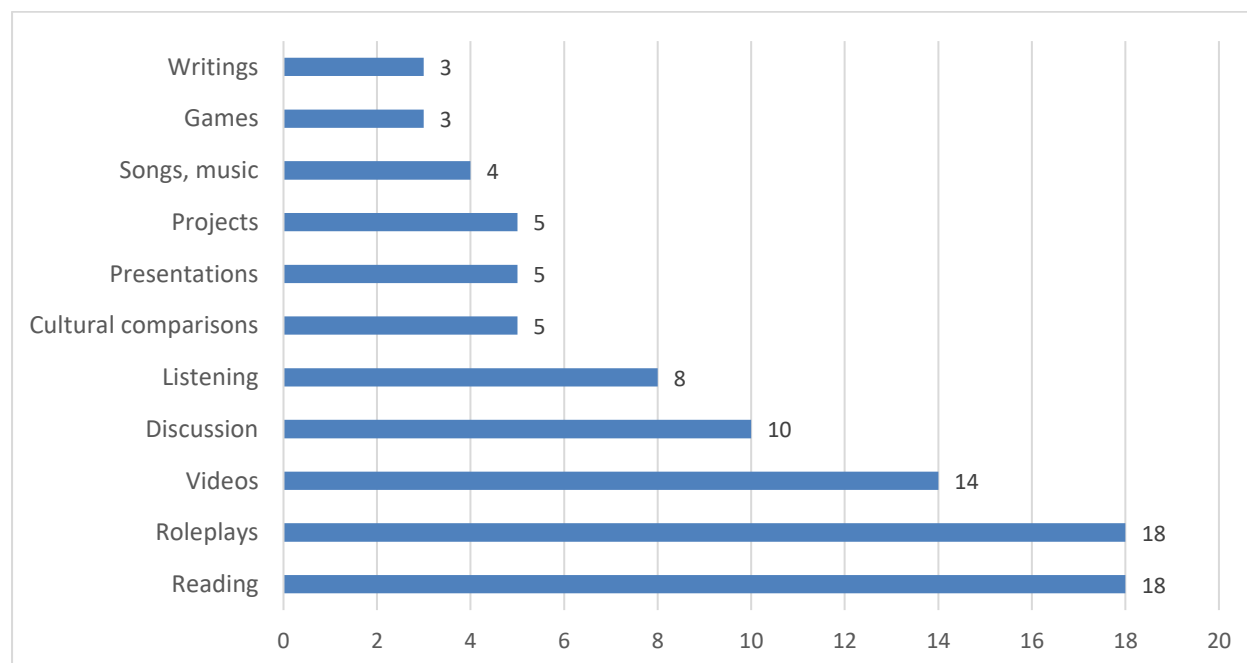*Thematic Analysis of Teaching Activities to Teach Culture in Middle School*

Figure 4 reveals that EFL teachers at the middle school used a variety of activities to teach culture. The top three activities are reading comprehension, role-plays, and watching videos. Other frequently used activities include discussion and listening. Less frequent ones include cultural comparisons, presentations, projects, songs, games, and writing. To get more insights into teaching activities, the subsequent question in the survey asks EFL teachers to briefly describe a lesson in which they believed they targeted culture. For space reasons, only a limited

number of lesson scenarios are provided, in particular those which elaborate on the previously identified activities. The findings revealed significant insights couched below.

First, it is worth noting, for research objectivity, that thematic analysis of teachers' listed teaching activities to teach culture indicates that cultural comparisons did not stand out as a common activity, as shown in Figure 4, but analysis of lesson descriptions to teach culture shows that 15 teachers commonly used cultural comparisons to teach culture. For example, a male professional teacher explained that he used a reading text to teach cultural aspects of shopping habits and ended his lesson with a comparison task. He said that he "gave students a simple short text about shopping habits as a way of life in American culture. The objective was to explore how brands affect people's willingness to spend money, including a simple comparison of shopping in America and Morocco". Another female novice teacher explained that she "compared a class in the US with our class and had students compare education in both countries". A third male novice teacher made it clear when he stated the objective of his lesson: "by the end of this lesson students will be able to recognize the target culture aspect 'food and drinks' and compare it to their own culture".

Second, lesson descriptions notably indicate that culture is infused into the four skills as well as into language components. For example, a male novice teacher described incorporating culture into a listening activity through a gap-filling exercise designed to assess students' knowledge of different table manners, noting, "Students listened to an audio describing eating habits in different countries (Kenya, China, India). The purpose was for students to listen and fill in the gaps with the appropriate table manners of each country." Another female novice teacher illustrated how she used videos and images to integrate culture into a vocabulary lesson. She explained, "In a lesson on vocabulary related to family and celebrations, I introduced traditional Western wedding customs. We explored a short video and images showing elements like the white dress, exchanging vows, and the reception. Students learned related vocabulary (e.g., bride, groom, ceremony, bouquet) and practiced using the present simple to describe wedding traditions."

Third, some accounts of lessons clearly demonstrate the importance of visual presentation of culture through videos, PowerPoint presentations and images in bringing cultural experiences to life for students. A female teacher described using videos to teach cultural routines for ordering food in different countries and invited students to simulate the situation through role-plays. For instance, she explained, "I presented a lesson on ordering food in a restaurant. First, I taught vocabulary related to the topic and showed a video about how food is ordered in other countries. After grasping the vocabulary and watching the video, I invited students to do a role-play integrating what they had learned." Another male novice teacher used a PowerPoint presentation to teach vocabulary related to celebrations. He noted "I use a PowerPoint presentation with images and short videos to introduce how Christmas is celebrated in the U.K. and the U.S., including Christmas trees, stockings, Santa Claus, gift-giving, and food, and listen to a simple Christmas song We Wish You a Merry Christmas") and students learn key vocabulary (tree, gift, snow, Santa)".

Finally, these lesson descriptions bear witness to the fact that culture can be integrated into teaching the four skills and language components and that different activities can be used within a single lesson to teach culture. For example, videos can introduce cultural aspects,

comparative activities can encourage reflection on cultural aspects, and role-plays can help simulate cultural experiences. Although each activity serves a specific pedagogical objective, the teaching of culture in middle schools is often simplistic. In other words, based on the teachers' sentiments, cultural content is typically limited to the surface-level of cultural products and practices. While these activities expose students to culture and occasionally highlight differences between students' own culture and others, they rarely engage learners in critical reflection on underlying perspectives such as cultural values and beliefs.

In light of these findings, thematic analysis demonstrated that EFL teachers at middle school frequently incorporate culture through reading texts, role-plays, videos, discussions, and listening. More reflective activities, such as cultural comparisons, research projects, writing about cultural topics, presentations, games, and songs, are less frequently practiced. These findings are consistent with Zaid's (2025) study, which shows that EFL teachers employ a variety of activities. Yet, the minor presence of activities such as projects, presentations, and writing can be explained by their demand for higher levels of proficiency (Sabilah et al., 2025), which novice learners at middle schools may not yet have, whereas the predominance of certain activities can be attributed to the fact that they require a lower level of language proficiency. Surprisingly, games and songs, though engaging for young learners, are also not frequently practiced to teach culture. This may be justified, as Zaid (2025) points out, by "the sensitivity of such cultural activities that could be viewed as culturally inappropriate" (p. 84).

Nevertheless, a significant finding is that cultural comparisons emerged as a common practice in teachers' narratives about example lessons. This finding aligns with one of the proficiency benchmarks at the intermediate level outlined in world-readiness standards for learning languages (NCSSFL-ACTFL, 2017) and and consistent with Bellaarabi and Bouguerba (2024) and Makaoui and Mazari (2024), who found that cultural comparison is a prominent activity practised by high school EFL teachers; Indeed, careful attention should be given to the practice of comparing cultures. Cultural comparisons should, in fact, be approached with caution in EFL so as not to reinforce inequalities (R'boul, 2023) or "run the risk of creating discontent among students" (Zaid, 2025, p. 84). Ivorian teachers, in fact, tend to be reserved when it comes to teaching similarities and differences between cultures due to the nature of the teaching materials and methods, which discourage cultural comparisons and instead focus primarily on language form, vocabulary, and routine communicative tasks (Michel, 2018).

4.2. Challenges to Teaching Culture in Middle Schools

The second objective is to find out the challenges EFL teachers face when integrating culture into their teaching. We asked the participants about the challenges they encounter and analyzed their responses thematically to identify common themes. The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 5

Thematic Analysis of Challenges in Teaching Culture in Middle School
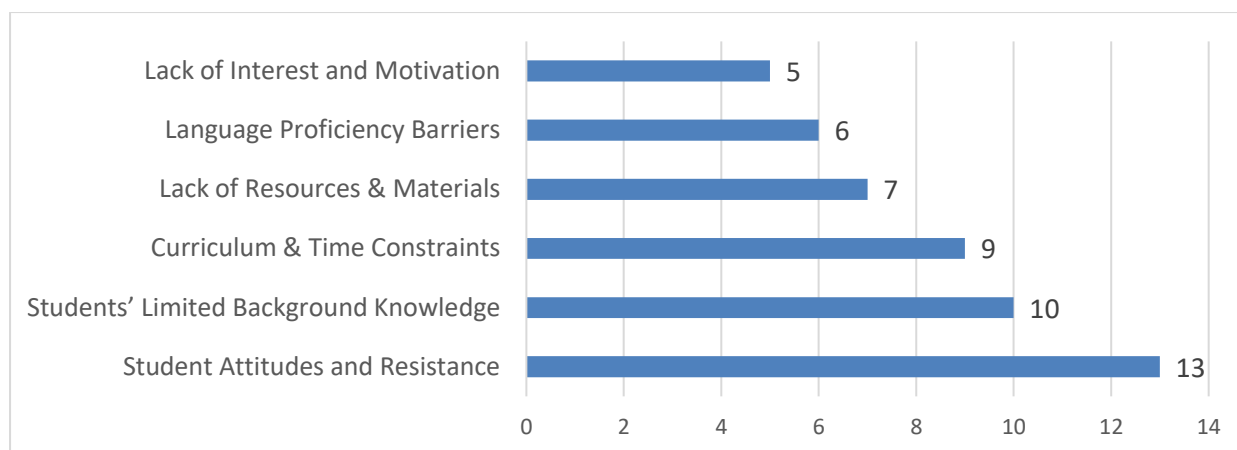

 Figure 5 demonstrates the challenges EFL teachers encounter in teaching culture in their classrooms. Notably, the most frequent impediment to teaching culture is students' oppositional attitudes toward culture. This is because students find foreign culture at odds with their local culture, as summarized in a sentiment by a male professional teacher: "Culture shock makes students refuse to learn about other cultures because they see them as strange and not worthy to learn." Another challenge is related to students' limited background knowledge. In other words, teachers complain about the limited knowledge of learners to understand other cultures. This is captured in this female novice teacher's argument: "I face the limited exposure of students to authentic cultural contexts outside the classroom, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to fully grasp certain cultural practices and values." Curriculum and time constraints are another major obstacle that EFL teachers face in middle schools. As one of the female novice teachers argues, "Time constraints within the curriculum and the need to prioritize language skills can also limit opportunities to explore cultural content in depth." This constraint also alludes to issues of assessment, particularly negative washback. Lack of materials, low language proficiency, and lack of interest and motivation are reported to be hindrances to incorporating culture in middle schools. These are echoed fervently in participants' responses. One of the male novice teachers points to the "Poor linguistic competence of the students," while another female novice teacher finds that "many students aren't interested or motivated to learn about the target culture."

Based on these findings, middle school EFL teachers encounter challenges related to students' negative attitudes, resistance, and limited schemata about either their own culture or foreign culture. While learners' attitudes and resistance can be explained by the differences between foreign and local cultures, especially when cultural aspects are perceived to contest the local values of Moroccan learners, motivation and lack of interest may be more related to learning the language in general. Baleghizadeh and Moghadam (2013) categorize such impediments under individual preferences. Students' proficiency level is also a major constraint to teaching culture, particularly when teachers attempt to explain invisible culture, such as the perspectives that underlie products and practices, to novice learners. Yusri and Andriyanti (2025) confirm that reflective activities, which can help discuss the perspective dimension of the three 3Ps model, are constrained by the low level of students' language. Hence, culture teaching is expected to remain at the superficial level while "an awareness of other cultures' perspectives

is critical in the development of global competence, an essential theme in preparing learners for life and work in the 21st century" (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, p. 109). Besides, student-related obstacles, syllabus, compounded with a lack of supplementary materials, is also a constraint that straitjackets teachers from providing learners with in-depth lessons about culture. Such lessons require more time, time which teachers may instead devote to linguistic components on which students are tested (Akharraz & Tamer, 2021). In fact, Michel (2018) and Akharraz and Tamer (2021) confirmed that a linguistically loaded syllabus does not leave much room for teachers to teach culture, and teachers in formal education are always required to cover the syllabus and prepare students for exams.

4.3. Implications and Recommendations

The reported aspects of culture covered in middle schools reveal that EFL teachers generally approach culture through the 3Ps model, alongside Moran's (2001) two dimensions: Persons and Communities. However, the teaching of culture is still addressed, to a large extent, at a superficial level, which is limited to knowing about products and practices, with little emphasis on the perspective dimension that underlies these cultural dimensions. In addition to cultural aspects, the findings highlight that teachers rely on a variety of activities to integrate culture into their classrooms, among which reading texts, watching videos, role plays, and discussions prevail. Unfortunately, other reflective activities such as research projects, writings about cultural topics and presentations don't catch the attention of teachers and imply that teachers are inclined to choose their activities based on students' limited proficiency in English. This indeed limits middle school learners' opportunity to develop intercultural communicative competence. It is apparent, based on the findings of this study and other previous research, that the English proficiency level of learners stands out as a barrier to teaching culture, particularly for low-level learners, and it is a key factor in employing reflective activities that tap into the perspective dimension. Thus, the wise use of L1 to discuss this invisible dimension of culture in EFL classrooms is proposed since the main aim of teaching culture is the development of intercultural competence. While reliance on learners' mother tongue in teaching a foreign language always stirs controversy, whether to use it, ban it, or limit its use, students' mother tongue or a common language between students and teachers can be an opportunity to develop learners' critical cultural awareness. Yet it should be approached with caution, although this approach still requires further research.

Besides the limited language proficiency of learners, teaching foreign culture at the elementary level in Moroccan middle schools does not go without challenges related to both students and the policy of English language teaching. On the part of learners, reported obstacles include negative attitudes, resistance, low motivation, and lack of interest. On the part of teachers, instructional time and syllabus constraints, as well as insufficient material support, emerged as significant barriers. While these challenges go beyond teachers' immediate control, they nonetheless need to be addressed. Teacher education and supervisors, through continuous professional development programs, can intervene to support EFL teachers on learners' attitudes, resistance, and motivation, not to mention the role the directorate of curricula plays in providing EFL teachers with supplementary material that could facilitate the teaching of culture.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored the self-reported practices of 48 EFL teachers regarding the integration of culture into middle school English classes, as well as the challenges they encounter. The findings show that most teachers make efforts to teach culture through diverse activities, such as reading texts, watching videos, and role plays. However, they face significant challenges, including students' low motivation and resistance, limited cultural background knowledge, low language proficiency, and constraints related to instructional time, curriculum, and teaching materials. The study recommends further research into the role of learners' L1 in supporting cultural learning, particularly for low-level learners, as well as classroom observations to examine how activities designed to teach culture generate the desired outcomes. These findings pinpoint the need for greater support and professional development for EFL teachers. Teacher education programs, supervisors, and educational authorities need to address the practical difficulties teachers face in teaching culture in EFL classrooms to young learners. For example, just as teacher education programs include modules on teaching language skills and components, as well as assessment, they could also integrate a module on intercultural awareness and teaching to train pre-service teachers in teaching culture. Supervisors could mentor in-service teachers, especially novice ones, and organize workshops on cultural instruction and strategies to address classroom challenges. Material designers could support teachers by providing ready-to-use cultural capsules and resources to integrate culture into lessons. These recommendations can help teachers overcome challenges and improve the teaching of culture in middle school EFL classrooms.

REFERENCES

Akharraz, M., & Tamir, Y. (2021). Culture teaching in Moroccan EFL secondary schools. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies, 3*(2), 127–144. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v3i2.579

Baleghizadeh, S., & Saneie Moghadam, M. (2013). An investigation of tensions between EFL teachers' beliefs and practices about teaching culture. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal*, (7), 35–53.

Bellaarabi, E. M., & Bouguerba, T. (2024). Intercultural education in Morocco: Theorization and practice through teachers' perspectives. *British Journal of Teacher Education and Pedagogy, 3*(3), 182–194. https://doi.org/10.32996/bjtep.2024.3.3.15

Bouslama, A., & Bouhass Benaissi, F. (2018). Intercultural competence in ELT contexts: A study of EFL teachers' perceptions. *Arab World English Journal, 9*(4), 122–135. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no4.8

Berkane, R. (2025). Fostering cultural competence: Teaching intercultural understanding through project-based learning. *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy, 6*(1). https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2025.6.1.906

Brooks, N. (1968). Teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals, 1*(3), 204–217. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1968.tb00135.x

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M., Perugini, D. C., & Wagner, M. (2013). The development of intercultural citizenship in the elementary school Spanish classroom. *Learning Languages, 18*(2), 16–31.

Crozet, C., Liddicoat, A. J., & Lo Bianco, J. (1999). Intercultural competence: From language policy to language education. In J. Lo Bianco, A. J. Liddicoat, & C. Crozet (Eds.), *Striving for the third place: Intercultural competence through language education* (pp. 1–20). Language Australia.

Hermessi, T. (2016). Teacher cognition on the place of culture in English education in Tunisia. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language, 4*(2), 105–118. https://doi.org/10.14434/ijsk.v4i2.18183

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2008). *Cultural globalization and language education*. Yale University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques & principles in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Makaoui, I., & Mazari, A. (2024). Investigating the importance of integrating intercultural communicative competence in EFL classrooms: Moroccan high schools as a case study. Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 6, 43–54. https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2024.6.3.6

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Messerehi, M. (2014). The teaching of English culture in Algerian secondary schools: The case of second year classes. Arab World English Journal, 5(1), 167–179.

Meziani, S., & Mahieddine, R. (2024). Teachers' perceptions of English culture in secondary school EFL classes in Adrar. Langues & Cultures, 5(2), 201–212. https://doi.org/10.62339/jlc.v5i02.298

Michel, A. Y. K. (2018). Culture in EFL teaching: Teacher beliefs and practices in Ivorian secondary schools. American Journal of Educational Research, 6(12), 1600–1604.

Ministry of Justice. (2011). *Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco* (J. J. Ruchti, Trans.). William S. Hein & Co. (Original work enacted 2011).

Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports (Morocco). (2023, May 23). Circular No. 030×24: Regarding the generalization of the English language in lower secondary education [Ministerial circular].

Moran, P. R. (2001). *Teaching culture: Perspectives in practice*. Heinle, Cengage Learning.

National Council of State Supervisors for Languages & American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (2017). *NCSSFL-ACTFL can-do statements: Performance indicators for language learners*. https://www.actfl.org/resources/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements

National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (1996). *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century*. Yonkers, NY: National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project.

National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (2006). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century* (3rd ed.). Lawrence, KS: Allen Press.

National Standards Collaborative Board. (2015). *World-readiness standards for learning languages* (4th ed.). American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). https://www.actfl.org/resources/world-readiness-standards-learning-languages

Phillips, J. K. (2003). Culture as the driving force. In D. L. & R. M. Paige (Eds.), *Culture as the core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning* (pp. 161–172). Information Age Publishing.

R'boul, H. (2023). English teaching in the Global South: Interculturality, postcoloniality and critical pedagogy. In D. Hird (Ed.), *Critical pedagogies for modern languages education: Criticality, decolonization, and social justice* (pp. 45–61). Bloomsbury Academic.

Sabilah, F., Wicaksono, B. H., & Andini, T. M. (2025). Enhancing intercultural communicative competence in EFL classrooms: Strategies and techniques in Indonesian high schools. *Research and Development in Education (RaDEn), 5*(1), 171–182. https://doi.org/10.22219/raden.v5i1.39261

Yusri, M., & Andriyanti, E. (2025). Investigating intercultural competence in EFL teaching: Teacher perception and action used to promote intercultural competence. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, 10*(1), 104–125. https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.v10i1.25325

Zaid, H. (2025). EFL Teachers' Culture Teaching Perspectives and Practices. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies. 7*(4).71-88. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i4.2198