Promoting Intercultural Pluralism: Linguistic Diversity in Saudi EFL Education

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Abstract

The rapidly changing social and educational landscape of Saudi Arabia has made commitment to intercultural pluralism in EFL classrooms a compelling necessity for peaceful co-existence with 'others' both within and outside the country. Understanding of the other cultures is facilitated by communication which is dependent on language which necessitates teachers' preparation in training learners in intercultural communication. This descriptive study aimed to assess the prevalent teachers' awareness of intercultural communication to foster a higher level of pluralism, particularly in the unique sociocultural landscape of Saudi Arabia. Data were collected from 29 EFL instructors at an academic institution via personal interviews. Thematic analysis with statistical analysis were carried out to answer the research questions. Findings showed that to fully master a language, one must also comprehend its cultural nuances; and the promotion of intercultural pluralism through EFL education in Saudi Arabia is a step in the right direction, as it ensures that students are not only linguistically proficient but also attuned to the contemporary geopolitics and culturally sensitive. This research lays the foundation for a larger discussion about the incorporation of cultural awareness in language education, positioning it as a foundation in the development of a more pluralistic and harmonious society.

Keywords: Linguistic diversity, promoting intercultural pluralism, Saudi education

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Intercultural communication competence involves the skill to understand and express meanings in a way that aligns with the meanings understood by the other person (Beamer, 1992). The consensus among scholars is that intercultural competence encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Due to the widespread interest in intercultural competence across various disciplines, there is a profusion of nuanced and diverse labels associated with this concept (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). The significance of intercultural communication cannot be overstated in contemporary globalized society. As more people interact across disparate cultural contexts, the importance of mutual understanding grows (Earley & Ang, 2003; Nunan, 1999, 2003). Intercultural communication is especially important in educational settings where students come to acquire skills that may prepare them for their roles as global citizens. The prevalent lingua franca, English, plays a crucial role in this (Nam et al., 2023).

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that second language acquisition is a socially mediated process. It explores the interaction between individual cognitive processes and cultural, historical, and institutional contexts, focusing on the social and cultural exposure of language learners and its impact on language acquisition. The research places these aspects at the core of the language learning process, highlighting the language classroom as a space where sociocultural dynamics shape learners' use of language to engage with a broader world. The initial sociocultural theory (SCT) timeline, as surveyed by Lantolf and Beckett (2009), highlighted the growth of research within the SCT framework in second language acquisition and language teaching. Two major research strands have emerged in the educational setting: one focusing on pedagogical practice and the other on assessment. The assessment strand, Dynamic Assessment, aligns with the SCT concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, while the pedagogical strand, Concept-based Language Instruction (C-BLI), is the focus of the present article. It is suggested that SCT researchers adopt C-BLI to avoid confusion with content-based instruction (Lantolf et al., 2021). According to Byram (2008), learning a language is not limited to acquiring its syntax and vocabulary; it is an immersive experience that is woven into the cultural tapestry from which the language originates. Therefore, for authentic language proficiency, educators must incorporate cultural aspects into their pedagogy (Byram, 2008). Educational pedagogies in the Middle East and, more broadly, the Asian continent are influenced by distinct historical, religious, and sociopolitical factors. In EFL classrooms in particular, where Western languages and Eastern cultures converge, the fusion can be both challenging and enlightening (Quyen, 2019). Alptekin (2002) notes that in many Asian EFL contexts, while linguistic competence is frequently attained, intercultural communicative competence is often neglected. Nonetheless, as the continent becomes a major participant in international affairs, it becomes essential to

incorporate intercultural elements into language classrooms.

1.2 Exploration of the Importance of the Issue

A nation profoundly rooted in its traditions and religious beliefs, Saudi Arabia has recently embarked on a journey of modernization and reform (Braibanti, 2019). Education, especially language education, is at the vanguard of this change. Literature is replete with critical studies which prove that the Saudi EFL curriculum leans excessively on rote learning and neglects the communicative and cultural aspects of education. The country's Vision 2030 initiative, however, has given massive impetus to alignment of educational outcomes with global standards, necessitating a renewed emphasis on intercultural communication (Alrabai, 2015; Al-Seghayer, 2014). Despite the acknowledged significance of incorporating cultural elements into EFL instruction, there is a significant implementation chasm in many classrooms (Mandarani & Munir, 2021). While linguistic competence is undoubtedly emphasized, the pedagogical frameworks for incorporating intercultural competence - comprehension, empathy, and the ability to navigate diverse cultural contexts - are not always obvious or prioritized (Hoff, 2019), nor is there a research corpus that presents a clear picture of this. This study fills the gap in the available literature by giving a picture of the changing EFL scenario in KSA with respect to intercultural pluralism in the EFL classrooms, fulfilling a larger aim of changing the prevailing social and educational paradigms, which in turn, will ensure national development and growth. The study findings are likely to add to the knowledge of many stakeholders including, but not limited to, educationists, policy makers, and budget allocators. Its findings will also benefit the cause of cultural inclusion in language education which is an important aspect of the socio-cultural-political synthesis given the multicultural population of the country. These also align with the aspirations of the national development plan document Vision 2030 which is also sensitive to the upcoming diverse, globally enabled human capital and the need for higher education graduates to perform well whether in terms of linguistic or cultural   attributes in an international peer group (Vision 2030, 2016). In the contemporary EFL classroom, these goals figure in a very limited (if any) capacity (Corbett, 2022). The repercussions of this deficit are extensive. Individually, Saudi graduates may face difficulties in global academic or professional contexts where cultural sensitivity and understanding are as essential as linguistic proficiency (Alsahafi & Shin, 2019). This disparity could hinder Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a major participant in global diplomacy, commerce, and academia, where a nuanced comprehension of intercultural dynamics is essential (Almohideb, 2019). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a cultural transformation within its borders. Increased exposure to global media, the influx of expatriates, and the return of Saudi students from international universities have created a cultural melting pot (Thompson, 2019). In such a scenario, promoting intercultural pluralism in educational institutions, beginning with EFL classrooms, becomes crucial for ensuring social cohesion, mutual respect, and harmony. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the sociocultural theory of language learning provide the theoretical foundations for this study on intercultural pluralism in Saudi EFL classrooms. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between language, culture, and education in Saudi Arabia's swiftly changing sociocultural environment.

1.3 Intercultural Competence in Communication (ICC)

As early as 1997, Byram ushered in the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This differed from the prevalent concept of traditional communicative competence, with its focus on the linguistic and functional elements of language acquisition. ICC, on the other hand, deeply analyzes the interaction of language and culture (Young & Sachdev, 2011). Even so, Byram (1997) hypothesized that foreign language communication was a factor of linguistic proficiency coupled with the ability to relate and interpret the target language culture to be able to place communication int eh right context, and the ability to evaluate and reflect critically on these cultural perspectives. Thus, cultural immersion becomes indispensable in this scenario which encourages the language learners to navigate, appreciate, and negotiate diverse cultural landscapes (Guo & Gu., 2016). In the Saudi language classroom, ICC takes language education beyond the confines of lexis and grammar to cultural sensitization and change in worldviews.

1.4 Sociocultural Theory of Second Language Acquisition

The theoretical framework of this study also rests majorly on the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978) which propagates that second language acquisition is a socially mediated process much like any other 'learning' that an individual goes through. This study focuses on the individual cognitive processes and their interaction with cultural, historical, and institutional contexts. In other words, it investigates the complex relationship between social and cultural exposure of language learners and their subsequent language acquisition, placing these aspects rather than acquisition of grammar and lexis at the center of the language learning process (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). This, consequently, qualifies the language classroom as a place where sociocultural dynamics are at play and learners use language to access a world beyond their immediate environment (Breen, 2014).

This theoretical framework also highlights the close and interlinked nature of the relationship between language and culture, an aspect that the conclusion of this study also emphasizes, as well as the immense potential of EFL education towards nurturing interculturalism in a society that is beset with much dynamism. This closeness has been highlighted by other studies, e.g., Kramsch and Hua (2016). Further, language is seen as a vehicle for communication and the preserver of a people's values, culture, norms, and histories (Bonvillain, 2019). Thus, the EFL education sector finds itself in a position from where it can deeply affect especially those countries whose culture is different from that of the native-English-speaker cultures (Awayed-Bishara, 2020). This limited focus, while effective in producing technically proficient speakers, frequently produced graduates unprepared to navigate the complexities of intercultural communication in the real world (De Jong & Harper, 2005). They were able to speak the language, but lacked cultural awareness, which could contribute to misunderstandings and misinterpretations in cross-cultural settings. In addition, as globalization continues to gain momentum, the

function of EFL instruction has shifted from merely facilitating communication to fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation among various cultures (Byram, 2008).

Jamali Kivi (2021) conducted a study on EFL learners to examine the impact of teacher-scaffolding and peer-scaffolding on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. They divided 60 learners into three groups and found that both experimental groups outperformed the control group. The study highlighted a significant difference between teacher-scaffolding and peer-scaffolding, with the peer-scaffolding group showing better performance. The research has implications for language teachers and syllabus designers regarding the use of different types of scaffolding. Furthermore, Chong et al. (2023) pointed out that the "context" has an impact on L2 teaching (L2) research. They mentioned theoretical perspectives such as Activity Theory, Complexity Theory, and Sociocultural Theory, which aim to understand the contextual forces affecting teaching and learning. Activity Theory emphasizes the influence of contextual variables like institutional rules, community, tools, and artifacts on a learner's motives. Complexity Theory, originating from physics, suggests that language learning is a volatile and emerging system shaped by constant interactions. Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of sociocultural contexts in learning and emphasizes concepts like scaffolding and the role of communication in language learning.

Socio-educational changes coupled with Saudi Arabia's diverse and rich cultural and historical heritage, make these theories more relevant (Pavan, 2016). Further, emphasis on English education and a futuristic, open, and globally integrated society add to this relevance. However, practical implementation of these theories is likely to face many obstacles (Kohn et al., 2018), for instance, the question of cultural preservation alongside interculturalism is one that is certain to confound many. Such fundamental questions naturally point towards ushering in a pedagogical approach that binds progress with cultural sensitivity (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, with its complex tapestry of traditions and cultural nuances, is one of those nations confronting the challenges and opportunities of intercultural communication in its EFL classrooms (Elyas, 2011). Historically, the principal goal of language education in many non-English-speaking countries, such as Saudi Arabia, was to assure linguistic proficiency (Barnawi, 2017). This emphasis remained primarily on the language mechanisms - its grammar, vocabulary, and syntax - rather than the nuances of cultural expressions and intercultural competencies (Al-Seghayer, 2014). In this theoretical background, ushering in interculturalism in language classrooms is a necessity if the students are to be prepared for the changing world, a situation that is not seen in its true enormity in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia, owing in part to pedagogical traditions and an extreme sense of insecurity towards the host culture (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

Rings and Allehyani (2020) investigated how specific personality traits can impact the success of ICC development and the ability of international undergraduates in Saudi Arabia to communicate effectively in an intercultural context. The findings show that Openness and Conscientiousness have a positive correlation with ICC, while Neuroticism has a negative correlation. No correlation was found between Extroversion and Agreeableness with the development of ICC. Obaid and Abdullah (2023) examined the challenges faced by Saudi English language learners in the UK and offered some solutions. The study emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness for second language learners situated in a host culture, both socially and academically. Khasawneh (2023) explored how culture influences communication in Saudi organizations through interviews with employees. The findings align with prior research, shedding light on cultural dynamics in Saudi Arabia. The study offers practical implications for organizations in Saudi Arabia and those engaging in cross-cultural communication. However, it acknowledges limitations and suggests further research for a deeper understanding. Due to the aforementioned factors, it is crucial to evaluate and comprehend the current state of intercultural communication in Saudi EFL classrooms. In addition to highlighting existing gaps, it is urgent to propose insights and strategies that align EFL instruction with the larger socio-educational objectives of Saudi Arabia.

1.5 Research Questions

1. To what extent do Saudi EFL teachers perceive the importance of integrating multiculturalism in the classroom?

2. How do EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia perceive the implementation of intercultural communication in the classroom?

3. How does awareness of intercultural communication among EFL instructors impact the promotion of linguistic pluralism in the Saudi educational context?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative (descriptive) approach to enable deep examination of the perceptions, experiences, and understanding of the teachers of intercultural communication in EFL classrooms. This study was held in the first semester of the Academic year 1445 AH, Saudi Arabia.

2.2 Instruments

Primarily, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, with most of the questions being open ended and framed in an informal, easy to understand manner, yet staying close to the fulcrum of the research questions of the study. Classroom observation strengthened the findings by helping the researcher to triangulate the results of the interviews and the on-ground practices.

2.3 Participants

29 EFL teachers at a typical Saudi university were the participants of this study. Participants with at least two years of teaching experience in the EFL domain and a strong interest in intercultural communication practices in their instruction were selected using

purposive sampling. The researcher had preserved the ethical considerations while conducting this study. Lecturers' consent to participate was obtained beforehand with disclosure of study objectives and freedom to withdraw at any stages of the same.

3. Results

Data Analysis

The collated information was transcribed and analyzed thematically. This required encoding the data to identify emerging patterns and themes related to intercultural communication and their implications for linguistic pluralism. NVivo, the software for qualitative data analysis, was used to facilitate categorization and thematic development. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and each of these lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. They were audio recorded with the participants' permission, and later transcribed for analysis. Observation sessions of classrooms were scheduled at the instructors' discretion and were non-intrusive, with the observer assuming the role of a non-participant. All data were anonymized, ensuring that individual participants could not be identified and thereby confidentiality was ensured. Only the research team had access to the interview recordings and transcriptions, which were securely stored. The word "Instructor" along with a letter is used to mention to the interviewee who participated in the study.

RQ1: To what extent do Saudi EFL teachers perceive the importance of integrating multiculturalism in the classroom?

The findings of the research demonstrate a very high agreement (M=4.7, SD=0.458) among EFL educators in Saudi Arabia about the fundamental importance of intercultural dialogue in the context of teaching the English language. According to the data presented in Table 1, the mean values obtained from the collected responses consistently demonstrated a high level of agreement. Specifically, the statement, "The evolving Saudi educational landscape requires an emphasis on intercultural communication", received the highest mean score of 4.9 out of 5, accompanied by a low standard deviation of 0.35. This indicates a uniform consensus among the respondents. Conversely, the statement that garnered the lowest mean score, which was still very high, was, "The exposure to diverse cultures in language classes equips students for an increasingly interconnected global society," with a mean of 4.5 and a somewhat elevated standard deviation of 0.53, suggesting a moderate degree of variability in the replies. The average ratings of the remaining assertions, which pertained to the incorporation of cultural subtleties in language instruction and the resulting improvements in communication outcomes with immigrant populations, were consistently in the upper quartile of the rating scale, indicating their significant role within the pedagogical beliefs of the educators.

Table 1. EFL instructors' perspectives on incorporating intercultural communication in the classroom

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Intercultural communication enhances language comprehension and application.	4.6	0.51
Integrating cultural contexts into language lessons helps in better communication with immigrants.	4.7	0.48
Language education should go beyond grammar and vocabulary to include cultural nuances.	4.8	0.42
Exposure to various cultures in language classes prepares students for a globalized world.	4.5	0.53
The evolving Saudi educational landscape requires an emphasis on intercultural communication.	4.9	0.35
Total	4.7	0.458

The quantitative results presented in this study provide further support for the notion that there is a significant transformation occurring in the EFL teaching paradigm in Saudi Arabia. This clearly indicates a new approach to EFL instruction with greater emphasis being on language as a means of cultural expression rather than a body of grammatical and lexical units. The participants reported positive attitudes to interculturalism in their classrooms, which they added, enhanced the language acquisition process and prepared the students for real life language use in the context of a globalized world with multicultural work peers.

RQ2: How do EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia perceive the implementation of intercultural communication in the classroom?

During the interviews, the teachers added that they were well aware that language and culture were an inseparable pair, ad given the new atmosphere of openness in the country, it is but natural to integrate interculturalism in the classroom processes to prepare the students for their rightful place in the new socio-economic dispensations. Moreover, they opined that such an approach was also aligned with the educational practices all over the world. Class observation by the researcher also pointed towards these practices being actualized, marking a change from the conventional language teaching practices which were centered around grammar and lexis to the exclusion of cultural awareness and empathy. The following excerpts from the interviews establish the level of the teachers' awareness:

> Instructor A said, *"I believe that what facilitates comprehension of a language goes beyond mere words and grammar…I endeavor to dot my teaching with multicultural anecdotes, contexts, and examples to give as much exposure as possible to my students as I understand that to be successful global citizens they need this kind of awareness."*

> In like manner, Instructor B conveyed, *"I think that intercultural communication vitally links language acquisition and real life language use. When my students gain the understanding of typical language samples and their nuances, they are in fact, getting enabled to interact with the cultures and peoples of the world ."*

> Instructor C expressed, *"Conventinally, our focus was on grammar and lexis, but my observation is that our students who are exposed to intercultural communication in the classrooms, are more confident and better*

equipped to deal with foreigners. This has prompted me to incorporate cultural contexts and situations in my lectures."

Instructor D said, "I have always held the belief that language is a representative of a culture…By familiarizing my students with different cultures and their communication nuances, I am preparing my students effectively for their place in the world which has necessitated cultural empathy for successful communication."

Finally, Instructor E said, *"In my experience over the decades, Saudi education scene has evolved greatly with the changing paradigm…Intercultural communication training is no longer a matter of choice in EFL, it is a necessity….The practice of including cultural content in our syllabi has ensured that we prepare our students not just for language but also cultural proficiency."*

Language instruction in Saudi Arabia has thus wholeheartedly accepted the need for cultural sensitivity alongside language proficiency. The new outlook is to see language as a dynamic entity that brings along its culture, both being essential for successful international exchange of any type. It also represents the changing socio scenario of KSA which is moving towards greater openness and internationalism, necessitating the ushering in of appropriate pedagogical approaches and outlooks.

RQ3: How does awareness of intercultural communication among EFL instructors impact the promotion of linguistic pluralism in the Saudi educational context?

In the educational paradigm of KSA, intercultural communication awareness among EFL teachers has a substantial influence on the promotion of linguistic plurality within the educational environment in Saudi Arabia with M=, 4.74, and SD= 0.514. Language plurality is encouraged by an inclusive educational paradigm, which helps language learners not only attain language proficiency but also to appreciate the nuances of the language. These beliefs are underscored by the narratives of the EFL participants and that language has a role greater than mere communication as a bridge between different cultures. Once students comprehend this intercultural aspect, they become empowered for effective communication in this globalized world.

Table 2 summarizes the importance that the EFL teachers place on intercultural awareness for language proficiency of their students. A tendency for higher average scores on the Likert Scale for all the statements indicates consensus amongst the EFL teachers for inclusion of culture in language education. A total mean score of 4.7 indicates the preparedness and motivation for the teachers for linguistic pluralism in their language classrooms. This is supported by low standard deviation.

Table 2. Impact of intercultural communication awareness on linguistic pluralism

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Integration of cultural lessons alongside language instruction enhances student engagement.	4.6	0.55
Incorporating cultural awareness into lessons deepens students' appreciation for the English language and its global nuances.	4.7	0.50
Grasping the culture of the English-speaking population is crucial for mastering the language.	4.8	0.52
Emphasizing intercultural communication prepares students for effective communication with diverse backgrounds.	4.9	0.51
Incorporating intercultural elements into lessons shifts classroom dynamics positively, promoting linguistic diversity.	4.7	0.49
Total	4.74	0.514

High mean scores indicate that the teachers in this study are convinced of the efficacy of including multicultural components in their teaching practices supported by their observation of higher engagement and achievement of their students in the EFL class. The EFL teachers' understanding of the intercultural nuances is of utmost importance to promote language pluralism, especially so in the Saudi context where culture preservation is held dear. These developments showcase the pedagogical approach of the EFL teachers who appreciate the importance of orienting their practices towards interculturalism.

Instructor A: *"When I integrate culture into my teaching, I find greater engagement amongst my students as they are not only learning English, but also, understanding many worldviews…this enhances their proficiency as they also understand the cultural nuances hidden in the language."*

Instructor B: "*Earlier, my focus was only on grammar, lexis, and pronunciation…Now I see language as a link between cultures…My new approach has developed greater empathy in my students for other languages and cultures in addition to enhancing their English proficiency."*

Instructor C: *"I believe that to acquire a language, it is essential to understand the target culture…in this paradigm, intercultural communication is central. Inclusion of cultural content in my EFL classes has led to greater participation and interest in my students, they have become very inquisitive and active in the learning process."*

Instructor D: *"By exposing our EFL learners to other cultures, we are certainly preparing our students for a globalized world…This will prepare them to not only attain English proficiency but also, to interact with*

people from different cultures and parts of the world. This approach brings in language pluralism and multiculturality amongst our students."

Instructor E: *"I was not so sure to replace the conventional approach in the beginning, but I noticed a pronounced change in my learners' development after I included intercultural components in my subject matter...Students are now more keen on collaborating with others, sharing their experiences, and learning about the larger world. This approach highlights the plurality of the English speaking world and their prosperity, thus encouraging language pluralism."*

4. Discussion

This study's findings showcase the very high agreement of Saudi EFL teachers on the importance of integrating multicularalism in the classroom (cf Bin-Hady et al., 2024). The findings shed light on the transformative potential of integrating intercultural communication into EFL instruction, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia (Byram, 1997; Cook, 2001). The Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives and practices are in line with earlier and ongoing research which has established that in a globalized world, it is of utmost importance to integrate language education with cultural education. In his pathbreaking work on intercultural communicative competence, Byram (1997) argued that language goes beyond a set of indicators and norms; it is a means of communication and of transmission of cultural elements. Instructor A asserted that only a culture inclusive approach to language instruction can fosters greater student engagement and comprehension. Conventional Saudi classrooms emphasized linguistic accuracy in isolation of the cultural component (Cook, 2001). This agrees with what Bayram (1997) noted: Language acquisition expands beyond language proficiency and it is inclusive of international communicative competence alongside cultural awareness. Alptekin (2002) also indicated that English has surpassed its cultural limitations and has developed as an international language, functioning as a common language of communication. That is why it is important for teachers to identify and emphasize many cultural aspects that characterize English, and not be limited to projecting it as a language of the west. This has been recognized as a limiting approach by Instructor B. This echoes Kumaravadivelu (2008) promotes a post-method pedagogy, urging educators to go beyond fixed teaching methods and create adaptable curricula considering learners' sociocultural backgrounds. Instructor C aligns with Kramsch (1993), emphasizing the deep connection of language and culture, advocating for a culturally immersive EFL environment that develops linguistic skills and a global mindset. Instructor D's observations support this perspective, emphasizing the importance of Saudi students acquiring linguistic and intercultural skills for navigating the interconnected global landscape effectively. The observations of Instructor D support the idea that students should be equipped with these skills to navigate a globally interconnected landscape effectively. Additionally, the hesitation of Instructor E to integrate intercultural components into the curriculum is seen as a reflection of the resistance to pedagogical innovations commonly observed in educational systems worldwide. Scholars such as Bax (2003) and Canagarajah (2007) further strengthen the argument that language education must adapt to evolving sociocultural and geopolitical realities to remain relevant. In the specific context of Saudi Arabia, where educational reforms and Vision 2030 are promoting cultural exchange and diversifying the economy, there is a growing motivation to align language instruction with intercultural education. The study affirms the significance of intercultural communication in enhancing EFL instruction. It stresses the necessity for a shift in pedagogy from a narrow focus on linguistic structures to a more comprehensive approach that values the interplay between language and culture. The findings highlight the global trend of diminishing borders and the increasing importance of bridging cultural gaps, and emphasize the role of EFL educators, particularly in Saudi Arabia, in leading efforts to facilitate this cultural exchange and understanding.

A changing world has changed the learning needs of the students, most acutely evident in the EFL classroom. This has necessitated a new approach in pedagogy and attitudes to language teaching. Results of this study show that Saudi EFL instructors at a typical university highly value the role of cultural awareness and education in language education. Also, that language is more than a set of lexical units arranged grammatically, it plays a bigger role especially when the world is shrinking at an alarming pace. Knowledge of the cultural nuances coupled with language proficiency is the need of the hour, a sentiment that is very strongly voiced by the Saudi EFL instructors. Moreover, language is a bridge between cultures and multicultural societies as seen in KSA demand cultural proficiency as much as language ability. The educational philosophy in KSA is also evolving to accommodate the dynamic needs of the student community as much as the employers'. These developments are in line with Saudi Vision 2030 and broader global trends, which appreciate the indisputable connection between language and culture. In the new global paradigm, linguistic and cultural diversity are indispensable assets. These findings underscore the need for ongoing innovation in EFL pedagogy. With opening of the Saudi economy, the educational system must emphasize the symbiotic relationship between language and culture. Thus, this study provides a poignant reflection on the significance of holistic language instruction and serves as a guidepost for similar educational landscapes that seek to cultivate global citizens with both linguistic and cultural proficiency. Byram (2008), Kramsch (2013), and Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) have earlier emphasized the place of intercultural communication in the language classroom. Findings of the current study align with these studies too as the participants' perspectives echo the larger discourse on the role of cultural awareness in the language classroom. The Saudi teachers appear committed to preparing their students for a globalized world. This is a desirable change as reiterated by Kramsch's (2013) that the onus to train the language learners for cultural communication lies on the teachers whose role has expanded to include this aspect in education. The emphasis now being placed on culture highlights the place of context in language education (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

In the Saudi EFL context, there is a need to train EFL teachers in the importance of intercultural communication given its place in the global paradigm. In these programs, the theoretical and practical aspects of ICC need to be tackled so that EFL teachers are enabled to

include cultural factors in their classrooms with minimal challenges. In addition to this, the curriculum should be so developed that it encompasses different global perspectives and resources that align with these objectives should be developed and made available to the teachers. Illustrative resources such as films, literature, etc. can encourage cultural awareness. Collaboration with international educational institutions should be established for investment and guest lectures to expose students to different cultures vis communication. In addition, periodic assessment and evaluation of pedagogical practices is essential to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of these changes to the rapidly transforming world. Future research can be encouraged to evaluate the extent of intercultural communication in Saudi EFL classrooms, as well as its effects on language proficiency and cultural sensitivity. Comparative studies should also be conducted to gauge preparedness of the Saudi EFL learners in the conventional versus interculturally communicative classrooms. Students' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences in the Saudi EFL classrooms should also be studied to understand the efficacy of the new approach. A parallel strategy should be used to gauge the progress on the online learning platforms. Research initiatives encompassing the dynamic educational sector may also contribute to a better understanding of the effects of intercultural communication training on the occupational and individual success of the Saudi youth.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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