

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) TEACHERS' PREFERENCES FOR INTERCULTURAL ELEMENTS IN TEACHING MATERIALS

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Abstract

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is defined to be at the heart of foreign language education nowadays due to the sensitivity of English Language Teaching (ELT) world to the term 'culture'. EFL teachers should gain and teach ICC. Accordingly, this paper aims to understand how much preference EFL teachers express for intercultural elements in the teaching materials. A qualitative research was designed via semi-structured interview with international EFL teachers. The findings reveal EFL teachers express less preference to intercultural elements in their materials. Specific emphasis on ICC is to be embedded to EFL teacher training programmes so that teachers can perform in the interculturalisation process more effectively.

Key Words; *intercultural communicative competence, EFL teachers, culture, language teaching*

YABANCI DİL OLARAK İNGİLİZ DİLİ ÖĞRETMENLERİNİN ÖĞRETİM MALZEMELERİNDE YER ALAN KÜLTÜRLERARASI UNSURLARA İLİŞKİN TERCİHLERİ

Özet

Kültürlerarası iletişimsel yeterlik yabancı dil eğitiminde önemli bir yere sahiptir. Özellikle modern İngilizce öğretimi anlayışının 'kültür' konusundaki duyarlılığından dolayı, yabancı dil öğretmenlerinden kültürlerarası iletişimsel yeterliğe sahip olmaları ve bunu öğretmeleri beklenmektedir. Bu çalışma İngilizce'nin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği ülkelerdeki İngilizce öğretmenlerinin kendi sınıflarında kullandıkları yabancı dil öğretim materyallerinde kültürlerarası öğeleri ne kadar tercih ettiklerini bulmayı amaçlar. Bu öğretmenlere yarı yapılandırılmış bir görüşme uygulanarak, nicel bir çalışma yapılmıştır. Sonuçlar bu öğretmenlerin kültürlerarası öğelerden oluşan yabancı dil öğretim materyallerini seçme farkındalıklarının az gelişmiş olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu öğretmenlerin kültürlerarası

süreçte daha etkin rol oynamalarını sağlayabilmek için öğretmen eğitim yada hizmet içi eğitim programlarında kültürlerarası iletişimsel yeterliğinin ve kültürlerarası öğelerin kullanımının önemi ayrıca belirtilmelidir.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** kültürlerarası iletişimsel yeterlik, kültür, dil öğretimi, İngilizce öğretmenleri*

1. Introduction

There has been a recent tendency in teaching English from an intercultural perspective (Sercu, 2006 & Sifakis, 2003 & Young and Sachdev, 2011). Thus, teachers are now required to teach intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in their EFL classes and they must be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required to fulfill this task appropriately. In other words, they should provide their learners with the satisfactory cultural background so that those learners can communicate and negotiate their ideas in this global village. Young and Sachdev (2011) claim that interculturality is considered a dynamic process in which people focus on both the cultures familiar with them and the cultures that are not known to them so much. Teachers are of great importance at this point as their views and preferences in classes affect the way they set new teaching goals and lead learners to be intercultural communicatively competent. Research into these issues has been conducted recently. Sercu (2006), Young and Sachdev (2011), Sowden (2005) and Sifakis (2003) have focused on teachers' point of views on intercultural competence and applications in teaching a foreign language in classes. Although the scopes of these studies are varied, none of them has gathered broader scope in quantity than this study.

Teachers' beliefs, views and applications decide on the successful intercultural communication of students in EFL classes (Sowden, 2005). Although there are a lot of studies conducted to learn the English language teachers' intercultural preferences on the use of English language variety such as British / American / Australian English, not enough attention is paid to EFL teachers from different EFL countries. Therefore, this study will function as an eye-opener in terms of gathering EFL teachers' preferences on the use of intercultural ELT materials.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. English as an International and Intercultural Language

English in the world today functions as a global language due to the amount of people who is acquiring it as an additional language for various purposes in different learning contexts. Economic, political, cultural, demographic, social, technological and educational developments are the reasons why English as an international language has been acquired so much in the world (Graddol, 2006). Related to the aforementioned reasons, Kachru (1986) categorizes English language learning contexts into three groups; inner, outer and expanding circles. First of all, inner circle includes

countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia where English is used as the primary language of the country. Cases like Turks in Germany, Poles in Ireland, and Indians in Great Britain are examples of immigration to wealthy countries. Language shift, language in-education policy and language maintenance are all issues related to inner circle context (McKay & Rubdy, 2009). In the second circle, English plays a second language role in a multilingual country like India, Singapore. Language change, linguistic standards and code-switching are especially important to outer circle contexts. Recently, English has been used as a means of communication for economic and practical motivations in the daily life. As a third aspect, in the expanding circles learning and teaching English are affected by government policies. English is regarded and studied as a foreign language rather than as an official language in countries like Japan, Turkey, China, Korea. McKay and Rubdy (2009) suggest that professionals of second or foreign language should provide opportunity to become multilingual in a multilingual and multicultural world so that learners can make use of the social and economic benefits of the global culture.

In international use of English, the focus is on the non-native speaker (NNS) while in intercultural use, the focus is on culture, communication and communicative situations of people as well as their beliefs about and their attitudes towards English. With regard to this fact, the shift has been changing from international language to intercultural one in English language teaching. Thus, it is significant to find out teachers' focus on pronunciation, materials, teaching and using intercultural elements in EFL classes.

2.2. Culture and ELT

Although culture was thought to be a part of social, artistic and intellectual traditions in a specific national group, this term has broadened recently. Bates and Plog (1990) claim that culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, customs and behaviors which members of society use to communicate in their world with each other, and which are transmitted from generation to generation via learning and experiences (as cited in Wang, 2007). Brown (2010) thinks that culture is considered a part of interaction between language and thought. Recently, as there have been fresh attempts to integrate culture into ELT and the curriculum, the social functions of a language such as how a language can be used to negotiate in social groups, and appropriate ways to handle with culture are emphasized and suggested (Corbett, 2003). Holliday (1994) puts forward the idea that teachers must consider all cultures in classes and work with them instead of imposing their own cultures to students. Accordingly, they should be careful with their students' cultures and their environments as well as their own cultures and backgrounds since teachers' underlying beliefs, assumptions and knowledge determine students' thought patterns in classrooms. Byram (1997) states that learning a foreign language with its cultural implications provides students with a critical and fresh perspective. In line with this process, students become interculturally and communicatively competent. Moreover, Kramsh (2003) states that culture is at the heart

of language if it is to be considered a social practice. Instead of assimilating students in classes; however, it is important to modify cultures by labeling their own identity on them according to their needs and interests (Sowden, 2007).

2.3. Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Sercu (2006) emphasizes that intercultural competence is related to ‘communicative competence’; thus, it has sociolinguistic, linguistic and discourse components.

To start with intercultural competence, it is a combination of components such as knowledge, skills and attitudes complemented by the values one has on account of his belonging to a group of society and its values which are part of one’s belonging to a given society. These attitudes consist of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own (Sercu, 2006).

According to Byram (1997), intercultural competence is described by five *savoirs*. The first *savoir* emphasizes the necessity of target culture specific and intercultural knowledge to be able to comprehend a wide variety of foreign cultures.

The second one, *Savoir-etre*, attaches importance to being suspicious, open and ready towards other cultures as well as one’s own culture. As for *savoir-comprendre*, it is described as the ability to understand, to explain and to transform an information from his own culture to another culture. *Savoir-apprendre* means discovering and negotiating new cultural knowledge within certain time limited by real life communication and negotiation. Lastly, *savoirs’ engager*, it is to be able to critically and politically think, evaluate and comment from the perspectives of one’s own culture and other cultures (Hamiloglu & Mendi, 2010). Teachers should be aware of and know these skills, knowledge and attitudes at a sufficient level in order to achieve intercultural communicative competence in them and in their students despite the fact that it may be impossible for teachers to know about each culture or have all the knowledge students may need. At this point, it is important for EFL teachers to be able to interpret and explain situations critically and politically, and to negotiate them from cultural and intercultural views.

2.4. Teachers’ Role and Their Preferences of Intercultural Materials in EFL Classes

The role of the teacher is to broaden the knowledge of a target culture or country, or of different cultures within one’s own country (Bayyurt, 2007). For Corbett (2003), the teacher provides materials and demonstrate how to use them to increase intercultural competence. It can be implied that teachers should first be aware of the intercultural elements in their preferences of teaching materials. It is revealed that there are some similarities as well as some striking differences in teachers’ perceptions across countries (Baumgart & Hales, 2000; Sercu, 2002). The differences imply a lack of intercultural understanding and the findings reveal that there is a need for increasing exchange programs and other opportunities for mutual relations that fos-

ter genuine dialogue, partnership and intercultural understanding between countries (Baumgart & Halse, 2000). As teachers are required to help learners acquire ICC, they need to be equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes and alter their views about the objectives of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) (Sercu, 2006). Moreover, cultural information is required to be involved in teaching materials. There has been considerable research investigating teachers' intercultural understanding, such as to be familiar with the foreign cultures, to make their students tolerant of other cultures, accepting teaching intercultural competence as an objective of foreign language teaching. Some studies have investigated to what extent established models of language teacher education acknowledge and address the needs of integration of the intercultural dimension into language teaching and learning, and how intercultural awareness of future teachers can be increased.

The findings suggested that more teacher training programs will help to gain new insights of the future teachers and to help build more professionalism in the educational system by facilitating mutual understanding and respect for other individuals and cultures (Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Garrido & Alvarez, 2006; Siberry & Kearns, 2005).

To put it in a nutshell, this study aims to take a picture of EFL teachers' views and preferences on the teaching materials with respect to intercultural elements. As little research has been carried out on this topic, it is thought to be useful and eye opener for further studies to be conducted in Turkey in order to see the similarities and differences between EFL teachers in Turkey and those in other EFL countries. Consequently, it can be questioned whether EFL teachers' preferences play a crucial role in developing foreign language learners' intercultural competence or not.

2.5. Research Questions

This study aims to find out teachers' preferences of intercultural elements in varied teaching materials. Intercultural elements were determined in terms of understanding their awareness of the term 'intercultural elements'. Then, two research questions were formed as below;

1. What kind of materials do they prefer in their classes to achieve intercultural communication?
2. How do they perceive the way they use culture in foreign language (FL) classes?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The scope of this study composes of 19 EFL teachers from 19 different EFL countries. They all work as English language teachers in either public or private schools for all levels of students. Their classes consist of students from primary to university education levels.

Table 1. The background information of the participants (N= 14 F, N= 5 M)

Gender	Age	Status	Native tongue	Teaching experience	
1 females	4 (40, 40, 64, 58, 30, 37, 46, 50, 31, 38, 46, 50)	7 MA, 3 BA, 2 PhD	Portuguese, Dzongkha, Greek, Albanian, Hungarian, Spanish, Spanish, Visayan, Bahasa Indonesia, Myanmar, Spanish	8 = 10 - 16 years, 2 = 10 – 15 years, 1 = 5- 10 years, 1 = 0 – 5 years	2 private, 8 state, 2 both
5 males	(36, 38, 27, 35, 33)	4 BA, 1 PhD	Spanish, Pashto, French, Arabic, Kinvarwanda	2 = 6- 10 years, 2 = 11- 15 years, 1 = 0 -5 years,	1 private, 4 state

3.2. Limitations of the Study

There are 12 items in the interview consisting of various questions such as open ended and multiple-choice questions. There are 19 participants in this study, and each of them is from different EFL countries like Bukina Faso, Cape Verde, Mexico, Romania, Lebanon, Equator, Greece. Thus, results cannot be generalized to the population in each country but they are commented based on the EFL countries.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

As a data collection instrument, an online interview was conducted to gain more insights into their understanding and preferences of intercultural competence in teaching materials. The interview consists of two parts; open-ended and multiple-choice items. The online interview for open-ended questions was done on the internet via messenger live. Participants were chosen based on convenience sampling method to prevent the inconvenient situations that might have arisen due to the time zone difference since they are far away from the researcher. Each of the participants was interviewed for nearly an hour, which lasted for half and a week in total. When their online interview was over, they were sent multiple-choice items via e-mail. They responded within a day or so. The results were analyzed via frequency, percentage and content analysis. The common points in their answers were counted and those parts were commented on. The interview consists of 4 main parts. The first part A is prepared to know their background information related to their status, age, gender and teaching

experience. The second part B includes questions related to their teaching context so as to know their students and their teaching context better. The third part C is about their criteria for choosing teaching materials. The last part is related to their perceptions and practices in their classes, which is based on 5 likert type questionnaire.

3.4. Findings

The interpretation of the data is presented in this part.

Q. 1. What type of materials do you use in your FL classes?

Table 2. The number of teachers who prefers these materials

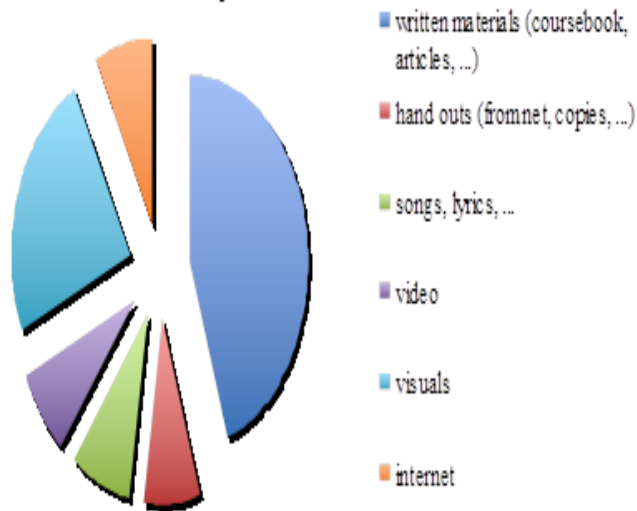


Figure 1. The number of the teachers who prefers these materials

17 of them prefer to use written materials such as course books, workbooks, articles, columns from newspaper. 3 of them prefer to use the hand-outs from the net, or photocopiable materials. 3 of them use songs or music in their classes. 3 of them use video in their classes. 9 of them prefer to use visuals during the courses. 3 of them prefer to use the internet in their classes.

2nd question designed to learn the criteria they have in order to choose intercultural teaching materials.

Q. 2. What criteria do you follow to choose intercultural teaching materials?

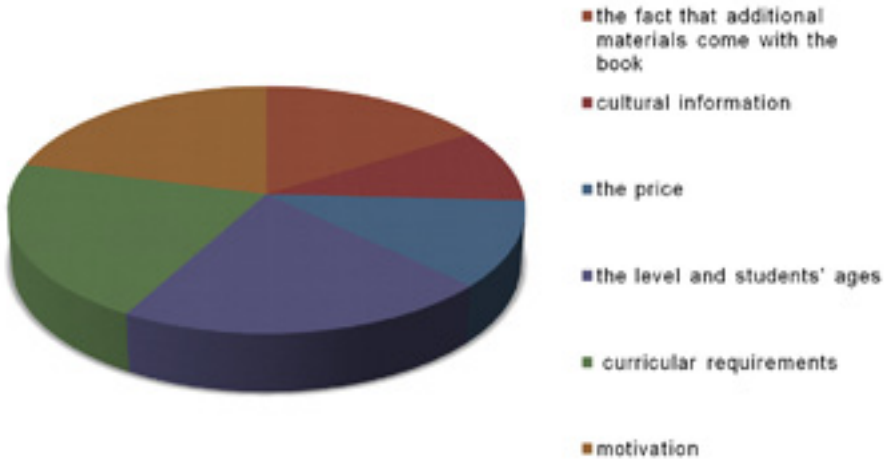


Figure 2. The criteria they follow to choose a material

6 of them attach importance to the criteria ‘cultural information’ in the coursebooks. 10 of them consider the fact that additional materials come with the coursebooks. 13 of them pay attention to the criteria ‘motivation’ in coursebooks in terms of taking learners’ interests. 13 of them question whether they meet the curriculum requirements. 13 of them question the level of the coursebook whether they are suitable for learners’ ages. 7 of them pay attention to the price of coursebooks. 6 of them attach importance to the cultural information the book provides.

Question 3, on the other hand, investigates teachers’ expectations of cultural elements in their classes.

Q. 3. Do cultural elements in the coursebooks you use in your classes meet your expectations?

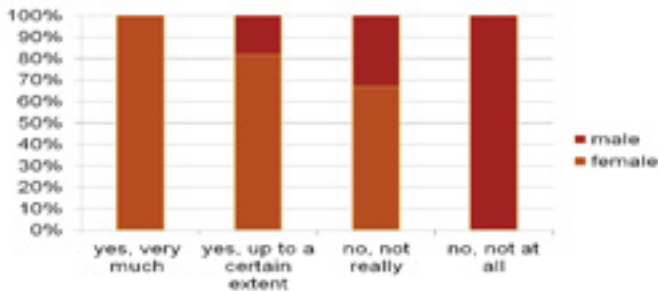


Figure 3. Cultural elements & teachers' expectations

2 of the females completely think that their coursebooks include cultural elements sufficiently. 9 of the females agree to some extent that their coursebook include cultural elements sufficiently while 2 of the males think so.

2 of the females think that cultural contents of the coursebook do not meet their expectations while 1 of the males think they do. Only one male claims that cultural contents of the coursebook do not meet his expectations.

Question 4 investigates their preferences of cultural elements in choosing the coursebooks in FL classes.

Q. 4. What cultural elements do you prefer while choosing coursebooks in FL classes?

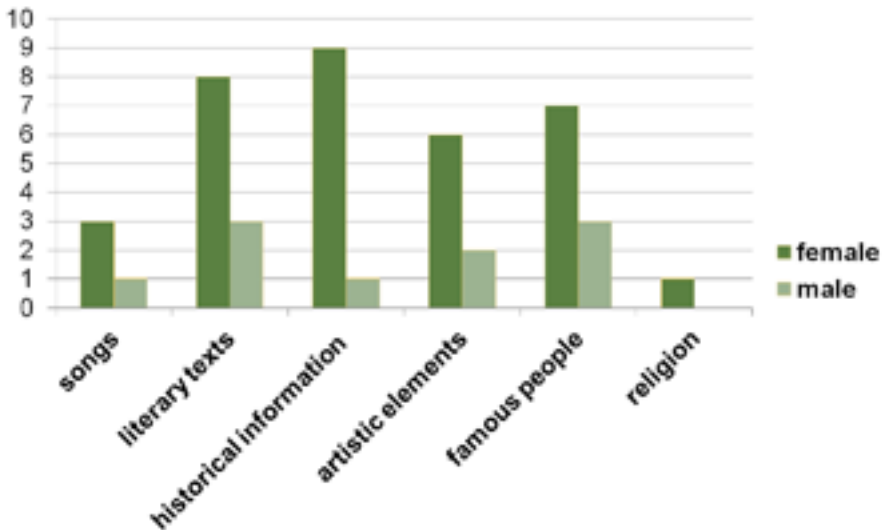


Figure 4. Cultural elements in choosing the coursebooks

While 3 of the females use songs and audio materials in FL classes, only 1 of the males prefers them. 8 of the females and 3 of the males use literary texts.

9 of the females prefer to use historical information in their materials while only 1 of the males prefers to use it. 2 of the males and 6 of the females use artistic elements such as actors, movies, soap operas. 7 of the females and 3 of the males pay attention to famous people from around the world in their coursebooks. Only 1 female claimed that she took the religious festivals and traditions into consideration in a coursebook.

The 5th question focuses on the variety of English they use in FL classes.

Q.5. What varieties of English do you use in your FL classes?

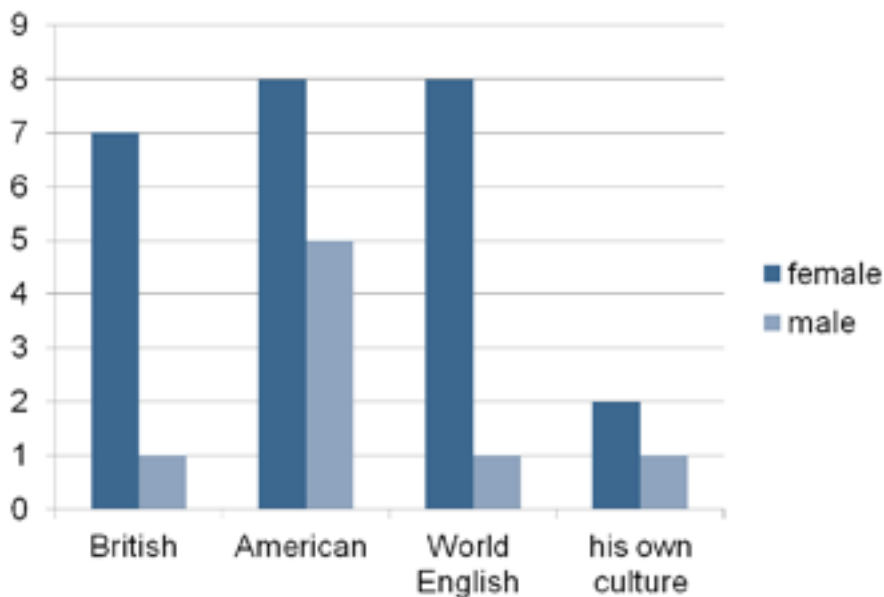


Figure 5. British / American Culture specific / intercultural elements

7 of the females prefer to use British culture in their classes while only 1 male prefers it. 8 of the females and 5 males use Am. Culture in their materials. 8 females and 1 males claim that they use intercultural elements in their materials. While 2 females use their own cultural elements in their coursebooks, 1 male uses them.

One English teacher puts forward her thoughts about world Englishes as;

I am a fan of American issues and really attached to that culture and also enjoy sharing information about this culture and the impact it has in our community. Also, due to the big Diaspora existent in the USA, a through exploration is done to understand the connection between these 2 countries (Cape Verde & USA). (Cape Verde)

Another English teacher points at American English as a response to intercultural English question;

The American English is simpler and within the reach of my students. (Lebanon)

Bolivian English teacher comments on his preferences of intercultural approach on his classes;

There is always something interesting in every culture: therefore, any! (Bolivia)

An English teacher from Bhutan states that;

Teaching becomes lively. Students learn to communicate better, understand other culture and can relate easily. It helps to become better individuals. The sense of acceptance is developed, and it aims towards bringing global harmony.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study highlight issues important to teacher education, methodology and ELT world. First of all, results related to the first part of the questionnaire are provided. It is a fact that 17 of them prefer to use mainly written materials in their classes instead of news, columns, authentic materials from other countries. The fact that 9 of them use visuals may result from the lack of opportunities in classroom environment or lack of the internet resources as some of the participants are from less developed countries. 4 groups of 3 teachers use hand-outs, songs, video and internet. This number is also rather low as we are living in a technological world. They do not mention any art and craft activities involving intercultural or cultural elements or messages within them. Results of the second part in the questionnaire reveal that their criteria consist of 6 factors. The most important ones to them are how much a coursebook motivates learners, whether those coursebooks meet the requirements of the curriculum, and whether their levels are appropriate for students and their ages. Next, they pay attention to the fact that whether the additional materials are provided with the coursebook or not. Price and cultural information criteria are not questioned at first sight although the latter is very important for Byram (1997), Bayyurt (2006) and Sercu (2002). This shows us that those teachers from different parts of the world do not pay enough attention to cultural contents of the coursebooks. They may not need the necessity to do this as most of them have already admired American culture. To sum up, it is clear that cultural information is not considered among the motivational factors. Only 2 females are satisfied completely with the cultural materials in terms of meeting their expectations. Although cultural information is the least important factor in choosing a material, it is taken into consideration while using it. 9 of the females claim that cultural elements in the materials meet their expectations to some extent, while 2 of the males claim so. 2 females and 1 male think that the cultural elements in their materials are not satisfactory enough, but 1 male is not glad with his materials about it. The results may be due to the fact that those teachers are not informed or trained enough to gain deeper insights into intercultural communication.

If they choose their materials according to cultural information at first sight, then they may come to more sound conclusions. When it comes to coursebook selection, females look for historical information and literary texts firstly. Furthermore, artistic elements like actors, soap operas, and famous people from all around the world are the second important criteria for them to be in coursebooks. 3 females and 1 male look for songs in coursebooks, which is surprising, whereas songs are considered to carry

a motivating role for language learners. Popular songs are preferred in most coursebooks nowadays as they are parts of a specific culture. Also, traditions and religious festivals of each culture or country are specific to it in its own ways. On the contrary, only 1 female considers this reality worthwhile. In terms of specific cultures, 7 females use British culture in their coursebooks, materials and classes while 1 male uses them.

Mostly, females and males prefer American culture as they think that it is closer to their countries geographically so it is easy to bring materials from the USA. Also, they think that American English is simpler to pronounce than British English. 8 females and 1 male employ intercultural perspectives and mix all cultures that are relevant to their topics and their students. This may result from the fact that they believe in the fact that learners should be exposed to the culture of English speaking countries by combining them with world cultures in classes. This belief shows that intercultural perspectives are vital for most of them. However, only 1 male and 2 females claim that they use their own culture in their FL classes. They explain that their students are not familiar with other cultures. In a way or so, they should be introduced with the intercultural and target culture specific elements in FL classes.

5. Conclusion and Implications For Further Research

Although 4 teachers state that the important thing is the cultures of English speaking countries rather than those of only the USA or the UK, it seems that teachers worldwide need to be informed and raised their interest and curiosity in intercultural elements. In parallel with the results of Dooly & Villanueva (2006); Garrido & Alvarez (2006); Siberry & Kearns (2005); Sercu (2006); Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs should provide and enrich trainees and teachers with intercultural variations in language teaching methodology and with education from intercultural perspective as there are some who think that their own cultures are important to their students. Hence, before all, those teachers' perceptions on the concepts of intercultural elements need to be questioned to comprehend what they understand from and how they consider those elements. Students in FL classes must be introduced with cultural elements more often than usual as intercultural communication broadens one's perspective, tolerance, insights, positive behaviors and mutual understanding. The coursebooks and materials they are using may be analyzed in order to reach more sound conclusions as for the impressions of them on students. The pronunciation of teachers and their students, also, may be checked whether they belong to any specific culture i.e. British, American English or not. Even, the results may be compared with those of Turkish ELT teachers so that we can understand the differences between us and them. What's more, it can be searched how and to what extent the choice and the preferences of language teachers on teaching materials with intercultural elements affect their EFL learners in language learning process.

When English language teachers teach their own cultural backgrounds and iden-

tities, then the teacher development process turns into a matter of self-development (Sowden, 2007). In other words, teachers' personal qualities, attitudes and experiences should be improved and enriched by providing them with opportunities to be trained via intercultural programs in English speaking countries. Teachers need to rely on their own experiences and report as many intercultural experiences and anecdotes as they can in FL classes. This will help students empathize and negotiate with others better, which leads them into being competent at intercultural and communicative level.

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