

Yasmina Abdzadeh* and Will Baker

Cultural awareness in an Iranian English language classroom: A teaching intervention in an interculturally “conservative” setting

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Abstract: Despite Iran’s increasing use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and its growing position as a more open country to international relationships, Iran’s education policy is still culturally conservative and intercultural language education is absent from the national curriculum and hence classrooms. In response, this article presents the results of a ten-session course focused on implementing and developing cultural awareness (CA) in an Iranian English language classroom. The data revealed that this course had a positive effect in developing students’ levels of CA, moving from basic in the first half of the course towards advanced in the second half. This provides important empirical evidence illustrating the value of systematic instruction of CA in students’ cultural learning. Furthermore, this course was the first of its kind in the predominantly monolingual, culturally restricted context of this study, where intercultural education is missing from the curriculum, yet where students are likely to use ELF for intercultural communication while travelling abroad or inside the country for communication purposes with non-Iranians. This study, thus, demonstrates the feasibility and documents the processes of integrating intercultural teaching into English education, specifically in contexts where educators might be limited by language policy makers.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; cultural awareness; intercultural language education; English language teaching; Iran

چکیده ی مقاله: بر خلاف رشد روز افزون استفاده ی زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان بین المللی در ایران و همچنین جایگاه رو به رشد ایران در دنیا در معاملات بین المللی، سیاست آموزشی در این کشور هنوز درون گرا می باشد و بعد چند فرهنگی آموزش زبان انگلیسی در دستور کار ملی آموزش و بالطبع در کلاس های آموزشی وجود ندارد. با توجه به این مسئله، در این مقاله نتایج حاصل از یک دوره ی ده جلسه ای ارائه شده است که بر ارتقاء سطح آگاهی فرهنگی و بین فرهنگی زبان آموزان در حین یاد گیری زبان انگلیسی در یک کلاس آموزش زبان انگلیسی در ایران

***Corresponding author: Yasmina Abdzadeh**, University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK, E-mail: Y.Abdzadeh@soton.ac.uk

Will Baker: University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK, E-mail: W.Baker@soton.ac.uk

متمرکز است. داده ها نشان می دهد این دوره تاثیر مثبتی در بهبود میزان سطح آگاهی فرهنگی زبان آموزان داشته است؛ این بهبود به صورت روند رشد از سطح ابتدایی آگاهی در نیمه ی اول دوره به سمت سطح پیشرفته تر در نیمه ی دوم نمودار گشته است. اگرچه شواهدی مبنی در رسیدن به سطح آگاهی بین فرهنگی در میان زبان آموزان یافت نشد. این تحقیق شواهد تجربی مهمی در زمینه ی اهمیت آموزش اصولی بعد چند فرهنگی زبان انگلیسی و ارتقاء آگاهی فرهنگی حین تدریس زبان انگلیسی را نشان می دهد. علاوه بر این، این دوره اولین در نوع خود در محیطی تک زبانی و فاقد بعد بین المللی می باشد که در آن آموزش بین فرهنگی وجود ندارد و از طرف دیگر زبان آموزان به احتمال زیاد انگلیسی را به عنوان زبان بین المللی در ارتباطات چند فرهنگی استفاده خواهند کرد. بنابراین، این تحقیق امکان پذیری و مؤثر بودن این رویکرد را به خصوص در محیطهایی که آموزگاران با محدودیت هایی از سمت سیاست گذاران آموزشی مواجه هستند نشان می دهد. همچنین نمایانگر مراحل ادغام تدریس بعد چند فرهنگی در آموزش زبان انگلیسی است.

کلمات کلیدی: دانش ارتباط بین فرهنگی، آگاهی فرهنگی، آموزش زبان با اتکاء به بعد چند فرهنگی، تدریس زبان انگلیسی، ایران

1 Introduction

Considering the role of English as a global lingua franca used for intercultural communication, the importance of intercultural aspects in English language teaching (ELT) has widely been recognised. However, despite much discussion at the theoretical level, inclusion of intercultural concepts in ELT classrooms has often remained ad hoc in part due to a lack of teachers' knowledge on how to implement this, resulting from an absence of support in educational policy (Baker 2015; Young and Sachdev 2011). Iran is an example of a setting which suffers from this; intercultural language education is absent from the national curriculum and, hence, ELT classrooms. This paper addresses this issue through, first, outlining the relevance of intercultural communicative competence and awareness (Baker 2011; Byram 1997) to ELT more generally and then moving specifically to evaluating its applicability to Iran. Secondly, data are presented from a ten-session course in cultural awareness offered to Iranian English language students with a focus on the development of CA. Despite the initial difficulty in gaining access to schools due to originality of the course and conservative attitudes of many teaching settings in the country, the course proved to be successful in integrating CA into ELT in the context of this research and has relevance to other settings with limited integration of the intercultural into ELT policy and practice.

2 Literature review

The global spread of English and de-centering of its use and ownership away from the Anglophone world is now generally accepted (Jenkins 2015). Less agreed upon are the implications of this for ELT and there is still debate around issues such as the role of the native English speaker and “standard” English as a model for English language learners (e.g. Dewey 2012; Widdowson 2012). Nonetheless, from a Global Englishes perspective, if the goal of ELT is to prepare learners to communicate in English, the rationale for focussing on a single variety of English associated with a particular national culture (e.g. the UK or US) is difficult to justify. Instead, learners need to be prepared for variable English use in intercultural encounters in which the relationship between language and culture is likely to be dynamic and flexible. This entails a re-thinking of the subject matter of ELT in terms of teacher knowledge about both language and communication (Dewey 2012; Hall et al. 2013). In particular, this means a re-evaluation of communicative competence away from a focus on a narrow, fixed set of lexico-grammatical and phonological features and native speaker communities and instead emphasising process and adaptation in the use of linguistic resources (Dewey 2012; Hall et al. 2013), and cultural and intercultural awareness (Baker 2015).

Concerns with more diverse conceptualisations of language teaching also mesh with intercultural education approaches (e.g. Liddicoat and Scarino 2013; Risager 2007). Similar to Global Englishes, intercultural education approaches have advocated an expansion of communicative competence that recognises the intercultural nature of second language learning and use. The most well-known formulation of this is Byram’s (1997, 2008) ICC (intercultural communicative competence), which adds intercultural competence as a key feature of communicative competence and replaces the native speaker with the intercultural speaker as a model for language learner. However, Byram remains ambivalent about the role of the native speaker and the focus remains at the national scale in the relationship between language and culture, thereby limiting ICC’s applicability to Global Englishes, where the place of the native speaker and links to national cultures cannot be assumed (Baker 2015).

A concept that attempts to incorporate elements of both intercultural education, including ICC, and Global Englishes into re-conceptualising communicative competence is intercultural awareness (ICA) (Baker 2011, 2015). To aid the conceptualisation of ICA and associated pedagogic practices, ICA is divided into 12 elements across three levels (see Baker 2015: 164): moving from basic cultural awareness associated with general knowledge of one’s own culture and basic “facts,” including stereotypes of other cultures; to advanced cultural awareness

which involves more detailed knowledge of other cultures and intercultural communication, as well as the ability to quickly transcend stereotypes and essentialism in intercultural communication; and finally intercultural awareness defined as “a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in communication” (Baker 2011: 202). The final level emphasises a dynamic approach to culture and language in intercultural communication in which cultural references and practices are viewed as emergent and adaptable, transcending fixed boundaries and moving through and across local, national and global scales (Baker 2015).

In relation to classroom practice, Baker (2015) has proposed guidelines for developing ICA which cover five areas: exploring the complexity of local cultures; exploring cultural representations in language learning materials; exploring cultural representations in the media and arts, both online and in more “traditional” mediums; making use of cultural informants (including teachers and other students); and engaging in intercultural communication both face to face and electronically (Baker 2015: 195–198). These are deliberately general guidelines since the details are best decided by teachers in relation to their context and learners.

A number of studies have offered empirical support for the relevance of ICA, as conceived here, in relation to classroom practices. Baker (2012, 2015) developed a ten-week online course in global Englishes and intercultural communication/awareness for undergraduate English language majors at a Thai university. Findings from questionnaires, interviews and observations showed mainly very positive responses to the course, demonstrating the practicality of incorporating intercultural and Global Englishes elements into ELT materials and the relevance and interest of teachers and students to such approaches (Baker 2012, 2015). However, most awareness was at levels 1 and 2 (CA), which involved an understanding of students’ own culture and an ability to compare it with other cultures in both essentialist (level 1) and non-essentialist ways (level 2), but there was less evidence of ICA going beyond national or other fixed cultural scales. The impact of the course on learning outcomes in terms of development was also unclear, due to its short duration and the high levels of participants’ CA before the course began. Similarly, Yu and Maele (2018) conducted an action research study in an attempt to integrate intercultural learning into an English reading course in a Chinese higher education context. Having used Baker’s (2011, 2015) model of ICA to define learning goals and design the teaching flow, Yu and Maele (2018) concluded that while the course has been successful in fostering CA at levels 1 and 2, more time and structured adjustments would be needed before learners can reach the ICA level. Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) reported on the development and use of

digital photograph-mediated intercultural tasks to promote students' critical intercultural awareness in Indonesian university ELT classes. Their findings revealed evidence of students' cultural and intercultural awareness including at the more advanced levels in which cultures and cultural identities were seen as fluid and adaptable (Kusumaningputri and Widodo 2018: 59).

In sum, while these studies show both the opportunities and relevance of Global Englishes and CA/ICA in ELT practices, the findings are still tentative and research preliminary. Furthermore, there is still a lack of support in educational policy and textbooks, as well as teachers' lack of knowledge on how to implement CA in the school classroom (Young and Sachdev 2011). Yet, as the majority of English teaching occurs in schools, school teachers play a vital role in not only instructing language skills, but also forming students' perspectives on intercultural aspects of ELT (Porto and Byram 2015). Considering the importance and relevance of ICA in ELT, including this aspect in language education is necessary if students are to be prepared to use English in today's multicultural, globally interconnected world. This need for intercultural education motivates this study's exploration of these issues in the context of Iran to which we now turn.

3 Research setting

Currently, both English and Arabic are offered as obligatory additional languages from the age of twelve in Iranian state schools. Additionally, many students choose to attend private language schools due to the popularity of learning English, specifically within affluent families (Borjian 2013). State schools are mainly concerned with improving vocabulary and reading skills along with grammatical knowledge (Hayati and Mashhadi 2010). According to the Iranian National Curriculum (2013: 39–40), the teaching of foreign languages has to be used as a basis for strengthening national culture in addition to Quranic values in students. In line with this, in the most recent change of policy, the teaching of English in primary schools has been banned (Oppenheim 2018). Unsurprisingly, ELT materials, which are all produced locally, hardly include any cultural references except for Iranian and Islamic values (Pasand and Ghasemi 2018; Tajeddin and Teimournezhad 2015). Therefore, due to the dependence teachers have on textbooks to structure the lessons (Boyle and Salah 2017) and the focus of culture at a superficial and local level in textbooks, there is a lack of intercultural language education in Iranian state schools and the educational system fails to develop students' levels of CA and ICA or awareness of Global Englishes.

In contrast, private language institutes generally adopt a more communicative approach towards ELT. Unlike state schools, which are obliged to use locally

published textbooks, they are free to choose their own textbooks. These are often chosen from internationally published textbooks. However, international textbooks are generally focused on Anglophone countries (Gray 2010; Shin et al. 2011) and the books used in Iranian private language institutes are no exception (Tajeddin and Teimournezhad 2015). Considering the use of English as a global lingua franca, the assumption of the relevance of Anglophone cultures does not prepare students for the diverse uses of English. Therefore, due to the lack of intercultural language education in both state and private settings and any existing policy to promote CA/ICA, developing and implementing an approach with this purpose is necessary.

4 Methodology and research questions

Due to the lack of intercultural language education in the Iranian ELT system, and our limited knowledge about effective approaches to promote ICA at high school level, this research was designed in the form of exploratory action research, i.e. identifying a problem, reflecting upon it, making a plan, and taking action to improve the situation (McNiff and Whitehead 2011). The main purpose of action research is to make some change in practice based on careful investigation of the context, and it is often an insider practitioner who plays the role of a researcher (Banegas and Consoli 2020). In case of the current article, although the researcher (Abdzadeh 2017) was not the teacher of the participants at the time of the research, her previous experience of the context both as a student and an English teacher in the country equipped her with enough knowledge to be considered an insider (as well as an outside researcher) who is aware of an existing issue in the English education system and based on that, can design a solution, and investigate whether it works.

In order to meet the needs of Iranian learners for a more intercultural and global Englishes focused syllabus, a ten-session course was designed based on Baker's (2011) model of ICA. Each session lasted for 1 h, with the exception of two sessions which were 2 h. Collected data included recording classroom interaction among students and students and teacher, classroom assignments (written individual homework given to students in sessions six, seven, and eight), and short reflective writings students were asked to write at the end of each session on what they think they have learned. The empirical study was led by the following research questions (RQ):

1. What are the differences in Iranian teenage students' perceptions and conceptualisations of culture between the beginning and completion of a teaching intervention?

2. In which ways do these perceptions and conceptualisations change as the result of different class activities through teaching intervention?

4.1 Teaching intervention

Prior to the design, detailed aims of the syllabus were established. These were adapted from the ICA framework and the associated pedagogic guidelines (Baker 2015).

1. The students can recognise culture as a set of shared behaviours, beliefs, and values.
2. The students can understand the role that culture plays in interpretation of meaning by every individual.
3. The students can recognise the role that culture plays in inducing certain behaviours, values, and beliefs both in oneself and others.
4. The students can view the nature of cultural norms as relative.
5. The students can identify individuals as being members of several social groupings at the same time.
6. The students can appreciate possible heterogeneity in any cultural grouping in spite of their belongingness to seemingly one cultural grouping.
7. The students can understand the potential danger laid in stereotypes and have the ability to move beyond this.

The final level 3 of ICA in the original framework (Baker 2011) was excluded in the course aims. As valuable as this is, it was thought that reaching this complex, advanced stage would not be possible in this course, mainly because of the short nature of the course, and difficulties in understanding the concepts involved due to participants' age and lack of intercultural experience.

To design the course, a variety of teaching material which met the aims was collected, adapted, and arranged from the easiest to the most difficult level in the form of ten sessions of 60 min over five weeks (see Table 1). Due to students' unfamiliarity with the concept of interculturality, it started with the most basic concepts, such as general discussion on students' understanding of culture, before moving on to more complex ones, such as definitions of culture at a more fluid level.

4.2 Participants

To find suitable participants, private language institutes were contacted because conducting such a course in state schools would not have been possible due to

Table 1: Global communication course: teaching approach and topics.

Name	Global communication: How to succeed while using English?
Type	Voluntarily: Advertised under language development, familiarity with concept of culture and global communication, and receiving an award from the institute following attending the course
Language of instruction	English (Farsi was also allowed if needed)
Course duration	10 sessions during 5 weeks (60 min each lesson)
Teaching approach	Student-centred to sustain motivation: – a variety of pair and group activities – material which involved constructing knowledge than reproducing it – assignments which involved active participation of learners in the learning process
Teaching material	Various activities including reading, writing, and speaking; collected and adapted from a wide range of references
Topics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Definition of culture 2. The effect(s) of cultural background(s) on individuals' interpretation(s) of events 3. Immigration and dealing with the new situation 4. Investigating students' own perceptions of cultural differences via picturing a real episode and their possible reactions 5. Stereotypes, possible ways they are created, and their effects on individuals 6. "Done things" in a particular community with no/different meaning in another one 7. Family life in Iran and UK (as well as within students' own families) 8. Media and stereotypes 9. Social identities and culture at group level 10. Revision of previous sessions and students' thoughts on the course

constraints imposed by the national curriculum and set syllabi. Volunteer participants were teenage¹ students at the institute with upper-intermediate level of English.² Choosing teenagers as participants was particularly important as they had experience of learning English in both state schools and the private institute. As can be seen in Table 2, all the participants, except for one, had no experience of

¹ The exception is one student, who was 20.

² As measured by the institute.

living abroad; furthermore, the setting of the research was not one with many opportunities for intercultural communication. They thus had limited, if any, intercultural experiences. This means that much of the course content was new to the participants.

As mentioned earlier, the teacher (Abdzadeh 2017) also played the role of researcher-practitioner, in which, an action researcher sees themselves as a part of the context they are investigating and constantly evaluates and re-evaluates plans as the research progresses (McNiff and Whitehead 2011). In line with Mills (2006), the researcher-practitioner recorded her observations and possible actions to be taken using a diary during the course. This helped towards further awareness of what activities to include in later sessions to meet the course objectives and involving more students.

4.3 Data analysis

Given the open-ended and exploratory nature of this research, it was thought that qualitative data, i.e. classroom interaction, students’ written assignments, and short reflective writing at the end of each session, best addressed the research questions due to the rich data captured (Tracy 2010). Therefore, all the sessions were audio-recorded to capture the interactions in every session and transcribed as soon as possible after each session to facilitate analysis. Three assignments and ten reflective writings were collected from each student over the course. To minimise any possible pressure on students, and considering the students were attending the course voluntarily, there was no limitation on the length of the assignments; however, students were asked to write in English so that language

Table 2: Participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Experience of living abroad
Omid	M	16	No
Erfan	M	17	Yes
Elyas	M	17	No
Hashem	M	20	No
Hadi	M	18	No
Mehrdad	M	17	No
Faranak	F	17	No
Zohre	F	17	No
Nazanin	F	16	No
Katayoun	F	17	No

development aspects of the course were addressed. In line with the topics of sessions six, seven, and eight (see Table 1), assignments' topics were: possible problems students may face in case of moving to another country with their parents and possible ways to deal with these; similarities and differences on different aspects of family life in the UK and their own family life as an individual; and two different letters to a friend from perspectives of both an Iranian student in the UK and a British student in Iran, respectively. In order to maximise richness of data and prevent any issues caused by language barriers, students were allowed to write the reflective writing in their preferred language, either Farsi or English.

Data was stored in Nvivo to aid analysis. Initial content analysis was in the original language of the data (both Farsi and English) and final analysis, presented here, took place in English to aid consistency. However, translation of data is not a neutral issue (Oxley et al. 2017). The data coded in Farsi was translated by the first author and another colleague prior to finalising the findings. There was a general agreement between the two versions of translation and minor differences were discussed and resolved.

The same coding scheme was applied to all data sets, within two overarching themes of basic and advanced cultural awareness. Basic CA was considered as conceptualisations of culture in a static manner. In contrast, references coded as advanced CA viewed culture as a more emergent concept, often independent of national borders. This was initially applied to data deductively to facilitate answering the research questions and investigate effectiveness of the course in developing students' level of CA. Within these themes, both inductive and deductive codes were developed, which led to the identification of a number of sub-themes as outlined below.

5 Results

5.1 Basic cultural awareness

Within the overarching theme of basic CA, three sub-themes were found: general definition of culture, national definition of culture, and stereotypes (Table 2).

In line with Baker's (2011) definition of basic CA, general definition of culture refers to "showing understanding of culture as a set of shared behaviours, beliefs, and values" (Baker 2011: 66). Similarly, national definitions of culture refer to a set of static traits within a nation. Finally, stereotypes were defined as "traits applied to a whole group of people [...] they are in all cases over-generalised and take little or no account of individual differences" (Gallois 2004: 359).

As can be seen in Table 3, stereotypes about themselves and others were the most frequent codes at the level of basic CA. Furthermore, national conceptions of culture were referred to most often, reflecting the prominent role such an understanding of culture has among these students. Qualitative data provides more detail on how students understood the topics under these codes.

5.1.1 General definitions of culture

Culture was often defined in a rather static manner as a set of repeated behaviours, i.e. habits, which have a diachronic (historic) root but not in reference to any specific group of people (Extract [1]).

- (1) (Zohre, Session one)
Culture is traditional habits which comes from the basic values from the past.
- (2) (Omid, Reflective writing ten)
Culture is a big word that includes all people's beliefs, backgrounds, clothes, costumes, etc.

In Extract (2), Omid's statement sums up two frequently identified sub-categories of general definitions of culture, namely values (i.e. clothes) and beliefs.

A pattern could be observed with such general conceptualisations of culture appearing at the early stage of the course, specifically week one, suggesting that students began with these conceptions. Task effect may also have played a role – sessions one and two, for example, were dedicated to elicitation of the definition of culture from students.

5.1.2 National definitions of culture

The examples student produced of national cultures mainly came from their own experience of Iranian society and focused on rules and regulations, i.e. regulations made by the Iranian government as in Extract (3).

- (3) (Zohre, Session one)
If a government, make some rules for the country and people have to follow it. So maybe government can make a culture ... For example, we have to wear cover in Iran. For example, Rohani [religious men] have to wear something different from others because of what they study and their minds. But for example, the clerks wear suits and you can understand in our culture, what people do from their wearing.

Table 3: Basic CA codes and frequency of occurrences during the course.

Sub-themes	Number of students	Number of quotations in classroom interaction	Number of quotations in assignments	Number of quotations in reflective writings	Overall number of instances	Number of instances in the first and second half of the course
General culture	9	46	0	7	53	47/6
National culture	8	76	24	9	109	79/30
Stereotypes	9	48	13	1	62	36/26
Self-stereotypes						
Other-stereotypes	9	39	24	1	64	23/41

Students' personal experience from Iranian society also appeared in references to national conceptions of cultural behaviour:

(4) (Erfan, Session one)

For example, by my idea, the government's culture is the same as people's culture ... For example, how the governments, for example, react to things which happen in the society is the same as how people react.

Government in this extract is also identified as an effective factor in creating culture. This time, however, this is not seen as happening through regulations imposed by a government, but through the positions they take concerning social events, which shape and are shaped by public behaviour. Beliefs were also part of students' conceptions of national cultures and the majority of references concerned religious ones, in Extract (5) in reference to ideas of UK national culture.

(5) (Omid, Assignment eight)

Sundays [in the UK] used to be very special day of the week for worship and rest and people are at home or church.

5.1.3 Stereotypes

Stereotypes make up the final group of themes identified at a basic level of CA. Following Gallois's (2004) categorisation of stereotypes, the examples of stereotypes have been divided into two groups including self-stereotypes and other-stereotypes, respectively referring to statements about Iranians and other nationalities. Students' constructions of stereotypes were often evaluative in orientation, including both positive and negative.

(6) (Faranak, Assignment eight)

In Iran family environment is warmer and more intimate than in the UK. It mean British parents spend most of their time in work. And rest of them when they are at home everybody goes to their own bedroom for resting.

Extract (6) came from an assignment on different aspects of family life in the UK and comparing it with Iran. Faranak gave examples of both self- and other-stereotypes. In her point of view, Iranian families have a stronger family relationship leading to a warmer environment. This can be seen as a positive self-stereotype versus a negative other-stereotype about British society. However, other stereotypes were less evaluative and more neutral (Extract [7]).

(7) (Mehrdad, Assignment nine)

They [Iranian people] eat less fast foods.

While Table 2 shows similar amounts of stereotyping in relation to both self and others, the self-stereotypes were typically more positive and other-stereotypes more negative, in keeping with othering theories (e.g. Holliday 2013; Moncada Linares 2016).

To summarise, the majority of references to basic CA appeared in the first half of the course and were related to general conceptions of culture, nationally defined cultures, mainly based on personal experience, and stereotypes of self and others. However, there were still instances of all these themes in the second half of the course. This may suggest the non-linear nature of development as well as the strong influence of task effect, with some later tasks (discussed below) prompting stereotypes.

5.2 Advanced cultural awareness

Advanced CA refers to instances where participants transcended a static definition of culture and moved towards a more emergent one. Within this overarching theme, four sub-themes were found: relativity of cultural norms, culture as independent of nation, different perspectives within a nation, and social identities and codes of behaviour. Following Baker (2011), relativity of cultural norms refers to instances where students show an understanding of the different interpretations cultural norms can have in different contexts. Although such norms related to the national level at times, the fact that students show evidence of understanding the effect of context in interpretation of culture is regarded as advanced CA. The culture as independent of nation theme is where students refer to the concept of culture beyond general or national views of it. Different perspectives within a culture concerns instances where students refer to the existence of a variety of perspectives within a nation. Finally, social identities and codes of behaviour encompass instances where students showed understanding of peoples' membership in more than one social grouping, which calls for its own specific codes of behaviour.

In Table 4, relativity of cultural norms had a noticeably higher frequency as compared to the other three themes within advanced CA. This may suggest its central role in being culturally aware at a more advanced level.

5.2.1 Relativity of cultural norms

A typical example of this theme is:

- (8) (Hadi, Session six)
In Iran it [certain hand gestures]'s OK but if you do it in America or European countries, it's not legal.

Table 4: Advanced CA codes and frequency of occurrences during the course.

Conceptualisation	Number of students	Number of quotations in classroom interaction	Number of quotations in assignments	Number of quotations in reflective writings	Overall number of instances	Number of instances in the first and second half of the course
Relativity of cultural norms	10	43	1	5	49	2/47
Culture as independent of nation	8	19	0	12	31	3/28
Different perspectives within a nation	7	21	0	6	27	6/21
Social identities and codes of behaviour	6	23	0	7	30	9/21

As a follow-up to the story “moment of embarrassment” (Byram and Zarate 1995), students were asked to discuss questions in groups and to think of examples of the different interpretations that same events can have in various contexts. Hadi, in this example, referred to the meaning of certain hand gestures, which may be either unacceptable or acceptable depending on the context where they are used.

As a part of session nine, students were given a handout containing some stories on different cultural norms people may have depending on their background and how this may lead to misunderstanding during communication. They were asked to read the stories in their groups and discuss what may have gone wrong in the given scenarios. While discussing the second scenario,³ Katayoun, for example, made the following statement in her group:

(9) (Katayoun, Session nine)

مستر ریچاردسون به مستر چو گفته که من رو اندی صدا کنین ولی این باز مستر آورده... فک می کنم تو فرهنگ مستر چو این احترام به مستر ریچاردسون هست.

‘Mr. Richardson asked Mr. Chu to call him Andy but Mr. Chu used the title “Mr” for him...I think in Mr. Chu’s culture, it’s a way of respecting Mr. Richardson.’

Although Katayoun seems to have missed Mr. Chu’s frustration at being called by his Chinese first name, she clearly has recognised the possibility of different social norms and preferences because of different backgrounds.

Overall, the relativity of cultural norms code mainly appeared in the second half of the course, suggestive of students’ moving towards a more advanced level of CA. Similar to the other themes explained so far, the task effect should not be ignored. Stories discussed in the classroom including “moments of embarrassment” in session six and critical incidents⁴ in session nine triggered many examples. As shown in Table 3, all students mentioned relativity of cultural norms at least once, indicating the success of the course in enhancing every student’s understanding of this theme. Furthermore, the fact that this came up in classroom interaction as well as reflective writings and assignments is suggestive of a relatively long-term effect on students’ thinking.

5.2.2 Culture as independent of nation

A representative example of this theme is Extract (10) in which Mehrdad refers to cultures at different scales, such as family.

³ This scenario comes from Scollon and Scollon (2001).

⁴ “Critical incidents are events which involve two or more people [...] which require attention, action, or explanation” (Fitzgerald 2000: 190).

(10) (Mehrdad, Reflective writing eight)

تفاوت های فرهنگی نه تنها در کشورها بلکه دامنه ی این تفاوت ها می تواند از این هم بیشتر شود به طوری که حتی می تواند از یک کشور میان خانواده ها نیز وجود داشته باشد.

‘What I learned is cultural differences do not only exist among countries, but also at a smaller scale such as families.’

Similar to the previous theme, the culture as independent of nation theme mainly came up in the second half of the course, specifically from session seven to session ten. The tasks which encouraged statements on this theme were a group discussion about finding the differences within students’ families and a “Sociogram activity” (Hall and Toll 1999), where students were asked to visualise different social circles they are a member of and different roles they have within each (in addition to any possible overlaps) via drawing circles. However, there were also statements not prompted by a specific task:

(11) (Faranak, Reflective writing ten)

فرهنگ هر جامعه با هم متفاوت است و حتی فرهنگ های خانواده ها باهم فرق می کند و بستگی به عقاید آن خانواده دارد.

‘Every society’s culture is different and even families’ culture differs from each other and depends on their beliefs.’

Faranak brings up this issue in her last reflective writing with no task trigger and this can be interpreted as a sign of her deeper understanding of this point.

5.2.3 Different perspectives within a nation

This theme was expressed in two different ways. The first, and most common, way that students expressed their understanding of the possibility of different perspectives within a nation was via the examples they gave. Exemplification was often triggered by the classroom discussions where tasks encouraged students to consider different behaviours and interpretations within groups. For instance, as a part of session eight students were put in groups and encouraged to think of possible differences which might exist among their families.

(12) (Faranak, Session eight)

In some families wedding ceremonies men and women are mixed but in some families they are separated. And about the for example get divorced, in some family they don’t accept it.

Farank brings up examples of wedding ceremonies and divorce, as two issues that people in a society may hold different ideas about.

The second way was when students explicitly referred to the existence of variety within cultures but without exemplification.

(13) (Mehrdad, Reflective writing two)

Each person holds a specific perspective, which is different from that of the other one. Sometimes, such differences can be very big.

Mehrdad, in this example, clearly acknowledges the distinguishability of an individual from others based on their perspective. However, no exemplification on the issue itself is given. These abstract acknowledgements of variety without exemplification were self-initiated and tended to come up in students' reflective writings, where creation of themes can be said to be less affected by the topics discussed in the classroom.

5.2.4 Social identities and codes of behaviour

This code was manifested in three different ways. Firstly, students simply named some of the social identities they orientated towards, defined as membership of individuals in different groups (Ellemers et al. 2002). These mainly followed some examples given by the course teacher. In Extract (14), Zohre refers to different roles she has when she attends different groups she is a member of.

(14) (Zohre, Session nine)

I am as student, friend, cousin, sister, classmate.

Another type is where students go further and make reference to different codes of behaviour participants should follow in each of their social groups, which at times differ from those of the others. This occurred primarily in response to class tasks, for example, as a part of the follow-up questions after the story "Save me, Mickey" (Dumas 2003), students were asked to think of any instance where they made assumptions about someone or something.

(15) (Katayoun, Session five)

We had a teacher, just for summer, he is a clergyman but he teaches maths ... We used to think that we need to talk about religion when we are with him; he never advise something and he just teach maths and he's cool.

Katayoun, in this example, transcends the concept of stereotypes by reflecting on her personal experience. That shows not only her openness to overcome her stereotypical picture of a clergyman, but also her understanding of belonging to different groups at the same time via following certain behaviours. One might appear to be talking about or promoting religion as a clergyman; however, as a teacher, they will be teaching the subject.

The final type of social identity and codes of behaviour is acknowledgement, where students explicitly refer to different social identities people have regardless of membership in nation.

(16) (Omid, Reflective writing nine)

We are at the same time participating in different groups in which we should consider the manners.

In Extract (16), Omid acknowledges his membership in multiple social groups at the same time, in which the manner of behaviour is important; although, it remains at a general, unspecified level.

In sum, the majority of references to advanced CA came up during the second half of the course. However, as with previous themes, certain activities in sessions five and nine gave rise to the most instances, demonstrating the effect of including certain tasks for encouraging particular answers and reactions. Nonetheless, the increase in overall instances also suggests possible development of students towards a more advanced level of CA over the course of intervention.

6 Discussion

Clear answers to the research questions for this study have emerged. As regards RQ1 “What are the differences in Iranian teenage students’ perceptions and conceptualisations of culture between the beginning and completion of a teaching intervention?”, we see a range of responses moving from basic CA and essentialist, stereotypical understandings of culture at the beginning, to more advanced CA at the end that recognises variations across and within cultures, as well as the relative nature of cultural norms. The essentialist understanding of culture at the beginning implies that students mostly had basic levels of CA when entering the course. Within basic levels of CA, definitions of culture at national levels was the most salient theme, in line with the suggestion of Baker (2015) who refers to national culture as the most common understanding. Furthermore, national culture was often described in reference to behaviours or beliefs with religious roots or regulations implemented in Iranian society (see Extracts [3], [4], and [5]). Considering the emphasis on Iranian-Islamic culture in the national curriculum and educational syllabi at schools following the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979, this is not surprising (Pasand and Ghasemi 2018; Tajeddin and Teimournezhad 2015) and can be interpreted as illustrating the effect that context has in people’s understanding of culture.

Evidence of advanced CA was generally found from session five onwards, which is indicative of the positive effect of the course in promoting more complex

understandings of culture among students. In other words, students moved from understanding of culture at a static level towards its understanding as a more emergent one, which is not necessarily limited to nation. However, as mentioned earlier, such development is non-linear and evidence of basic CA appeared in not only the first half of the course, but also the second half (see Extracts [6] and [7]). The non-linear nature of CA development has also been confirmed by Holmes and O'Neil (2012). Furthermore, among this group of participants there was little evidence of more fluid and complex understandings of cultural practices associated with ICA, in keeping with other classroom-based studies (Baker 2012, 2015; Yu and Maele 2018). This highlights the longitudinal nature of the development of cultural and intercultural awareness and that longer periods of teaching and time are needed before an advanced level of CA consolidates in students' minds or ICA can be developed.

In answer to RQ2 "In which ways do these perceptions and conceptualisations change as the result of different class activities through teaching intervention?", it is clear that teaching interventions here have a large influence on students recorded development of CA. Students demonstrated more complex understandings of culture in direct response to class activities (see Extracts [8]–[10], [13]–[15]). Moreover, there was also evidence of advanced CA in independent tasks as the course developed (see Extracts [11], [12], [16]), suggesting that the learning went beyond responses to class tasks. However, as might be expected over such a short course and already noted in RQ1, this development was quite uneven, with essentialist understandings still present at the end of the course, albeit alongside more complex understandings. Nonetheless, the study clearly indicates that teaching can aid in the development of CA (Baker 2012, 2015; Porto and Byram 2015).

In terms of pedagogic approach this study has highlighted the role of specific classroom tasks in eliciting responses which guide students towards understanding the concept of culture at a more advanced level. This research used a range of teaching materials and classroom activities including videos, short stories, classroom discussions and written assignments to meet this aim. Using a variety of tasks can increase the chance of having more participants involved and benefits a wider range of learners (Skehan 2016). Furthermore, this research joins the growing body of studies that have explored intercultural educational approaches to ELT which follow a more Global Englishes orientated perspective (e.g. Baker 2015; Galloway and Rose 2018; Kirkpatrick 2011; Xu and Dinh 2013). Such a pedagogy involves a move away from a sole focus on Anglophone cultures; although, they are still present, albeit alongside alternative cultural associations. Most importantly, they critique essentialist cultural comparisons fixed only at the national scale and introduce variety and complexity to the links between

languages and cultures (including English and students' L1) to better prepare learners for the superdiversity of ELF communication. Via achieving a higher level of CA, students will be able to go beyond stereotypical definitions of culture while participating in instances of intercultural communication using English as a *lingua franca* and therefore increase their chance of succeeding in such cases. This is through flexibility, open-mindedness, and understanding of culture as relative and as entailed in the concept of CA.

Finally, this article shows the important role that language teachers play in identifying possible issues within their own teaching context and in identifying actions that can be taken to solve these. The researcher (Abdzadeh 2017) through her experience of this setting was able to identify both content and activities of potential relevance and interest to the students that addressed the aim of adding a more intercultural and ELF-informed perspective to language classes. For example, inclusion of activities such as class discussions, as done here, will enable teachers to elicit and highlight certain concepts, thus reinforcing concepts related to the intercultural side of learning (see McConachy 2013).

7 Conclusion

As this is a study in a single setting with a small group of learners, generalisations cannot be drawn. Nonetheless, aspects of the data presented here will hopefully resonate with other researchers and practitioners who face similar issues in introducing intercultural approaches to ELT. This is specifically relevant in contexts where, on the one hand, integrating interculturality into ELT is important due to the global uses of English resulting in students' eagerness to learn English for intercultural purposes and, on the other hand, teachers are limited by curriculum and textbooks which are put into place by policy makers with narrow perspectives on culture. While complete diversion from prescribed textbooks is not possible in contexts such as Iran, it is still possible to integrate intercultural elements of language teaching into syllabi via either adding/adapting textbook activities in the classroom, as exemplified in this research, or through complete courses in more flexible alternative settings, such as the private language institute in this study.

In conclusion, this research is the first of its kind conducted in Iran, a context where any type of explicit intercultural teaching is often excluded from ELT. Despite the newness of the ideas to students, the course proved to be successful in its relevance and interest for students and fostering their levels of CA. Thus, we believe this study illustrates how even a short course in CA can be beneficial to students in terms of developing a more sophisticated understanding of culture and intercultural communication through English. We hope this will contribute to

further studies which help prepare English language learners and users in all settings for the dynamic reality of English as a global language and its multitude of cultural connections.

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Bionotes

Yasmina Abdzadeh

University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

Y.Abdzadeh@soton.ac.uk

Yasmina Abdzadeh is a visiting researcher at the University of Southampton, UK. Her research interests include intercultural communication, English language teaching, culture representation in textbooks, and English as Lingua Franca. Having experienced teaching of a wide range of subjects at the university and outside, Yasmina’s research focus is now on applicability and integration of the intercultural aspect of English teaching into language syllabi in different contexts.

Will Baker

University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

W.Baker@soton.ac.uk

Will Baker is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics and Director of the Centre for Global Englishes at the University of Southampton, UK. His research interests are English as a Lingua Franca, Intercultural and Transcultural Communication, English medium instruction, Intercultural Education, Intercultural Citizenship and ELT. Publications include: co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca* (2018), author of the monograph *Culture and Identity through English as a Lingua Franca* (DGM 2015), and co-editor of the book series *Developments in English as Lingua Franca* (DGM).