An Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Interculturality in ELT

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Abstract

One of the influences of globalized English in recent years on the English language teaching (ELT) practice is the rise of the significance of intercultural teaching and learning. Such a development has made teaching intercultural competence a compelling requirement. This study investigates ($N = 16$) English language teachers' perceptions of intercultural teaching and learning and their actual classroom practices in Oman. Data were collected from a survey administered to the participants. Results showed differences in the teachers' opinions concerning intercultural teaching. While only a small minority of teachers believed that EFL classrooms should adopt intercultural teaching, nearly half supported teaching culture in foreign language classes but cited concerns about cultural clashes that might occur. The study also revealed that the participants favored avoiding teaching culture in language classrooms, especially in contexts that lack support for interculturality. The study draws on the significance of addressing the challenges that occur in the absence of intercultural teaching.

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1. Introduction

Throughout its history, English Language Teaching (ELT) has been the pivotal concern of applied linguistics which has witnessed development in scope, methods, and purpose. By focusing on topics such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and restricting itself to second language acquisition theory and pedagogy, as well as the interrelationship between the two, the discipline has traditionally been identified with language teaching and learning. However, the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a paradigm shift in the focus and methods of language study and pedagogy, which has profound implications for the development and growth of applied linguistics (Davies, 2007; Schmitt, 2010). It is now defined as "the academic discipline concerned with the relation of knowledge about language to decision making in the real world" (Cook, 2003, p. 5).

Applied linguistics has grown remarkably and expanded in both scope and methods of inquiry (Davies & Elder, 2006), taking language and society as a central subject matter. This expansion in the focus and scope of the discipline has given language and culture more significance as the central subject of its investigation. In this context, language and society have a dynamic and complex relationship based on mutual influence (Van Herk, 2012). Linguists believe that language and society are interrelated based on the understanding that language is the most dominant aspect which influences and reflects our daily activities and is better understood as people use it and experience it (Cook, 2003).

The development of applied linguistics as a fast-growing discipline has gone in tandem with the rise of English as an international language. Throughout its intriguing history of growth, and especially in recent times, English has brought significant challenges and new developments that have contributed to changing the world's linguistic landscape and have tremendous implications for ELT practice (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Pishghadam et al., 2013; Salih, 2021; Salih & Holi, 2018). Moreover, the spread of English worldwide has created populations of culturally and linguistically diverse users with different needs and expectations (Cook, 2003; Crystal, 2002), motivating researchers to investigate the methods of language teaching, curriculum design, and material development. Thus, the rapid global spread of English and its developments have made teaching intercultural understanding an urgent need and a significant objective that needs to be addressed and pursued in ELT pedagogical practice.

Interculturality in ELT is a crucial aspect that requires more space and attention in light of the rising phenomenon of globalized English (Cook, 2003; Crystal, 2002; Galloway & Rose, 2015; Jenkins, 2000) and to avoid the prejudiced position of 'linguicism' (Phillipson, 1992) which establishes for a hierarchical ranking of language use and the hegemony of one linguistic group over another. Kachru (1990) described the global expansion and spread of English in a model of three concentric circles: the inner circle where English is the dominant native language of most of the population; the outer circle where English enjoys the status of official or widely-used language; and the expanding circle where English is used as a second language in different fields and industries. The constant expansion in the third circle drew attention to the value of intercultural communication in using English as a lingua franca among non-native language users (Jenkins, 2006).

Adopting an intercultural approach to the use of English as a lingua franca found its way to the educational field with a growing interest in developing language learners' intercultural communicative competence and abilities to negotiate meaning when encountering cultural differences. Hadley (2001) believes "that language and culture are closely intertwined" (p. 343) because they play a mutual and complementary role in promoting language proficiency. The changing scene in higher education requires universities to focus on their students' learning needs, equip them with the necessary twenty-first-century skills, inculcate in them the awareness and ability to interact with culturally diverse individuals and contexts, and embrace intercultural competence and cultural differences management skills as essential traits.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Intercultural Language Teaching for Global Citizenship

As a lingua franca, English is omnipresent in diverse intercultural exchanges, making teaching English as a second/foreign language fraught with many challenges. According to the conventional approach to ELT the main focus of the educational process was to bridge gaps in knowledge between language users and improve their communication skills. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the intercultural approach to language teaching and learning started to flourish by expanding the focus from developing the learners' four skills in reading, listening, speaking, and writing to acquiring socio-cultural skills that allow language users to communicate in various intercultural contexts. The status of English as a lingua franca gave rise to the intercultural approach to language education that focuses on building the learners' 'intercultural competence' (IC) or 'intercultural communicative competence (ICC)' (Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997; Lyddon, 2018; Secru, 2004). This new form of competence replaced the conventional mode of "native speaker proficiency/competence" (Corbett, 2003, p. 2).

The notion of IC or ICC emerged in response to the need to adopt intercultural language teaching in an increasingly globalized world (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Byram, 1997, 1989, 2006; Cetinavci, 2012; Gu, 2016; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018; Romanowski, 2017). In a globalized setting, the native speaker model gradually lost its prevalence and dissolved into the internationalized status of English as a lingua franca. The communicative approach to language teaching started to integrate with the intercultural approach (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2013), taking the form of intercultural communicative competence. ICC is viewed as the fruit of integrating three levels of competence: linguistic, socio-cultural, and discourse competence. Byram (1997) observed that ICC could be developed and assessed in different disciplines, but first and foremost, its application emerged in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT).

IC and ICC were used interchangeably by different scholars. Deardorff (2011) highlighted the importance of context in defining intercultural competence, clarifying that its definition differs by academic discipline. The author explained that what matters most in defining intercultural competence is to exceed superficial knowledge about cultural components such as food, values, social practices, and others and concentrate on a broader understanding of more profound cultural paradigms in socio-cultural contexts. An indispensable component of developing the learners' IC is to instill in them the ability to understand different worldviews and appreciate various dimensions of identities other than the national identity without showing a tendency for stereotyping others but at the same time without undermining self-identity. Pishghadam et al. (2013) highlighted the integrated relationship between language, culture, and identity as language teaching/learning may lead to deconstructing the learner's identity, which explains the reservations about adopting an intercultural approach to language education. This concern was later consolidated by Pishghadam et al. (2020) in their account on 'culturing'. The authors remarked that language teachers should be mindful of the danger of transferring the target culture memes to language learners.

Cetinavci (2012) remarked that having ICC involves mastering the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of language education, including attributes such as "display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, interaction management, tolerance of ambiguity" (p. 3449). Romanowski (2017) classified the components of ICC into cognitive, behavioral, and affective, observing that they are inseparable in assessing the ICC of an individual. The cognitive component involves the individual's knowledge, the behavioral component refers to behavioral skills, and the affective component embodies the feelings and attitudes about knowledge and behaviors. The affective element of ICC requires having intercultural sensitivity towards cultural differences by showing understanding, acceptance, and respect towards cultural diversity. This helps establish and maintain a communicative relationship (Young & Sachdev, 2011) with others, including those different in faith, sex, socio-economic status, or academic orientation:

> Intercultural communicative competence is inseparable from language teaching,

but linguists and methodologists started to consider it as a major facet of language instruction only recently. Nowadays, the stress is put on those foreign language teaching methods which enable learners to become successful communicators. Hence, they are expected not only to exchange information, for which they need to master a linguistic code but also to maintain proper relationships with their interlocutors. (Romanowski, 2017, p. 1)

Byram (1997) distinguished between Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence, clarifying that in the case of IC, language users succeed in communicating with individuals from different cultures using their native language. In this regard, successful communication implies that these language users benefit from their intercultural experience in surmounting differences and appreciating similarities. But in the case of ICC, an individual is capable of interacting with people from different cultures using a language other than their language while negotiating a mediatory interactive approach that is appropriate to all parties involved in the communication process. In other words, ICC is an advanced model of IC in which the individual needs to pursue "critical engagement with otherness and critical reflection on self" (p. 71). According to this distinction, intercultural language teaching is mainly concerned with developing ICC in situations where the individual uses a foreign language rather than their language. For the purpose of this research, we will adopt this definition of ICC in exploring the notion of intercultural ELT.

At the beginning of the new millennium, there was a growing tendency in Europe and the United States of America to link the practice of intercultural language teaching with the presence of cultural diversity in the classroom (Strugielska & Piątkowska, 2016). The primary purpose behind embracing intercultural language teaching was to use inclusive educational practices in culturally diverse classrooms (Bastos & Araujo, 2014; Civitillo et al., 2019; Miravet & Garcia, 2013). Accordingly, introducing ICC in TEFL/TESL has been neglected in language classrooms with a less noticeable intercultural variation.

In Middle Eastern countries like Gulf states, most higher education institutions lack representational diversity in the students' population, which contributes to the marginalization of the intercultural approach to teaching. Valdivia and Montoto (2018) view the predominant tendency to link intercultural education with the presence of cultural diversity in the classroom as limiting and restrictive. The authors maintain that it is significant to develop the teachers' recognition and practice of intercultural teaching regardless of the presence of cultural diversity. In a globalized educational scene, developing ICC within the language classroom is essential even in the absence of palpable classroom diversity, considering the need to graduate global citizens.

2.1.1. Nurturing ICC vis-à-vis Teachers' Diversity

Nurturing the ICC of language teachers and learners is becoming increasingly crucial to initiate and consolidate the values of global citizenship among future graduates, particularly considering the growing interest in internationalizing higher education following the COVID-19-triggered transformation in the educational scene worldwide (de Wit, 2021; Ge, 2022; Salih & Omar, 2021). Practicing intercultural language teaching to nurture the ELT learners' ICC is not a smooth process irrespective of the density of multicultural representation among the learners' populations, especially if we consider the variation in the background of English language teachers. Diversity is reflected in the background of the teachers' population. The status of English as a lingua franca made it impossible for a homogenous category of language teachers to keep pace with the high demand for ESL teachers worldwide. This situation created an additional demand for ESL/EFL teachers from different cultural and academic backgrounds. The variation in the background of teachers created both a need for and a limitation in practicing intercultural teaching. Young and Sachdev (2011) remarked that most ELT teachers are non-native speakers of the language and that their number is increasing steadily. According to the authors, the fact that these teachers are not native speakers of the English language makes them apprehensive in

informing "about a socio-cultural milieu that is not their own" (p. 84).

Cetinavci (2012) observed that "teachers and teacher education are significant factors to be meticulously considered and researched in terms of intercultural communicative competence" (p. 3449). There is an apparent variation in English teachers' cultural and academic backgrounds in Gulf countries. In other words, it is common in these countries for ESL teachers to be nationals of non-English-speaking countries and specialize in subsidiary language majors such as literature, criticism, translation, or others. This aspect should not be neglected in researching ICC in the ESL/EFL context, as research has revealed that the variation in the academic profiles of ESL teachers might impact their practice of intercultural teaching (Strugielska & Piątkowska, 2016). Accordingly, in the foreseeable future, intercultural education may become mandatory in the academic institutions of increasingly-international countries like Gulf countries, especially if they are to fulfill international accreditation requirements (Salih & Omar, 2021).

Byram (1997) believes that ICC is normally taught and acquired within an educational environment. At the same time, developing the ICC of learners requires a transformation in different components of the educational process, including, but not limited to, the academic institution's management of the FLT profile, the syllabi, and the pedagogic practices of teachers. Byram et al. (2013) criticized the shortage of studies investigating the practice of intercultural education in the language classroom, given the apparent dichotomy between theory and practice. According to Zhang (2017), assessing and nurturing teachers' ICC is a prerequisite for practicing intercultural education in the ESL classroom; thus, developing "ESL teachers' ICC has become current in the agenda of ESL teachers' professional development and an important ingredient in teachers' intercultural training since most ESL teachers are language learners in the same sense with other learners" (p. 230). In order to assess the ICC of language teachers, it is incumbent to understand their perceptions and pedagogic practices of intercultural teaching in the language classroom.

According to Estaji and Jahanshiri (2022), it is important to explore the perceptions and pedagogies of ELT teachers, both native and non-native, in teaching English as a lingua franca. The authors concluded that the national background of language teachers does not leave an impact on their pedagogic practice. Rather what influences teachers' pedagogic approaches is their pedagogic knowledge and the efforts exerted by them to practice effective teaching of English as an international language. To exercise intercultural teaching, foreign language teachers need to adopt reflective pedagogic practices referred to by Byram (1997) as "critical pedagogy" (p. 46). Critical reflection on one's pedagogic practices should generate empirical knowledge. Kramsch (1993) viewed reflection as one of the components of intercultural language teaching as it leads to developing the teachers' intercultural competence (Hagar, 2018) and the learners' critical awareness of oblique cultural components and values. This may be a daunting task for foreign language teachers, considering the sensitive issues it may raise in some educational systems. Accordingly, foreign language teachers may become reluctant to introduce intercultural teaching in their pedagogic practices.

2.1.2. Nurturing ICC: A Double Mechanism

According to Byram (1997), developing the learners' ICC in the classroom is a highly idealistic objective because the required tasks may not be in harmony with the classroom environment or the learners' socio-cultural contexts. The limitations imposed by the classroom environment are compounded by the abovementioned factors on the variation in the background of instructors and the low cultural diversity among the learners' population in specific educational settings. For example, the variation in language teachers' academic or cultural backgrounds makes it difficult for them to accept an unexpected shift from conventional to intercultural language teaching. Similarly, the non-representational cultural diversity of learners makes them function as a lobbying force to resist any potential change that threatens the tenacious stability in their cultural and educational paradise.

Accordingly, the acquisition of ICC needs to occur both within the classroom setting and beyond. This implies that there are two streams

for the learning process: learning inside the classroom and learning outside the classroom, and these two streams typically run independently from each other in terms of the timeframe. Outside the classroom, independent learning may arise in the field or as part of extracurricular activities. An example of such non-pedagogic activities is academic or non-academic exchanges which can be facilitated using cyberspaces. Empirical research has revealed that internationalization guarantees a smooth introduction to intercultural language teaching in which the teachers can succeed in the unsolicited nurturing of the learners' ICC (Salih & Omar, 2021). Byram postulates that exchanges or communication outside the classroom offer "real time intercultural communication, combined with reflection, analysis and skills development in the 'suspended' time of the classroom" (p. 68), and this turns the classroom into a venue to practice reflection on the knowledge and competencies acquired beyond the classroom setting.

Intercultural ELT requires "an appropriate syllabus, materials, and a teaching approach" (Mighani & Moghadam, 2019). One of the reasons why ICC is not the current focus of the teaching process in language classrooms is that it is not an explicit component of the curricula. ICC is referred to generally as one of the graduate attributes but is not addressed clearly in course content or the teachers' pedagogic practices. Additionally, assessments focus on students' competencies in the four skills, regardless of ICC competencies. This view is consistent with the findings of Young and Sachdev (2011). The authors researched the perspectives and practices of language teachers about nurturing intercultural communicative competence in the language classroom in order to test "the uptake and perceived applicability of this approach" (p. 83) to language teaching.

Highlighting the lack of studies that researched the teaching and learning of and about culture in the language classroom from the perspective of practicing language teachers, Young and Sachdev (2011) believed that language teachers view the integration of interculturality with foreign language teaching as a source of problems and limitations rather than opportunities and motivation for effective language learning. The research concluded that the limitations for practicing intercultural

language teaching include, among others, having concerns about in-class discussions of sensitive cultural issues (political or religious), implicit and general references to ICC in the syllabus, lack of assessment for ICC competencies, as well as the focus on shallow cultural content in the EFL teaching materials like focusing on visible cultural components such as food, festivals, geography, etc.

Czura (2018) stated that recognizing the importance of developing ICC in the language classroom has become one of the indispensable attributes of foreign language teachers. But the author researched this topic from the perspective of a prototypical category of foreign language teachers who were graduates of language education programs, an attribute which does not apply to the majority of foreign language teachers, at least in Middle Eastern countries. Although the researched group of teachers comprised language teachers who were prepared academically and/or professionally (by being involved in international experiences abroad) to teach a foreign language, the research results revealed that the participants did not have the skills required to develop the learners' ICC in the classroom as the teachers themselves needed to develop their own ICC, which is why they needed more support and training before and during the practice of their profession, according to the author.

2.2. The Transformative Teacher as Learner in Deglobalized Classrooms

Instilling the values of ICC among ELT learners within a renitent educational setting requires a transformation in the prevalent teaching models. In order for ELT teachers to change the dynamics of the educational process in a resisting and restrictive educational environment, they have to mobilize their theoretical and professional experiences and become involved in a self-learning process. Unquestionably, developing ELT from its conventional status into a transformative intercultural communicative model is an enormous educational project which needs close collaboration among all the parties involved in the educational process. Estaji and Rahimi (2018) concluded that intercultural language teaching should not necessarily transform the teacher's pedagogic practices as it should be introduced "at macro rather than micro level" (p. 15). But at the same time,

practicing language teachers need to recognize the significance of self-understanding as language users, learners, and educators, which implies that they have to redefine their educational objectives and reflect on their classroom practices accordingly.

English language teachers can benefit from the developed models and theoretical frameworks on ICC in designing relevant classroom activities and tasks which help practitioners in the assessment and growth of the learners' ICC. Reflective pedagogic approaches are the pillar of any transformative educational process (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Salih & Omar, 2022). Practicing reflection allows the teachers to view themselves as learning instructors who control the dynamics of the educational process. According to Romanowski (2017) "Transformative teacher learning thus entails that teachers move from the role of being consumers of outside expert knowledge towards taking an active role as curriculum developers and researchers of their work" (p. 85).

Embracing the model of the transformative teacher as a learner in practicing intercultural teaching is challenging as it requires time and dedication but it is worth the while for an inclusive, across-the-board launching of a teacher-oriented intercultural approach to ELT. This approach should not be limited to the use of simple techniques such as role-play, films, games, and others (Cakir, 2006) or fixed strategies such as critical incidents and cultural minidramas (Secru, 2004, p. 74). Salih and Omar (2021) bridged the existing gap between theory and practice and implemented Byram's theoretical model in an avant-garde empirical study that merged international cooperation with reflective-based action research. According to the authors, "Building the cultural competence of learners … requires remarkable efforts on the cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral levels without sacrificing one's cultural priorities and identity" (p. 186).

This empirical model, which is inspired by earlier theoretical contributions to the topic, can be very effective in the context of deglobalized classrooms such as the ones prevailing in Gulf countries' academic institutions, but it may look highly ambitious and not feasible considering the massive numbers of students taking language classes in all levels of different

disciplines. One optimal solution to this challenge may be to design a multi-disciplinary language course that students will be required to complete just before their graduation. The value of implementing this binary approach is two-fold: first, it builds on the already-developed competence of the learners on the cognitive level; second, it prepares them for the globalized workplace while nurturing their competence on the behavioral and affective level.

While ELT has focused much on the learning experience of students by giving much attention to language proficiency as well as skills development, little is known about intercultural teaching and learning in the language classroom. For instance, research has overlooked the absence of intercultural teaching in the EFL curriculum and the significance of exploring the experience of ELT practitioners and teachers about interculturality in their teaching contexts. This study aims at exploring teachers' perceptions and practice of interculturality in the ELT practice context. The study is significant and timely based on the observation that the ELT context, particularly in the GCC and the Middle East, is culturally rich and diverse. The Gulf countries are culturally-unique ELT contexts hosting teachers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, there is a growing interest in intercultural competence within a globalized English context (Salih & Omar, 2021) that has been accelerated by the rapid growth of globalized English speakers' populations and advances in computer-mediated communication and information. There is also a surging interest in inculcating the values of global citizenship in higher education EFL/ESL learners. With these issues in mind, the study attempts to contribute to the urgency of exploring, sustaining, and renewing ELT practices for the current and next generations of English language learners. It specifically strives to answer the following questions:

1. How do language teachers perceive intercultural teaching?
2. From the participants' perspective, how is the presence of intercultural teaching reflected in the language classroom?
3. What instructional strategies do language teachers use in the context of interculturality?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed qualitative and quantitative methods approach to examine teachers' perceptions and practices of interculturality within the EFL context. It specifically attempted to uncover teachers' views and practices of intercultural teaching. Teachers' views of intercultural teaching were explored to highlight perceptual and pedagogical choices teachers adopt in teaching the English language.

3.1. Participants

The study involved 16 teachers of English serving in Omani higher education institutions. The participants consisted of 8 females and 8 males aged 35-50 and holding a doctorate in English as the highest academic qualification. All the participants came from a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds and had extensive ESL/EFL teaching experience that stretched over a period exceeding 20 years.

3.2. Instruments

This study is an attempt to explore aspects of intercultural teaching from teachers' perspectives within the context of teaching English as a foreign language. To serve its end, the study utilized data that were collected via a questionnaire survey which explored the participants' perceived understanding and any possible practice of interculturality in the classroom. It is believed that an understanding of the opinions of teachers of English as an additional language concerning interculturality and their experience in encountering it in their teaching contexts is of significance in helping these teachers perform better and help students maximize their learning.

3.3. Procedure

The study utilized an open-ended survey as the main elicitation tool. The instrument was designed to elicit the participants' perceptions of intercultural teaching and learning and their actual classroom practices. The survey consisted of items that required the participants to express their opinions about intercultural teaching, the extent to which culture was present in the classroom, and the instructional strategies used in the context of interculturality.

3.3.1. Data Collection

As stated earlier, this study employed an open-ended survey as a research method. The participants were contacted first to obtain their consent to play the role of sources of data. The survey was then administered to the participants who responded to it and returned it to the researchers. The research topics and objectives were made clearer to all the teachers who took part in the data collection task.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

The participants' responses to the survey were collected and analyzed with particular focus on teachers' perceptions about interculturality, their experiences in possible encounters with it in class, and the spaces interculturality might enjoy and create in classes. The responses were grouped and used in answering the study's questions and to draw conclusions on the issue under investigation.

4. Results

To address the first question— "How do language teachers perceive intercultural teaching?" — the 16 participants' views on introducing culture in language classrooms were explored. Raising this particular point is important because it is key to uncovering teachers' perceptive understanding of interculturality and its relevance to teaching contexts. The participants' responses were categorized into different domains as justifications in the perceived favor of introducing intercultural teaching in language classrooms together with the learning aspect to be achieved. Table 1 summarizes the respondents' stated reasons for the necessity of introducing intercultural teaching and the related domains that learners may develop. The justifications provided by the participants explain the viewed significant learning benefits of exposing students to intercultural contexts and experiences while learning English.

Table 1

Teachers' Perceptions about Introducing Interculturality in the Language Classroom (N =16)

	Justification	Related domain
Interculturality in the classroom	-Key to understanding the target language	-cognitive
	-Enhances students' communicative ability	-behavioral
	-Promotes relevance to graduate attributes	-behavioral
	-Enhances learners' cultural awareness	-cognitive
	-Promotes effective teaching and learning	-cognitive, behavioral, and affective
	-Creates instances for cultural comparison	-cognitive and affective
	-Creates instances for values sharing	-behavioral and affective
	-Minimizes cultural gaps and stereotypes	-behavioral and affective
	-Boosts interaction in class	-behavioral

The participants (*N* = 16) expressed different views about introducing culture in the language classroom and provided varieties of reasons as justifications for their responses. As for support and a positive tendency for the introduction of intercultural teaching in language classrooms, 3 (18.75%) of the participants favored seeing culture in the classroom. The teachers' perceptive support of interculturality reveals their willingness to indulge in intercultural teaching and expose students to such a learning aspect. In this regard, one of the participants stated that "I would love to see interculturality be incorporated in all language courses and become one of the attributes students must attain" (T1). This view recommends the necessity of preparing students for the job market by exposing them to grammatical knowledge and intercultural communicative competence. A response by another participant supports this aim because "promoting learners' cultural awareness will also help in overcoming cultural stereotypes that often lead people to be disconnected somehow" (T2).

However, 7 (43.75%) of the participants expressed conditional support for intercultural teaching, suggesting that intercultural teaching is a delicate issue that needs to be approached cautiously to avoid any conflict or misunderstanding by students. One of the participants stated that "I am in favor of introducing culture in the language classroom, although I think this may lead to some confrontations due to certain sensitivities" (T3), given the teaching context and the dominant culture of the students. This view draws on important facts, which include the need for language teachers to understand their teaching context, their students' background, and the need to have a clear understanding of the curriculum objectives and course syllabus and

tasks. In addition, language teachers need to develop their students' intercultural competence as they strive to learn the linguistic aspects of the target language.

The analysis also reveals that 2 (12.5%) of the participants suggested that interculturality can only be introduced occasionally when the topic requires that. One of the participants reported that "interculturality may be introduced whenever the issue is relevant to a topic or a concept being discussed as part of the syllabus of a course" (T4). This view suggests that teachers should be bound to the prescribed syllabus and confine teaching to the cultural boundaries, whether visible or hidden. In the same vein, 4 (25%) of the participants viewed intercultural teaching as unnecessary and should be avoided as long as it is not highlighted in the syllabus or language program.

In the study's second question— "From the participants' perspective, how is the presence of intercultural teaching reflected in the language classroom?"— the participants were asked about their awareness of the presence of interculturality in the language classroom and whether they introduced their own culture to their students. Responses to this question revealed reluctance on the part of teachers to become involved in intercultural teaching and they were not forthcoming about introducing their cultures in the classroom. As one of the participants responded, "no, I do not introduce my culture in class because I think this will personalize my relationship with my students in a way that threatens the academic relationship between us" (T5), thus the priority is for the academic goal when conflict is imminent. Another participant reported that a teacher's culture is introduced in class "only when there is a chance for that" (T6), and "it depends on

the content of the topic. For example, there was a time when we were discussing kinship, I drew different examples from many languages, including Arabic and my native language" revealed by another participant (T7).

To address the third question— "What instructional strategies do language teachers use in the context of interculturality?"— participants did not show encouraging responses concerning inviting and motivating students to discuss their culture in the classroom as a part of their language instruction strategies. Participants reported that they would only encourage discussions about the cultural elements which have been provided and highlighted in the textbook and syllabus. Thus, instances of intercultural teaching are confined to the limited boundaries of the textbook. In addition, comparing the student's cultural elements and the target language culture (English) is done based on the examples provided in the textbook. On the other hand, 'censorship' in terms of avoidance, selectivity, and paraphrasing of culturally-conflicting concepts are the common instructional strategies used by participants in case of possible conflict or misunderstanding. Participants stated that cultural elements conflicting with the students' values and discussions or instances that appear to be culturally problematic, sensitive, or critical are avoided.

5. Discussion

The present study has attempted to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and possible practices of intercultural teaching in language classrooms. The findings of this study revealed that there is a general tendency among the participants (10 out of 16) to favor introducing culture in the language classroom conditionally or unconditionally. This finding confirms the belief that learning and developing intercultural communicative competence by learners of English is imperative, especially in the context of globalized English and the growing trend for the internationalization of higher education (Ge, 2022; Salih & Omar, 2021). It also suggests that exposing language learners to intercultural experiences and learning is expected to raise their intercultural awareness, boost their social intelligence and provide a safety harness in culturally-diverse communicative contexts, whether locally or globally, where

English, as an international lingua franca, functions as a medium of communication. This validates the findings of Estaji and Rahimi (2018) on the need to integrate intercultural teaching with the language classroom.

On the other hand, the results also showed an absence of vivid and constant intercultural teaching in language classrooms. Interculturality remains a fundamental pedagogical challenge for language teachers in EFL higher education contexts in Oman despite the teachers' perceived learning benefits of intercultural language teaching. Teachers were found to lack a clear and definite understanding of intercultural communicative competence. This creates fear and trepidation regarding what, when, and how to approach and practice interculturality. The misconception about the relevance and significance of interculturality in language classrooms by some teachers depicts it as a forbidden area that should be avoided in teaching, and as such, the focus should be on developing the students' linguistic competence.

This view contradicts the findings of research that advocates supporting language students with linguistic knowledge, IC as well as ICC (Byram, 2006; Czura, 2013; Hadley, 2001). The teachers' views of limiting teaching to the prescribed syllabus or about the irrelevance of interculturality to the English language classroom may be attributed to various reasons. The first reason may be relevant to the perspective that interculturality is not stated in the syllabus visibly, as indicated in the earlier account by Young and Sachdev (2011), which is justifiable considering the fact that "The inclusion of culture in language teaching to cultivate interculturality is recommended to be explicit" (Mighani & Moghadam, 2019).

The second possible reason for the teachers' reluctance to practice intercultural language teaching despite their favorable perceptions of interculturality in the language classroom can be indicative of the complex nature of the language classroom in terms of not having visible cultural variation. Taking into account that the learners form a culturally homogenous group, the teachers may prefer not to indulge in intercultural pedagogic practices as this may expose them to direct confrontations with the dominant home culture. This corroborates with studies that highlighted the significance of considering the learning context in which

intercultural teaching takes place (Deardorff, 2011; Pishghadam et al., 2013).

The third possible reason behind the participants' withdrawal from intercultural teaching may be interpreted as a lack of teachers' awareness of the critical significance of intercultural teaching or their tendency to avoid any critical contextual confrontation or misunderstanding with the students. In this regard, teachers may prefer to avoid teaching interculturality or indulging in any intercultural discussion or encounter for the fear that they might be seen as 'promotors' of the English culture who try to detach the students from their cultural identity. This finding is consistent with the results of Young and Sachdev (2011), who reported that interculturality is often seen by language teachers as an obstructive factor and a source of limitations rather than opportunities for effective language learning. Whenever there is no support for intercultural teaching and learning in multicultural contexts, there is a tendency for misunderstanding and cultural sensitivity. Teachers are expected to be in intense fear of raising any cultural element or topic that may be deemed critical or sensitive.

The participants' responses on the instructional strategies they used to promote interculturality in their teaching indicate that while most teachers expressed enthusiasm to integrate intercultural teaching with their pedagogic practices, they did not appear to be motivated enough to take this perspective further to a practical level. The participants did not address the limited occurrence of intercultural instances. For example, they neither introduced their culture to their students nor did they encourage their students to talk about theirs. There is a gap between what teachers perceived as useful for developing the students' intercultural competence, teachers' understanding and attainment of intercultural competence, the teaching context support, and the actual practice of intercultural teaching. This disequilibrium is a source of limitation in typical EFL classrooms where learners are expected to learn English without the need to be loyal to the target language culture or lose their cultural identity. Byram et al. (2013) drew attention to such a gap and called for more focus on intercultural education that enables learners to develop the ability to learn and understand the 'other' culture while appreciating their own cultural orientations.

These findings also support the conclusion drawn by Pishghadam et al. (2013) on the significance of observing the inseparable relationship between language, culture, and identity in embracing intercultural language teaching, as it may leave a deconstructing impact on the national identity of the learners. This is of paramount importance because, according to Pishghadam et al. (2020), language teachers' practice of intercultural teaching may involve practice of cultuling, which, in its turn, functions as a vehicle for transferring to the learners the cultural memes of the other culture. These results have fundamental implications for teacher professional training and development in EFL contexts. Assessing teachers' readiness for intercultural teaching is of paramount significance, especially in naturally multicultural settings.

EFL professional contexts offer multiculturalism as a common trend adopted by higher education institutions. Universities usually attract teachers of English from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A pertinent fact worth mentioning here is that the EFL context is interculturally challenging and teachers' lack of awareness of the strong presence of contextual interculturality spaces in relation to EFL practice hinders intercultural teaching, and the development of students' intercultural communicative competence. In other words, intercultural teaching is inevitable in any EFL context and with the very engagement of teachers in teaching EFL students, intercultural teaching becomes imperative, and as such, teachers need to be prepared for any instances of intercultural encounter.

Institutional intercultural programs are imperative to prepare teachers to perform within a multicultural environment and promote students' intercultural communicative competence positively. This requires EFL professionals to be aware of intercultural interaction and grow the ability and flexibility to perform in such environments, whether in class or outside. Future research is needed to assess ESL/EFL teachers' needs and understanding of interculturality at the workplace and in the classroom. Effective teaching and learning are hindered by an

insufficient understanding of the importance of intercultural teaching.

The teachers' reluctance to practice intercultural language teaching in their language classrooms deprives students of developing intercultural understanding and competence. Without being exposed to intercultural experience within language learning contexts, students will remain with a partial, if not a distorted, understanding of the entwined relationship between language and culture. It could be argued that despite the limitations of practicing intercultural language teaching, inviting culture into the language classroom is imperative for its pedagogical values and is not be thought of as an 'ostracizing taboo' that should be avoided, inhibited, or detached.

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