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## **Teacher Cognition on the Place of Culture in English Education in Tunisia**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the cognition of 70 Tunisian teachers on the place of culture in English education. It showed that Tunisian teachers believe that English textbooks and curricular documents are not specific about the cultural dimension of EFL. It also revealed that L2 teachers, whose mother culture is distant from that associated with L2, hold ambivalent attitudes towards culture. They acknowledge the importance of culture to communicative competence and intercultural competence, but either approach culture with suspicion or prefer to keep it to a minimum in the curriculum. The reasons for the marginalization of culture in English curriculum, according to the participants of the study, are 'vastness of the concept of culture', 'lack of resources', and 'problems of procedure'. These reasons are accepted by L2 teachers, worldwide, who seem to share a 'co-culture' that determines their cognition on the different aspects of language teaching. As regards the cultural dimension of L2 teaching, the 'co-culture' seems to drive teacher cognition more than 'cultural distance'.

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## 1. Introduction

The place of culture in L2 education has been extensively theorized and problematized since the late 1990's. Such theorization and problematization resulted in the emergence of the intercultural approach to language teaching and the subsequent elaboration of the concept of intercultural communicative competence (henceforth, ICC). In the intercultural approach, being linguistically and socio-pragmatically competent in a particular language is meaningless if the cultural dimension of that language is not critically and interpretively understood. Within such an approach, ICC is believed to be the key to successful communication and the lack of it is assumed to result in miscommunication, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, stereotyping, and stigmatization (see Byram 2011, 2014).

Research on the cultural dimension of English education has taken two avenues: (1) evaluating the place of culture in curricular documents and teaching materials and (2) scrutinizing teacher cognition on the matter. As regards the place of culture in curricular documents and teaching materials, Hermessi (in press) identified four curricular positions: (1) the no need for culture position, (2) the red-tape position, (3) the nonsystematic position and (4) the systematic position. Teacher cognition research is concerned with studying teacher attitudes and beliefs, which subsume the thoughts, feelings, images, metaphors, and perceptions teachers hold about curriculum, subject matter, teaching, learning, teacher, learner, teaching materials, and teaching practices (see Borg, 2011). Several studies have investigated teacher cognition on the cultural dimension of L2 education in different foreign language settings (see Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990; Byram & Risager, 1999; Galeano, 2014, Sercu, 2001; Sercu et al., 2005; for instance).

This study investigated the cognition of Tunisian teachers on the cultural dimension of English education. Tunisia is a North-African former French colony with a three-millennium history and a complex cultural and linguistic situation. Hermessi (in press) evaluated the place of culture in teaching English as a foreign language in curricular documents and teaching materials in Tunisia. The analysis of curricular documents revealed that curriculum designers

tended to approach culture in a nonsystematic way and to essentialize the 'English' culture to the British culture and the American one. The analysis of teaching materials showed that there existed a substantial 'latent' cultural content of which both curriculum designers and teachers might not even be aware. The current study was meant to shed light on teacher cognition on culture in FL teaching in a setting where culture is neither approached systematically nor explicitly. It intended also to explore teacher cognition in a setting where the culture associated with L2 and the culture of teachers are assumed to be distant from one another.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This section will present the key concepts and the theoretical framework of the study, mainly (1) culture, theories of culture and the constituent elements of culture, (2) culture in foreign language teaching, and (3) teacher cognition on the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching.

### 2.1. Culture and Theories of Culture

Culture is an elusive construct. In its anthropological sense, it refers to the communicative, meaningful aspects of social life without any reference to social reality. In contrast, in its sociological sense, culture is defined in relation to social organization, social system and social interaction. Culture has been approached differently in structuralism and post-structuralism. Structuralists adopted an ahistorical, static, homogenizing, deterministic approach to culture. They focused on the underlying thought processes of culture by systematically examining such cultural traits and expressions as kinship, myth, and language (see Ryan, 1999 and Spillman, 2007). They failed, however, to address the dynamic aspects of culture and to account for independent individual human acts. Poststructuralists expressed their disenchantment with the structuralists' static, mechanistic, and controlling models of culture. Atkinson (1999, p. 626) criticized what he called the 'standard' views that approach cultures "...as geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous...". In a similar vein, Pennycook (1999, p. 11) criticized the static models of cultural difference and static definitions of culture that dichotomize "a West/East, Them/Us polarity of difference".

Such post-structuralist and post-modernist views of culture have been criticized, in their turn, for dismissing the essentialist, collectivist, and homogeneous, nationalistic views of culture in times of nationalistic, religious and ethnic fundamentalism (Hermessi, 2016). In EFL teaching, answering the question of 'who represents 'English' culture?' is not straightforward. Three positions, framed within Kachru's (1992) inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle model can be identified. The first essentializes 'English' culture to the British and the American ones or to one or more members of the inner circle, namely Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The second position considers the members of the outer circle (India, South Africa...) also to represent the 'English' culture. The third either considers members of the expanding (Nigeria, Egypt, Brazil...) circle to represent the 'English' culture, in their turn, or simply consider English to be a 'lingua franca' (ELF) associated with a 'culture franca' that belongs to no particular nation or country.

The elements that constitute culture include beliefs, worldview, values, mores, customs, and behavioral norms. They pertain also to appearance, ceremony rituals, presence, artifacts, and esthetics as well as organizations and institutions (Tylor, 1871). Several dichotomies have been used to classify the constituent elements of culture. Big 'C', for instance, refers to formal culture, including formal institutions (social, political, and economic), great figures of history, and those products of literature, fine arts, media, literature, cinema, music, and sciences that have been traditionally assigned to the category of elite culture. Little or small 'c' is associated with the sociological sense of culture and refers to the way of life of a particular group of people, including organization and nature of family, home life, interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs, housing, clothing, food, tools, transportation... (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996).

## **2.2. Culture in Foreign Language (FL) Teaching**

Culture has always been present in most language teaching methods. In the Grammar-Translation Method, the aim of L2 education

has been to allow L2 learners to have access to the 'canons' of Greek and Latin literature. In the Audiolingual method, in spite of the focus on the structural aspects of language, such prominent figures of the method as Nelson Brooks and Robert Lado stressed the need for familiarizing L2 learners with the culture. Brooks (1986) has even compiled a list of 62 cultural topics that can be considered in language classes. In the Communicative Approach to language teaching, culture has been considered indirectly through use of authentic materials and focus on the socio-semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language (Richards, 2001). In this approach, culture has, however, never been explicitly addressed as a dimension of teaching of its own right; rather, it has either been considered as an incidental by-product of communicative competence or as sub-component of socio-linguistic competence or pragmatic competence. It is worth noting that ICC is misunderstood by many L2 teachers and curriculum designers who either mistakenly equate it with communicative competence or believe ICC to be subsumed in it (Byram, 2014).

As for the perspectives from which culture has been approached in L2 curricula, Kramsch (1993) established a distinction between three of them: (1) the factual perspective that emphasizes facts more than meaning, (2) the cultural information perspective that imparts the knowledge that might raise awareness but does not result in comparison or interpretation, and (3) the interpretive perspective which involves the use of cultural knowledge and awareness to critically mediate between cultures.

Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) argued that teaching the cultural dimension of an L2 can take three distinct forms, namely cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural competence. Cultural knowledge refers to the procedural factual information about culture that is imparted to the L2 learner by an external party (the teacher as a case in point); such knowledge does not imply any conscious, comparative, or critical approach to culture. Cultural awareness is defined as "sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behavior on language use and communication" (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993, p. 5). It refers to the L2 learner's consciousness of cultural facts, products,

events, or patterns without necessarily implying understanding them or accepting them. Cultural competence, however, refers to the ability to effectively converse with members of the target culture and critically understand and explain their perspectives and practices. It also implies being aware of one's own cultural viewpoint(s) and holding positive attitudes to those of others.

### 2.3. Teacher Cognition on Culture in L2

Teacher cognition refers to the beliefs and attitudes held by teachers on their profession. Attitude represents a mental orientation that underlies the evaluation of a given situation, person, idea or object. In contrast, beliefs represent a set of understandings, premises, or propositions felt by a person to be true (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In L2 education, the body of knowledge and competencies needed by an L2 teacher has changed from knowledge on grammar and pedagogy to subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills. Underscoring the importance of investigating teacher cognition, Pajares (1992, p. 307) contended that attention to teacher belief/attitude system can inform about teaching in "ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot". Phipps and Borg (2007) correctly noted that teacher thoughts and intuitions determine the way they appraise syllabus, evaluate teaching materials, view teaching procedure, assess learner needs, and behave in the classroom. Likewise, Borg (2011) argued that beliefs and attitudes drive teaching practice and behavior as they serve as a filter through which teachers mentally process new information.

Research on teacher cognition about the place of culture in L2 education revealed that L2 teachers, in many settings, are unaware of the concept of ICC. When they are aware of such concept, they either hold ambivalent attitudes towards it or simply reject the intercultural approach to L2. Adaskou et al. (1990), for instance, studied the attitudes of Moroccan teachers towards the place of culture in English education asking her subjects "[s]hould learners be extensively or minimally exposed to foreign culture content?" (p. 6). Adaskou et al.'s study revealed that there was consensus among Moroccan teachers that cultural content be a function of the needs of learners as perceived by English language teachers and inspectors. Byram and Risager (1999) studied British and

Danish teachers' perceptions of the cultural dimension of foreign language education. Sercu (2001) studied the perceptions of the intercultural dimension of L2 education of Belgian teachers of French, English, and German. Both studies found that teachers lacked a systematic approach to teaching intercultural competence and gave little attention to 'cultural values and social norms'.

Sercu (2005) conducted a large scale study on European (Belgian, Polish, Bulgarian, Greek, Swedish, and Spanish) and Mexican teachers' perceptions of and beliefs about 'teaching intercultural competence'. He probed the profile of the 'intercultural teacher' and compared such profile across the six countries in which the study was conducted. He found that teachers, regardless of their country, did not believe that 'intercultural competence teaching' positively affects pupils' perceptions of other cultures; rather they believed that "intercultural competence teaching" could reinforce stereotypes. In a similar vein, Byrd, Hlas, Watske, and Valencia (2011) studied the beliefs and practices of US teachers and teacher educators with a focus on the motivators and barriers in considering culture in language classes as specified by the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century. Galeano (2014) examined US K-12 foreign language teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture.

Lange (2003, p. 274) contended that "[I]ack of stated goals and outcomes, absence of curricular organization, deficient or non-existent assessment tools, and unfocused learning strategies are some of the major reasons why culture learning has not been successfully included in language instruction". In a similar vein, Sercu et al. (2005) argued that educationalists should realize that L2 teachers are neither enough conscious about the educational breadth of FL teaching nor predisposed to embrace the intercultural approach to language teaching. This study explored the cognition of teachers of English on the cultural dimension of English education in the Tunisian EFL context. Teacher cognition is conceived of, in this study, as a tripartite concept comprising affective (mainly intuitions, beliefs, and likes), cognitive (attitudes and thoughts), and conative (actual or potential behavior related to the subject of cognition) dimensions. The study was meant to shed light on teacher

beliefs and perceptions about the place of culture in teaching English as a foreign language in a context where culture is far from being explicitly recognized as a teaching/learning objective. It was also meant to probe whether Lange's (2003) and Sercu et al.'s (2005) claims about the lack of specificity of how to teach culture and the lack of L2 teachers' familiarity with the intercultural approach to foreign language teaching and the concept of ICC are valid or not for the Tunisian context. Furthermore, the study aimed to inquire into the extent to which cultural distance between L2 teachers' culture and culture associated with L2 affects teacher cognition on the place of culture in FL. The study specifically investigates the cognition of teachers on three issues:

1. The cultural dimension of English curriculum in Tunisia
2. The potential impact of culture teaching on learners
3. The practices and behaviors of Tunisian teachers in relation to the cultural dimension of English education

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Setting and Participants

Tunisia is a North-African former French colony. Culturally speaking, the original people of Tunisia, the Berbers, have been influenced by all the civilizations and peoples that marked the history of the Mediterranean sea, namely the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Moorish, the Spanish, the Turkish and the European ones. Linguistically speaking, the mother tongue of Tunisians, is 'Tunisian Arabic' (TA), which is believed to be a dialect of either Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or Classical Arabic (CA). MSA, the official language of all Arab countries, is also the medium of instruction of most school subjects. The educational system in Tunisia is composed of three stages: Basic education which lasts (from 6 to the age of 15), Secondary education (from 16 to 19) and higher education (from 19 on). In Tunisia, students learn MSA as a first foreign language starting from the age 6, French as a second foreign language starting the age of 9 and English as a third foreign language starting from the age of 12. In the Tunisian EFL setting, teachers of English implement curricular decisions

designed by others and seem therefore not to exert any agency over their teaching. They have little room for improvisation or change given the exam orientation of the English program. In fact, the professed objective of the English program in Tunisia is to prepare students to successfully take the national exam screening out for access to university i.e. the Baccalaureate exam. The subjects of the study are 70 Tunisian Basic School and High School Teachers of English. 25 males and 45 females 38.6% of whom have less than 10 years of teaching experience. 44.3% 10 to 20. 11.4% 20 to 30 and 4.3% 30+.

#### 3.2. Instrumentation and Procedure

The study used a questionnaire to collect data on the beliefs and attitudes of Tunisian teachers on the place of culture in the English curriculum.

The questionnaire is composed of 13 structured and semi-structured items (see Appendix). It was meant to gather information on Tunisian teachers' beliefs on the place of culture in curricular documents and teaching materials, their attitudes towards the impact of culture teaching on L2 learners, as well as their potential or actual behaviors and practices in relation to the cultural dimension of English education. The first item of the questionnaire was related to the issue of 'who represents the English culture?'. It required the participants to mention the peoples/nations that represent with the 'English' culture. Items 2, 3 and 4 tapped on the place of culture in official documents and English textbooks as well as the type of culture, if there is any, presented in them. Items 5 and 6 pertained to the link between language and culture as well as the impact of culture teaching or lack of it on students. Items 7 and 8 were related to the actual and potential practices of EFL Tunisian teachers regarding cultural content. Items 9, 10, and 11 concerned teachers' attitudes towards the amount of cultural content in the English curriculum as well as the readiness of Tunisian teachers and students to teach/learn about culture in English classes. Items 12 and 13 were related to whether culture is overlooked or not in the English syllabus as well as to the reasons behind the marginalization of culture in English classes.

The questionnaire has been developed both on a theoretical basis (see section 2) and in the light

of results of an informal discussion with a group of Tunisian teachers (see section 4.1.). Item 4 of the questionnaire, for instance, was based on the definition of culture and its elements in the theoretical framework section of the study. In addition, the factor of ‘lack of resources and problems of procedure’ was included as a potential reason for the marginalization of culture under item 13. The questionnaire was piloted on the 6 teachers who participated in the qualitative part of the study; the piloting helped to revise the wording and layout of the questionnaire. The final version of the questionnaire was sent to 10 basic and high schools in Tunisia and any teacher who was willing to help with the study was welcome. In total 75 questionnaires have been returned to the researcher and only 70 have been considered in the study proper as 5 questionnaires have been eliminated for such reasons as response set or partial completion. This study relied on a mixed design as it used both the quantitative and the qualitative methods. The next section of the article will present the results of the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Qualitative Phase

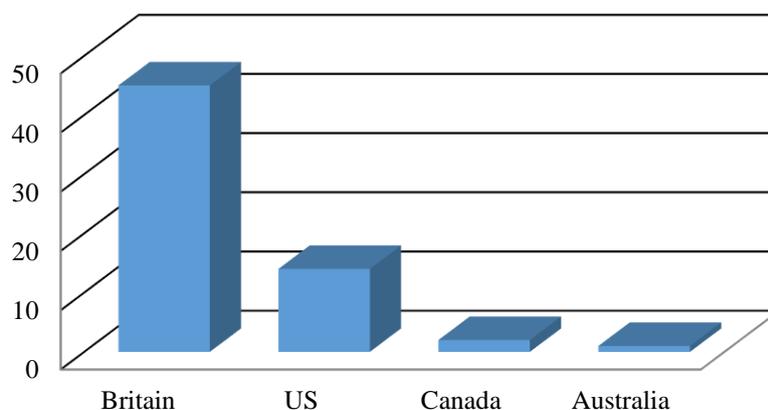
The qualitative part of the study consisted in a group discussion held by the researcher with 6 Tunisian teachers. The group discussion focused on how teachers felt about the place of culture in the English curriculum in Tunisia. The discussion revealed that culture did not seem to be a priority for Tunisian teachers who confessed that they had no time to deal with it

in their classes. These teachers noted that curricular documents and teacher guides were not specific about the place of culture in English education and remarked that culture was marginalized in English textbooks. As for the reasons of such marginalization, other than the lack of specificity of curricular documents on the issue, teachers referred to what they called ‘lack of resources and problems of procedure’. When asked to be more specific, they said that they felt that they neither have the required materials nor the adequate training on the techniques, strategies and activities for teaching culture. The insights obtained from the discussion with Tunisian teachers were seminal in the writing of the questionnaire.

### 4.2. Quantitative Phase

#### 4.2.1. Place of Culture in English Curriculum in Tunisia

The first item of the questionnaire is: ‘For you, what is/are the nation(s)/community(ies) that represent(s) the ‘English’ culture most?’. The study informs that Tunisian teachers of English essentialized the culture representative of the English language to the British and to a lesser extent the American cultures. In fact, ‘Britain’ was mentioned 45 times and ‘US or America’ 14 times (See Figure 1). This might be accounted for by the fact Great Britain is more involved in English language teaching in Tunisia than the US. It might also be explained by the fact that the Tunisian majors out of whom English teachers were recruited are more likely to spend linguistic training periods in Britain than in the US.



**Figure 1**  
Country(ies)/Nation(s) Representing the ‘English’ Culture

The second item of the questionnaire concerned the explicitness of curricular documents on the cultural component of English education. Table 1 shows that 43% of the participants of the study thought that ‘the official program’ was not clear about the matter. This can be explained by the lack of specificity of official curricular documents regarding the cultural dimension of English education (Hermessi, in press). Concerning the weight of cultural content in teaching materials that is the subject of item 3, Table 1 reveals that only 21.4% of

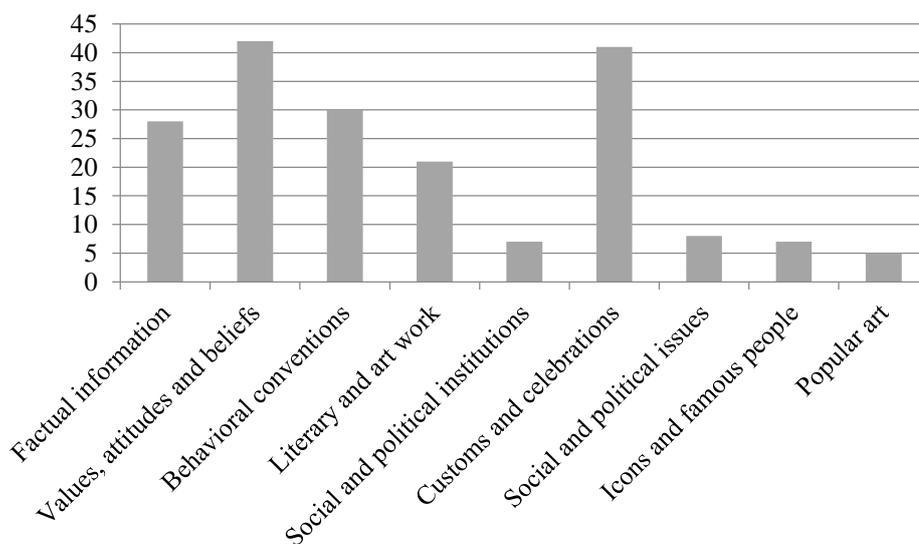
teachers thought that there was a cultural component in English textbooks while the rest either thought that it was absent (14.3%) or ‘somewhat there is one’ (64.3%). The fact that the majority of Tunisian teachers stick to the ‘somewhat’ response might be accounted for by the existence of a ‘latent’ cultural content in the English curriculum. That is, a cultural content that is neither presented systematically nor explicitly but that stems from the inherent cultural load of language (Hermessi, in press).

**Table 1**  
*Culture in English Curriculum*

	Very Clear/Yes	Rather Clear /Somewhat Clear	Not Clear/No	Don't Know
<b>Culture in Official Documents</b>	32.9%	24.3%	18.6%	24.3%
<b>Culture in Textbooks</b>	21.4%	64.3%	10.0%	4.3%

The fourth item of the questionnaire invited the study participants to rank the various components of cultural content in terms of importance. Tunisian teachers ranked such components as follows: (1) values, beliefs and attitudes, (2) customs and celebrations, (3) behavioral conventions, (4) factual information, and (5) literary and art work (see Figure 2). The least important cultural elements according to Tunisian teachers were popular art, icons and famous people, social and political institutions and social and political issues. The

classification of values, beliefs, and attitudes as the most important cultural aspect to be considered in English classes is unexpected, the least to say, given that many studies found that values, beliefs, and attitudes represent the most complex and sensitive aspects of culture (See Adaskou et al., 1990; Hermessi, in press). It would be interesting to see whether students share their teachers’ point of view or not regarding whether to include popular art, icons, and famous people or not in cultural content.



**Figure 2**  
*Ranking Cultural Aspects in Terms of Importance*

Regarding the potential and actual behavior of Tunisian teacher in relation to the cultural content of the English curriculum, Table 2 shows that 60% of the study participants considered culture in their classes while 46% invited their students to compare Tunisian culture to 'English' culture. It revealed, however, that 32% of the study subjects thought that culture must be kept to a minimum. Tunisian teachers considered, therefore, culture in their classes and invited their students to compare mother culture with the culture associated with FL but wanted, at the same time, to keep culture to a minimum. This fact highlights the ambivalent feelings L2 teachers hold about the cultural component of FL. Such ambivalent feeling emerged in several studies on the place of culture in L2 education in different Islamic settings. In Morocco, for instance, Adaskou et al. (1990) reported that L2 teachers felt that the use of 'foreign cultural milieu' and 'cultural comparisons' can lead to discontent with local culture among students.

**Table 2**  
*Teachers' Attitudes towards Cultural Content*

	YES	NO
Do you consider culture in your class?	60	40
Do you invite your students to compare L1 and L2?	46	54
Are Tunisian students reluctant to learn about the 'English' culture?	61	39
Do you feel that you lack the knowledge and training to teach the 'English' culture?	45	55
Should culture be kept to a minimum in English curriculum?	32	68

#### 4.2.2. *Reasons for the Marginalization of Culture*

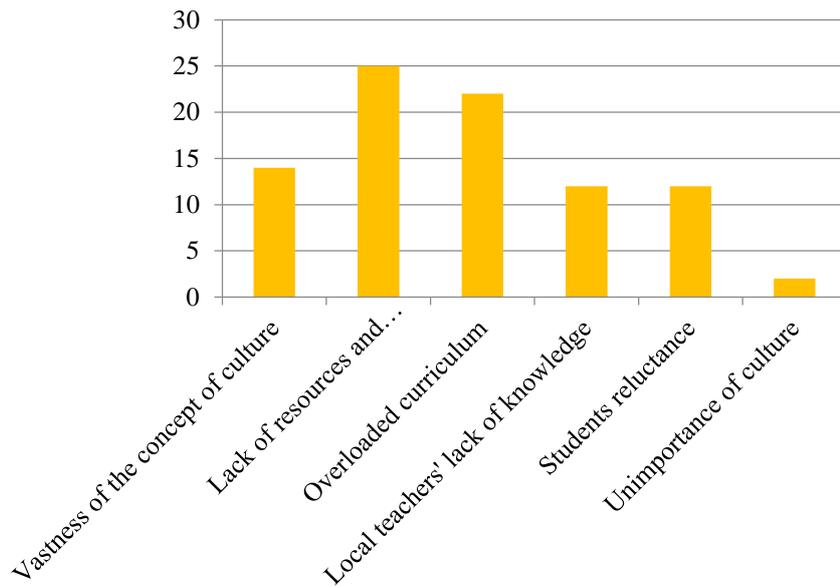
In addition to the place of culture in English curriculum, the study participants were required to give the three most important reasons for which culture was marginalized in the English curriculum in Tunisia from the following list:

- Vastness of the concept of culture
- Lack of resources and problems of procedure
- Overloaded curriculum
- Local teachers' lack of knowledge
- Students' reluctance
- Unimportance of culture

Moroccan teachers thought also that there have been "...patterns of behavior in an English-speaking social context that most Moroccans would prefer not to see presented as models to their young people" (p. 7). In another Islamic setting, namely Iran, Ghadiri, Tavakoli, and Ketabi (2015) proposed a culturally-adaptive foreign language syllabus that would introduce Iranian FL learners to other cultures without compromising local culture.

Table 2 informs also that 45% of Tunisian teachers thought that they lack the knowledge to teach 'English' culture. It shows also that 61% of Tunisian teachers thought that their students are reluctant to learn about 'English' culture. Teacher's lack of familiarity with the 'English' culture and students' reluctance to study it have been raised by L2 teachers, in several studies, as important reasons for the marginalization of culture in L2 education (See Karabinar & Guler, 2012; Sercu, 2005; Sercu, 2001; Byram & Risager, 1999, among others).

Figure 3, reveals that the most important reasons for overlooking culture, according to the study participants, are (1) lack of resources and problems of procedure, (2) overloaded curriculum, and (3) vastness of the concept of culture. In the fourth place, we find two reasons namely local teachers' lack of familiarity with target culture and students' reluctance to learn about culture. The fact that 'lack of resources and problem of procedure' and 'vastness of the concept of culture' represented the most important barriers to the consideration of culture in English education in Tunisia is an interesting finding. In fact, in spite of the extensive conceptual and operational definition of intercultural communicative competence during the last two decades, teachers still view culture as an elusive vague concept.



**Figure 3**

*Reasons for Marginalizing Culture in L2 Curriculum*

The reasons for the marginalization of culture in L2 curricula seem to cut across the cultural background of teachers. Overlooking culture cannot therefore be explained (only) by distance between L2 teachers' culture and culture associated with L2. In fact, teachers, regardless of their cultural background seem not to be favorably disposed towards the integration of culture in their L2 classes for reasons other than cultural closeness or distance. In this respect, Karabinar and Guler (2012) found that the most important reasons for ignoring culture, in EFL classes in Turkey, are lack of time, students' low level of English, and teachers own insufficient knowledge of the target culture. Sercu (2001) also found that the marginalization of culture is due to lack of time, curricular overload, lack of pupil interest in the foreign culture and lack of a basic pupil familiarity with the foreign culture. Likewise, Byrd et al. (2011) found that two of the most significant barriers to the consideration of culture by teachers are lack of time and lack of resources.

The explanation of the mismatch between the state of the art literature on ICC and on the intercultural approach to foreign language teaching, on the one hand, and teacher cognition on the place of culture in FL, on the other, should be looked for in teacher education programs. Such programs seem not to give the

required attention to the cultural dimension of L2 education as it is the case in Tunisia, for instance. It goes without saying that, unless L2 teachers possess the required knowledge, skill and (positive) attitude to teach culture, they will neither discern the added value of considering it nor be willing, predisposed or motivated to do so. It would be, therefore, unrealistic to expect from Tunisian teachers to enthusiastically engage in culture teaching when almost half of them think that they lack the knowledge, experience and training required to do so.

#### *4.2.3. Impact of Culture Teaching on Learners and Teacher Practices and Behaviors*

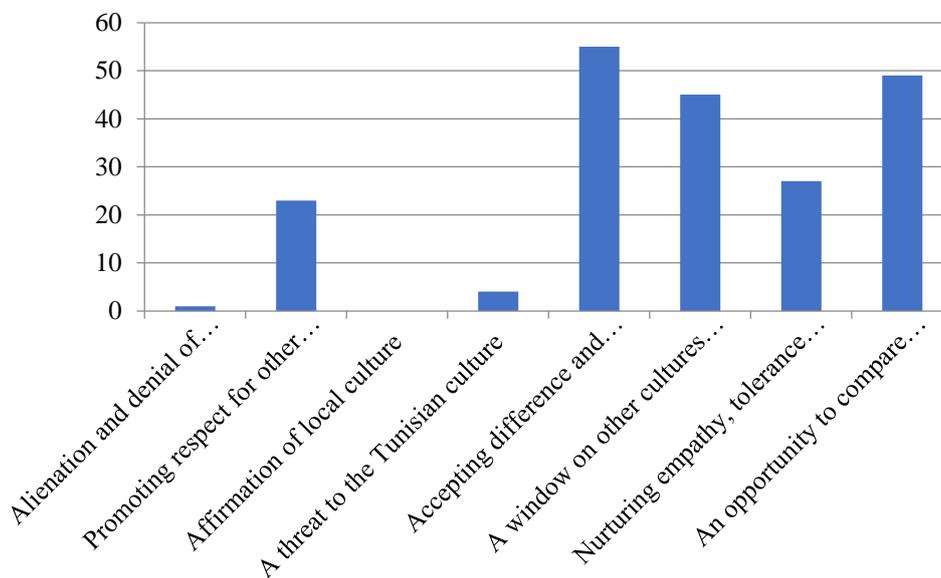
Tunisian teachers of English are divided on the possibility of teaching language without considering culture. Table 3 shows that although 37% of the participants believed that language could be taught without culture, more than 80% of them believed that L2 learners would never become communicatively competent without cultural knowledge. In addition, 65.8 % of Tunisian teachers thought that L2 learners would never assimilate meaning within context of use without such knowledge. Table 3 reveals also that almost 70% of the participants believed that without cultural knowledge, L2 learners would never get rid of stereotypes, fully grasp native speaker viewpoint or tolerate (cultural) difference.

**Table 3**  
*Teacher Beliefs on the Link between Culture and Language*

	SA	A	N	D	SD
<b>Impossibility of teaching a language without culture</b>	52.9	10	11.4	7.1	18.6
<b>Linguistic/communicative competence incomplete without culture</b>	70	11.4	1.4	5.7	11
<b>Impossibility of assimilating meaning without culture</b>	44.3	21.4	18.6	10	5.7
<b>Impossibility of getting rid of stereotypes without culture</b>	47.1	24.3	18.6	4.3	5.7
<b>Impossibility of becoming tolerant without culture</b>	41.4	31.4	11.4	4.3	11.4
<b>No grasping of NS viewpoint without culture</b>	42.4	22.7	10.6	12.1	12.1

Regarding the impact of culture teaching on L2 learners, Figure 4 informs that the most probable impacts, according to Tunisian teachers, are: (1) accepting difference and avoiding stereotypes, (2) opening a window on

other cultures and nations, and (3) comparing mother culture to target culture. The other two impacts are promoting respect for 'the other' as well as nurturing empathy, tolerance and openness.



**Figure 4**  
*Potential Impact of Culture Teaching on Students*

Figure 4 also reveals that Tunisian teachers did not perceive of 'English' culture as a threat to local culture that would lead to alienation and denial of Tunisian culture; nevertheless, they did not consider 'discovering foreign cultures' to be an opportunity to affirm local culture either. The openness of the majority of Tunisian teachers to the 'English' culture is not shared by Moroccan teachers who, as reported by Adaskou et al. (1990), deem the objectives of international understanding and countering stereotypes not to be relevant to 'the case of secondary education in Morocco'.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Understanding teacher cognition is necessary at all levels of teaching, pre-service teachers, new teachers and older teachers set in their practices, as argued by Borg (2011). Such necessity gains in importance when the subject of cognition is the controversial issue of the place of culture in L2 education, which remains an ideological and political issue in the first place. This study investigated Tunisian teacher cognition on the place of culture in English education. It showed that Tunisian teachers of English essentialize the 'English' culture to the British and to the American ones. Furthermore, it informed that

though Tunisian teachers think that curricular documents are not specific about the place of culture in English education, they feel that 'somewhat' there is a form of cultural content in English textbooks. Unexpectedly, the study revealed that Tunisian teachers think that 'values, beliefs, and attitudes' represent the most important cultural aspects to be considered in English classes. Besides, it uncovered that Tunisian teachers hold ambivalent attitudes towards culture. In fact, many of them wish to keep cultural content to a minimum while believing that culture is important to both communicative competence and intercultural competence. Finally, the study showed that Tunisian teachers account for the marginalization of culture in English curriculum by 'lack of resources and problems of procedure', 'overloaded curriculum', and 'vastness of the concept of culture'. These results are in line with those found by Karabinar & Guler, 2012; Byrd et al., 2011; Sercu, 2001; Sercu, 2005, among others. Two conclusions can be drawn from this study: (1) cultural distance is not the most determinant factor in shaping L2 teacher cognition and (2) L2 teachers belong to a co-culture that determines this cognition.

This study was meant to probe into the role of distance between the 'English' culture(s) and the teachers' culture in shaping Tunisian teachers' attitudes and beliefs on the cultural dimension of language teaching. It showed that cultural distance is not the determinant factor in cognition on the place of culture in L2. Moroccan and Tunisian teachers of English, as a case in point, who, in principle, share the same cultural background exhibited different attitudes and beliefs on such place. Tunisian teachers seem to be more open and less suspicious of teaching foreign cultures than Moroccan teachers. Such finding should, however, be taken with caution for two reasons. First, the notion of cultural distance has not been clearly defined in this study. Second, Adaskou et al.'s study has been conducted in the 1990s and Moroccan teacher cognition might have changed since then.

This study confirmed that L2 teachers seem to belong to a co-culture that determines their cognition on L2 teaching, in general, and the cultural dimension of L2 teaching, in particular. As a matter of fact, L2 teachers belonging to

cultures that are 'in principle' distant from one another seem to share the same views on the reasons for the marginalization of culture; such reasons pertain to overloaded curriculum, complexity of the concept of culture, problems of procedure, lack of resources, and students' reluctance to study about culture. Furthermore, L2 teachers, regardless of their cultural background, seem to believe that they lack the theoretical and pedagogical readiness to teach about foreign cultures. In spite of the extensive theorization of the intercultural approach to L2 and the concept of ICC, the remarks formulated in the years 2000 by Lange (2003) and Sercu et al. (2005) concerning L2 teachers' lack of knowledge of such approach and concept are still valid. Investigating the role of 'cultural distance' in shaping teacher and student cognition on the place of culture in foreign language teaching remains, however, an interesting avenue of research. Another interesting line of research is the impact of teacher education in the cultural dimension of foreign languages on teacher cognition and teaching practice. Finally, research should also inquire into whether teachers and students share the same views on the place of culture in L2 education or not.

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## Appendix A

### *The Questionnaire of Teacher Cognition on Culture*

#### Please give the following information:

Institution

Sex: Male..... Female.....

Teaching experience: .....Years

Please, answer in the provided space or tick (X) where appropriate

1. For you, what is(are) the nation(s)/community(ies) that represent(s) the 'English' culture most?

2. Are official documents clear about the place of culture in English Education?

Very clear..... Rather clear..... Not clear..... Don't know.....

3. Is there a cultural component in the English textbooks used in Tunisian schools?

YES..... Somewhat.... NO..... Don't know.....

4. Which of the following cultural elements should be included in the English program?

(Please select the three most important elements for you)

.....Factual information (geography, history, monuments...)

.....Values, beliefs and attitudes (religions, morals, taboos, beliefs, points of view...)

.....Behavioral conventions

.....Literary and art work

.....Social and political institutions

.....Customs and celebrations

.....Social and political issues

.....Icons and famous people

.....Popular art

.....Other (please specify)

5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (NB. SA = Strongly Agree; SD = Strongly Disagree)

It is impossible to teach a language without necessarily teaching some aspects of its culture

SA 1.... 2.... 3.... 4.... 5.... SD

Linguistic/Communicative competence remains incomplete without cultural knowledge

SA 1.... 2.... 3.... 4.... 5.... SD

6. If culture is not integrated in language teaching, the L2 learner:

Would not be able to fully assimilate meaning within contexts of use

SA 1.... 2.... 3.... 4.... 5.... SD

Would not be able to get rid of biased, stereotyping, simplistic views about other cultures

SA 1.... 2.... 3.... 4.... 5.... SD

Would not be aware of differences between cultures and tolerate them

SA 1.... 2.... 3.... 4.... 5.... SD

