

An Investigation of Tensions between EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices about Teaching Culture¹

Una Investigación sobre las Relaciones Tensas entre
las Creencias y Prácticas de los Profesores de Inglés
como Lengua Extranjera sobre la Enseñanza de la
Cultura

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Abstract

This study explores tensions between three Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs and practices with respect to teaching culture. The teachers were observed and interviewed over a period of eight weeks. The observations provided insight into how they taught culture in practice, while the interviews tried to elicit their beliefs. Drawing on the distinction between what they perceived as ideal and what they did in practice illustrated some differences between the two. It is argued that these tensions between beliefs and practices lead teachers with different beliefs to act similarly in practice. Claims are also made about the probable roots of the tensions which have been grouped into two main categories of macro-scale decisions by educational system and micro-scale preferences of learners and teachers. Finally, a number of implications for curriculum developers and teacher education programs are also made.

Key words: culture, intercultural awareness, personal practical knowledge, cognition

Resumen

Este estudio explora la relación tensa que se genera entre las creencias y prácticas de tres maestros iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera respecto a la

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enseñanza de la cultura. Los maestros fueron observados y entrevistados durante un periodo de 8 semanas. Las observaciones permitieron conocer la percepción de los profesores sobre como ellos enseñan cultura en la práctica mientras las entrevistas permitieron obtener información sobre sus creencias. Con base en la distinción entre los que ellos percibieron como ideal y lo que ellos hicieron en la práctica ilustró algunas diferencias entre los dos. Lo anterior explica que las relaciones tensas entre las creencias y las prácticas conducen a los maestros con diferentes creencias a actuar de manera similar en la práctica. Asimismo, las declaraciones sobre las posibles causas del conflicto han sido agrupadas en dos principales categorías: decisiones a macro escala por el sistema educativo y a pequeña escala las preferencias de los estudiantes y docentes. Finalmente, también se realizan una serie de implicaciones para los especialistas en diseño curricular, programas de formación de docentes.

Palabras claves: cultura, conocimiento intercultural, conocimiento práctico personal, cognición

Resumo

Este estudo explora a relação tensa que se gera entre as crenças e práticas de três mestres iranianos de inglês como língua estrangeira com relação ao ensino da cultura. Os mestres foram observados e entrevistados durante um período de oito semanas. As observações permitiram conhecer a percepção dos professores sobre como eles ensinam cultura na prática, enquanto as entrevistas permitiram obter informação sobre as suas crenças. Com base na distinção entre os que eles perceberam como ideal e o que eles fizeram na prática ilustrou algumas diferenças entre os dois. O anterior explica que as relações tensas entre as crenças e as práticas conduzem os mestres com diferentes crenças a atuar de maneira similar na prática. Da mesma forma, as declarações sobre as possíveis causas do conflito foram agrupadas em duas principais categorias: decisões a macro escala pelo sistema educativo e a pequena escala, as preferências dos estudantes e docentes. Finalmente, também se realizam uma série de implicações para os especialistas em desenho curricular, programas de formação de docentes.

Palavras chave: cultura, conhecimento intercultural, conhecimento prático pessoal, cognição

Introduction

It seems that reporting on the strong integrative nature of language and culture announces no further news, as the notion of culture has been well established both in the fields of linguistics (Bakhtin, 1981; Byram; 1989; Kramersch, 1995, 2000) and applied linguistics (Chastain, 1988; Corbett, 2003) during the past decades. Within the EFL context, apparently, teaching the target culture has been both a demanding and a controversial issue for years. Recognizing the subtle cultural differences, preparing a rich context, and selecting appropriate methods and materials for instruction seem to be beyond the competence of most non-native teachers, in addition to the fact that not all EFL teachers are standing by the side of second culture instruction. However, the growing concern for teaching culture as an embedded body of language never leaves even those who are against teaching the second culture within the context of language classroom. As Kramersch (2000) observes, culture exists not only in the thoughts and beliefs but also in every word, phrase, and even nonverbal signals.

The present paper is an attempt to examine what teachers think about teaching culture and what they do in practice. Moreover, this study tries to list some of the reasons for which EFL teachers may have to deviate from their beliefs. Hopefully, the analysis of these tensions may be regarded as a complement to previous studies and set the ground for further research in the context of foreign language education.

Literature Review

Teachers' Knowledge

Teaching could be variously defined as a science, a technology, a craft, or an art (Freeman & Richards, 1993). However, even for those who follow a tested model, the justifications for the actions come from their cognition, a concept that has become the focus of interest since 1985 in the fields of teacher education and evaluation. Borg (2003) defines teacher cognition as “what teachers know, believe, and think” (p.96), and argues that cognition is shaped by schooling and contextual factors, in addition to its mutual reciprocation with professional coursework and classroom practices. Likewise, Shulman (1987) believes that teachers' practice is based on their repertoire of knowledge, namely content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical-content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values as well as their philosophical and educational backgrounds.

In addition to the concept of cognition, terms such as the practical knowledge (Meijer et al., 1999) theoretical belief (Johnson, 1992), and personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 1998) have been introduced. Among these, personal practical knowledge received considerable attention. The term has been defined as moral and aesthetic way of knowing life's educational situations (Golombek, 1998), which can be traced in teachers' practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987). To be more specific on the nature of personal practical knowledge, Clandinin (1985) argues:

This knowledge is neither theoretical, in the sense of theories of learning, teaching, and curriculum, nor merely practical, in the sense of knowing children. A teacher's special knowledge is composed of both kinds of knowledge, blended by the personal background and characteristics of the teacher and expressed by her in particular situations. (p.362)

Borrowing the concept of cognition from Borg, in this study, we try to approach teachers' cognition over the following dimensions of culture teaching:

- Why to teach culture?
- Whose culture to teach?
- How to teach culture?

Why to teach second culture?

The first serious question in foreign language classroom is why culture should be taught. To answer this question, first we have to clarify what we mean by culture. As culture has been interpreted differently in varieties of definitions, meeting different attitudes and approaches in the language classroom is not far from expectation. One of the most famous definitions of culture belongs to Chastain (1988). Chastain makes a distinction between two general definitions of culture. In his view, Large C culture "focuses on the major products and contributions of a society in general or of outstanding individuals in that society" (p. 303), while small C culture focuses on the "functional knowledge of the second-culture system" (p.303) to satisfy the goal of intercultural understanding. Taking the small C culture into account, we will realize that many aspects of second language such as semantics (Wierzbicka, 1992), pragmatics (Jung, 2003), and discourse structure (Moder, 2004) are basically culture bound. Thus, teaching language within a cultural context is a must. As Wendt (2003) rightly observes, it is the cultural context that imposes a thorough understanding of the cultural norms, and the belief in literal meaning can lead to a superficial and even

misleading understanding, where the cultural context of the country and individuals are ignored. However, it seems that during the history of language teaching, the status of cultural context in foreign language classroom remained unnoticed until the advent of communicative language teaching, which introduced communicative competence as the ultimate goal of language learning and instruction.

As a component of communicative competence, intercultural competence is described by Byram (1997) as:

1. “Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.”
2. *Savoir-comprendre* (understanding): “the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and to relate it to documents or events.”
3. *Savoir-apprendre/faire*: (learn/do) “the skill of discovery and interaction ability to acquire knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-life communication and interaction.”
4. *Savoir-engager* (involvement): “critical cultural awareness/ political education. An ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.”
5. *Savoir-être* (being): involves “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures” (pp. 57–61).

Apart from intercultural competence, Simpson (1997) attributes the value of culture teaching to learners’ cognitive development and growth in motivation, and Ivers (2007) mostly emphasizes the impact of culture instruction on critical development as he argues:

One would think that the cultural exposure received in foreign language courses might serve in some way to foment critical thinking and personal transformation. It could serve to assist students in recognizing their own flawed cultural bearings by grappling with interesting ideas, challenging assumptions, and critically evaluating new paradigms. (p. 153)

Whose culture to teach?

If native and target societies are mono cultural, it is relatively easy to answer the question; however, the fact is that not all societies are mono cultural, so the dilemma is whether to include minority life and

beliefs, for instance, by talking in English about immigrants in Canada. It is always difficult to make choices because choices inevitably show political preferences.

Mainly during the past two decades, by development of the role of English as a lingua franca, the necessity of teaching target culture was under question. Many arguing voices asked for teaching English as an international language. Among them, Nault (2006) argues:

First, English teaching professionals should discard the notion that the US and Great Britain represent the sole ‘target cultures’ of the English language. Second, they should rethink the goals of culture and language education to better meet their students’ diverse needs. And third, ELT professionals should do more to design and/or select teaching materials that are international and inclusive in scope. (p.314)

However whatever is our belief about whose culture to teach, Byram (1999) warns us against the often-ignored fact that learners have already developed their world views, so foreign concepts and values cannot be acquired as if the learners are a “tabula rasa.” Thus, unplanned pursuing of the target culture in foreign education context may not sound acceptable as observed by Alptekin (1993):

A learner of English who has never resided in the target-language culture will most likely experience problems in processing English systemic data if these are presented through such unfamiliar contexts as, say, Halloween or English pubs. Even if these are explained.....as one’s natural tendency is to assess a novel stimulus with respect to one’s own cultural system. (p. 137)

How to teach culture?

As mentioned previously, language and culture are intertwined, so when the instruction of second language starts, the incidental instruction of culture also begins. But the next question is whether this incidental instruction is sufficient. Byram’s (1989) answer to this question is that if the aim is to develop learners’ intercultural competence; they should be exposed to at least four types of planned practices. Figure 1 introduces these practices as equally valuable.

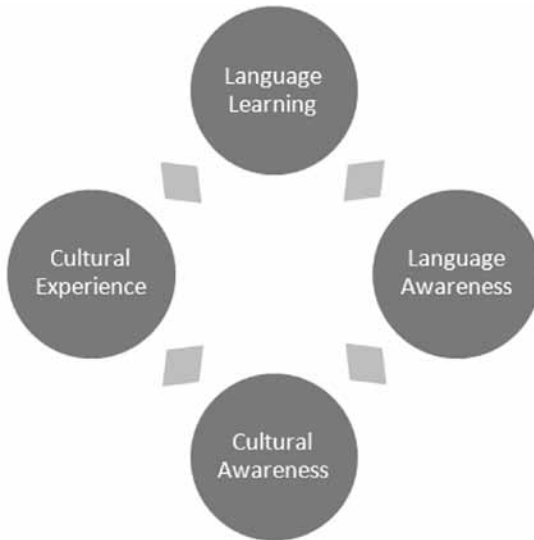


Figure1. A model of foreign language education (Byram, 1989)

According to Byram (1989), language learning can be provoked by the communicative approach, which provides students with immediate experience of the language both in those activities which emphasize rehearsal and practice of skills and in those which evoke dramatizing language use in role play and simulation.

Language awareness includes the analysis of sociological and structural aspects of language that can be practiced in L1 with a comparative focus on language formulae, for instance those needed to greet and take leave. The language awareness component would draw conscious attention to the similarities with and differences from the learners' first language, perhaps focusing on different degrees of formality and the appropriate linguistic formulae.

Cultural awareness is concerned with nonlinguistic dimensions of culture and more focused on the question of change from mono-cultural to intercultural competence. This type of practice, which includes both source and target culture viewpoints, aims at making learners ethnographers and informants by allowing them to gain a perspective through linguistic comparisons. The practices of this kind should cause learners to reflect and explicate their own key cultural concepts.

Cultural experience is an integral part of culture teaching which is simultaneous with the other components. It includes verbal and

nonverbal practices which zoom in on both the skills of fluency and accuracy.

Research Design

The aim of this study is to explore the probable tensions between teachers' beliefs and practices about teaching culture by specifically focusing on three important questions: why to teach culture, whose culture to teach, and how to teach culture in language classroom. The data for this research come from the close study of three teachers in the EFL setting of Iran. The data were collected during the spring semester of 2011 and consist of nine 60-minute voice-recorded classes (three classes for each teacher), in addition to pre- and post- semi structured interviews with the teachers.

Participants

Three nonnative experienced EFL teachers volunteered to help the researchers. They were all observed while teaching English to adult learners. In this study, the learners in all three classes were at a pre-intermediate level of English language proficiency. Table 1 displays some basic information about the participants. It should be noted that all the names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Basic information about the participants

| | English Learning Experience | Teaching Experience | Main Textbooks |
|-------|--|----------------------------|---|
| Omid | Lived in North America for 12 years | 12 years | <i>American Cutting Edge, Tactics for Listening</i> |
| Babak | Lived in England for 5 years | 23 years | <i>American Cutting Edge</i> |
| Javid | Never lived in an English-speaking country | 7 years | <i>Interchange</i> |

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected by the second researcher within the period of eight weeks through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The teachers were asked for permission to voice-record and analyze their instruction. The present paper was conceived within an “exploratory interpretive paradigm” (Grotjahn, 1987). According to Borg’s (1998) perception of the framework, the goal is to understand the inner perspectives on the meanings of the actions of those under study, which is definitely not linear but cyclical in design. Therefore, in practice this cyclical sequential procedure consists of data collection and analysis throughout the period of fieldwork, with each successive stage of data gathering being influenced by the analysis of the data already collected. Similar to what Borg (1998) did for grammar instruction, the stages of analysis in this study included the following. First, there were pre-observation interviews with the teachers to (a) provide them with an overview of the study and (b) to keep a record of their general attitudes towards the concept of culture in the language classroom. The interviews lasted for about 15 to 25 minutes, and were subsequently recorded and transcribed. Next, there were three hours of classroom observation (dedicating one hour to each teacher), accompanied by field notes, and audio recordings. These were used to develop the main questions of the study by keeping an eye on teachers’ contextualization of language instruction, their curriculum expectations, teaching objectives, and what they stated in the first interview (the second researcher acted as a non-participant observer during all the observations). Finally, the questions extracted from the first observed sessions were asked by conducting a semi-structured interview. The following questions formulated the basis of the interview:

1. What is the meaning of culture?
2. Is there a need to teach culture?
3. Whose culture is better to teach in language classroom?
4. How culture can be taught?

These three interviews were audio-recorded. The next stage was observation of six more hours for gaining a detailed account of classroom practices.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After the classroom observations and interviews were conducted and recorded, the collected data were transcribed and key instructional

episodes which were in contrast with the prior statements were marked. The contrastive highlighted memos provided the framework for the final interviews and the teachers were given the ground to justify their actions.

Results

The analysis of teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching culture indicated that generally there were a number of tensions between the teachers' stated beliefs and their practices, mainly regarding why to teach culture, whose culture to teach, and how to teach culture. Mostly, these tensions were consistent. In the following sections, we will consider the reasons for these tensions by drawing on data from all the three participants.

Why teach culture

The first example of tension comes from Omid's belief, when he was talking about teaching culture in our first discussion. Early in the study, he said "I do not teach culture. We should not advertise a foreign culture, [as] we have a better culture" (INT1), but the observation of his classroom practice revealed a tension that he had not been previously aware of. In the observed sessions, he frequently asked the students to pay attention to sociocultural issues such as formality and informality of some expressions and structures. For example, when the students were supposed to read a text, he asked:

T: What is the meaning of he is at rest?

S2: He died?

T: Yes? Yes. It's the polite way of saying he died.

...

T: What is the meaning of hop in? Hop in.

S3: Get in?

T: Yes, get in the car. It is an informal way of saying get in the car. (Observation 1)

...T: When do we use shall we?

S2: Shall we? In question?

T: Shall is used in question indicating offer or suggestion. Shall we go for a drink ? Shall we go for a lunch after class? Shall we is a polite expression for let's go. (Observation 2)

Thus, it seemed that Omid's general belief about culture included only large C Culture, but later in our discussion, the teacher realized that while he did not believe in the value for culture teaching in general, he did believe in its value in raising the learners' awareness of semantic and pragmatic aspects of language which sometimes are undoubtedly at odds with the source culture. Therefore, our discussion stimulated an awareness about why to teach culture; however, his felt need to teach the materials, closer to the needs of his students remained unsolved up to the end of the study. Omid talked about his experience in the last interview.

Most of my students never want to leave the country; why should they know about American or British culture?.. I think the truth is not written in these books. For example, in *American Cutting Edge*, there is a reading section about touring in New York, the tour guide calls New York a safe place, and I tell my students it's not true. New York is not a safe city at all. People do not have eye contact when they are walking in the streets. Three or four taxi drivers are killed every week there. (IN4)

This was an explicit example that indicated how contextual factors such as pre-selected materials and teachers' professional assumption shaped by their professional coursework can be at odds.

Whose culture to teach

Further evidence of tensions comes from Javid's use of the main textbook despite having doubts about its values for culture instruction. Being already aware of this disparity in belief and practice, he said, "I believe learners should pick up a second identity; however, the textbook contains cultural topics with multicultural orientation." (INT 1) As Javid mentioned in our discussion, the topics for classroom discussion in the observed sessions covered topics such as "the role of parents in children's education" and "immigration". Moreover, the students were supposed to read about "Samba in Brazil", "wedding parties in Japan", "color day festival in India", and "women's proposals to men in Germany and India". This was, he felt, "not appropriate to identify with native speakers," but he believed "these are the topics that provide a good context for speaking." (INT 2)

When asked about using supplementary materials to get closer to his professed belief.

Sometimes I do bring the texts of my own. But, supplementary materials should be wisely selected. If not, teachers are accused of advertising a certain cultural norm, which is not true. I do not encourage anyone to follow an idea, but learners should be exposed to the views, maybe the ones they are ignorant about or in some cases hostile with....there is no tolerance on the side of the students; they do not want to be exposed to the realities of the target culture. (INT2)

Therefore, our discussion indicated that the main reason behind the tension was another contextual factor. The learners' low level of tolerance prevented Javid from teaching American and British culture.

How to teach culture

The following examples highlight the role of both contextual and personal factors in creating tensions between teachers' beliefs and the way they teach. Early in the study, Babak said, "I believe that learners should develop a critical perception about the second culture and ideally awareness about the world that they do not live in." (INT 1) With respect to how this awareness should be raised, he replied, "there should be discussions on the differences between cultures... culture-bound topics for discussions and exercises such as role play can stimulate cultural understanding." (INT 1)

In the first lesson, one of the students gave a lecture about the origin of Halloween and Valentine's Day. While she was giving the lecture, the others except the teacher were noticeably distracted as it seems that the vocabulary used in the lecture was higher than the learners' level of English language proficiency. After the lecture, Babak corrected her grammatical errors. Therefore, although the incidental choice of the learner brought about the chance for the learners to acquire new knowledge of a culture (skill of discovery and interaction), it was taken for granted. Babak talked about this practice.

Lectures are the opportunities for speaking; they are not for cultural practice. The content of what is spoken about is not the matter of concern here.....the fact is that these students are really weak and do not spend much time on learning. How can I be concerned about their knowledge about the origin of Halloween when they still do not know how to use subject-verb agreement correctly? (INT 2)

This was not a tension that could be resolved. Further observation also revealed that Babak's concern about language learning incited him

to teach culture only incidentally. In another observation, when the class was working on a reading section about the “most famous figures in the world,” the focus was on the meaning of the expressions. For example, in the text about Gorbachev and missionaries he asked:

T: Gorbachev resigned. What the meaning is of resigned? To resign means to leave your job.

...

T: That was the missionary.

S3: What is the meaning of missionary?

T: Missionaries are sent by church to different parts of the world to help the poor.

And when for the third time one of the learners could not pronounce apartheid, she said in L1 what is the meaning of the word, and Babak started to explain it:

S1: What’s the meaning of the word? I cannot pronounce it.

T: A system in South Africa that was against the equal rights of the people. (Observation 3)

In the post-lesson discussion, his explanation for not discussing the issues raised in the reading section such as the duty of missionaries was that “having this heavy syllabus, we always have to be worry about the deadlines....I prefer to use the available time to cover the pre-determined objectives.” (INT 3) By the pre-determined objectives, he mainly meant the enhancement of grammatical features of the language which were the main focus of both teaching and testing syllabi of the institute. Although our discussions helped to raise his awareness of the tension between his beliefs and practices, it was not a tension that could be resolved.

The findings of this study revealed that some tensions exist between teachers’ beliefs and practices. Table 2 illustrates a summary of these tensions.

Table 2. Tensions in teachers' cultural beliefs and practices

| | Belief | Comment | Practice | Comment |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Why to teach culture? | No reason | Learners do not need to know about American and British culture | Direct learners' attention to culture-bound expressions | Second language forms and functions are inevitably culture bound |
| How to teach culture? | Discussions, and role plays | To find a critical perspective | No intentional cultural practice, incidental ones were taken for granted | Lack of time to raise culture-specific issues |
| Whose culture to teach? | Target culture | Unless a second identity is taken, proficiency will not be achieved | Discussing culture familiar topics | Learners' low level of tolerance |

This study suggests that our participants have developed divergent views over whose culture to teach, and why and how to teach it. However, in practice, these teachers had convergent views toward teaching the same thing in the same way and most importantly for the same reason. Buttjes (as cited in Byram, 1989) identifies three basic positions toward culture instruction. The first, "pragmatic-communicative oriented" means teaching about the culture, which is intended to alleviate problems of communication in the language. The second approach is to give learners a critical understanding of the foreign people, of their own view of themselves and their values. This is called "ideological understanding oriented." The third position encourages learners to go beyond mere acceptance of particular historical developments, and present social situations and analyze their own social environment with critical understanding. The label attached to this position is "political-action oriented" (Byram, 1989, p. 60). Accordingly, in this study, our first discussion with teachers indicated that Babak's professed belief was closer to pragmatic-communicative orientation. Javid and Babak had tendencies close to ideological understanding and political action orientations, respectively. However, in practice, all teachers were teaching culture just to raise awareness toward the socio-pragmatics aspect of the language. As Byram (1987) claims, despite the fact that

“authentic material imported into the foreign language classroom, the experience is a restricted and limited version of using the language in the foreign culture and society, and the principal focus remains on the language and on learners’ fluency and accuracy in language use” (p.140). Subsequently, when Kramersch (1995) argues that “in practice, teachers teach language and culture or culture in language but not language as culture” (p. 83), she is fairly true.

In addition, although Omid and Javid were quite unsatisfied with the cultural themes of the textbooks, both were acting within the predetermined framework. In practice, all the teachers were teaching the cultural content of the main textbooks included in the syllabus, irrespective of their beliefs about whose culture to teach.

Finally, as a result of their dissimulate answers to the first two questions, we would expect to see different strategies in their practices. In fact, all three teachers implemented the communicative approach, which included the use of authentic material and exercises such as role plays. This approach could have allowed all the three teachers, implicitly and incidentally, to provide a context to introduce language as social action. Nevertheless, the main explicit cultural practices in Byram’s (1989) model, namely cultural awareness with a comparative focus, and cultural experience with foreign culture focus were mostly absent from the observed classroom practices.

The reasons for teachers’ divergence from their initial beliefs are summarized in Figure 2.

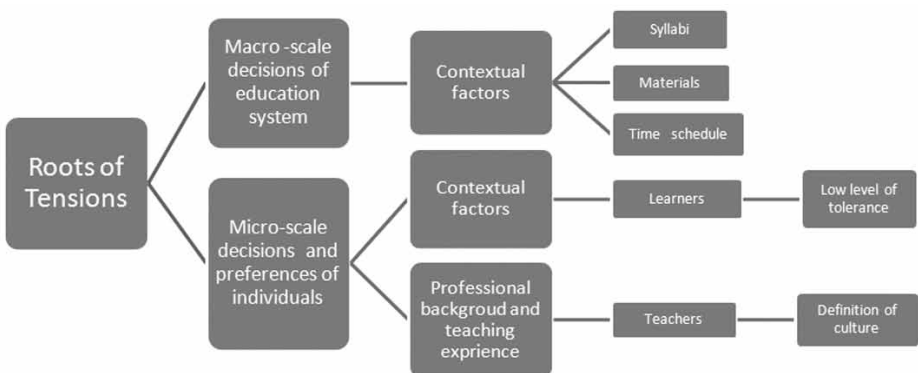


Figure 2. The roots of tensions between the beliefs and practices in this study

As Figure 2 shows, the sources of these tensions can be basically grouped into macro-scale decisions as well as individuals' decisions and preferences. In the teachers' syllabus, the objectives of each individual session were prescribed in advance, in addition to the fact that time was limited and teaching materials had already been selected. Therefore, these contextual factors assigned classroom practices that were presumably at odds with the teachers' stated beliefs. Apart from these contextual factors, the teachers' definition of culture, and learners' low level of tolerance proved to be further sources of incongruity.

The results of two European research projects (Aleksandrowicz-Pedich et al., 2003; Sercu et al., 2005) are close to the results of the present study. In the former, attitude surveys were conducted in ten European countries (Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Greece, Holland, Iceland, Malta, Poland, Rumania), and in the latter, research both on attitudes and classroom practices was carried out in six European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Spain and Sweden), and also in Mexico. The results showed a high level of uniformity among the answers. The teachers were generally positively inclined toward teaching culture though they did not usually have enough time. If they taught culture, they mostly took advantage of the existing target language teaching materials.

Conclusions

The above insights must, of course, be interpreted with reference to the particular methodological and contextual features of this study. Thus, they emerged from an analysis of the practices in teaching culture of three EFL teachers, working with monolingual intermediate learners in a private language institute in Iran. While these characteristics mean that the practices and beliefs highlighted here are particular to the context of study, we feel that the results may have implications for both the curriculum developers, and teacher education programs. Curriculum developers may need to acknowledge the socio-cultural component of communicative competence and include the pragmatic facets of language as well as the grammatical features in the very initial phases of the planning. This study further suggests that teacher education programs may include culture as the fifth dimension of language. This inclusion may benefit future teachers by assisting them in finding a more explicit definition of culture, and training them to explore appropriate strategies aligned to the realities of the context.

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