

Strategies for Withstanding the Inevitable at Ground Zero

—An Analysis of Intercultural Sensitivity in the ELT Classroom

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of how intercultural sensitivity is lived out in the classroom. It draws focus on the importance of intercultural awareness in the context of ELT and how this trait ultimately impacts teachers' pedagogical decisions and daily teaching strategies. The study shows the dynamics of intercultural sensitivity as teachers grapple with not only the culture stemming from mostly Western published textbooks and their students' culture, but their own culture as well. The study draws on qualitative data from a case study of expatriate teachers in a Saudi Arabian university ELT context. The data were generated through focus group discussions, interviews and classroom observations.

Keywords

English Teaching, Cultural Awareness, Cross-Cultural Communication, Intercultural Sensitivity, ELT, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

In a previous article, I identified that four frames of reference converge in any ELT context (Etri, 2015). Two of these are relatively static and they are the ELT Context and Teacher's Biography, while the other two are more dynamic being the Teacher's Attitudinal frames related to attitudes towards culture and intercultural sensitivity (IS) and their Situationally Responsive frames related to their adaptation and response to their teaching context. The place where these frames converge is the place for understanding IS in ELT (Diagram 1) and I would argue that any attempt to understand IS in this context without understanding the frames of references at play would be deficient.

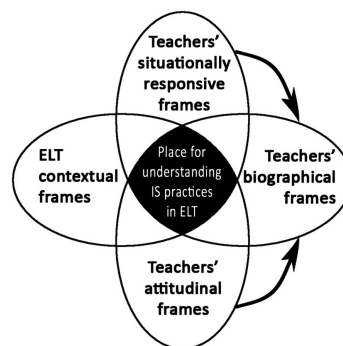


Diagram 1. The place for understanding intercultural sensitivity practices in English language teaching.

This unique place in a qualitative study of expatriate teachers teaching in a Saudi Arabian university (Etri, 2015) identified two main factors that help understanding IS in daily ELT contexts; teacher's intercultural awareness and pedagogical decisions. Following will be an analysis of these factors based on qualitative data collected through various interviews and observations of 19 expatriate teachers in X University in Saudi Arabia who took part in this study. Teachers were given pseudonyms in the analysis to reflect their cultural background to help further understand how their native culture may influence their teaching.

A literature review of culture has shown that there is a lack of consensus on its meaning and to reduce complications for the following analysis, I accept Moran's (2001) conceptualisation of culture as: the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts (p. 24). This definition is comprehensive enough to include both big C culture (products) and little c culture (perspectives and practices) identified by Stempleski and Tomalin's (1993) which was grounded from a study of the ELT perspective by Robinson (1985). In addition, to reduce further complications with another term important for this study for which there are many definitions, intercultural sensitivity is defined, based on Bennett's (1993) conceptualisation of it, as a continuum of the awareness, understanding, and response that a person has towards people of other cultures. On account of this, the teachers' intercultural sensitivity frame denotes the frame that shapes their potential to notice and make sense of cues in the teaching context, and respond appropriately to them.

2. Teachers' Intercultural Awareness

In order to address intercultural sensitivity and to avoid offence in their English teaching, teachers in the study saw it as imperative to develop an awareness of the students' culture. Such a development would help them adjust to their ELT context and guide them to methods and strategies suitable for their students, who not only may have had a culture new to teachers' experiences, but also dif-

ferent cognitive levels.

2.1. Importance of Intercultural Awareness in New ELT Contexts

Having awareness of the culture of students in their ELT context, is seen as crucial by teachers for any teaching assignment (Goleman 2003). The quest and development of cultural awareness actually begins before coming to a new teaching environment like Saudi Arabia:

Some (teachers) would also be having some background information... because for foreigners coming here, they need to know where it is they're going. They need to have some idea and most people do ask questions about what's acceptable (Dania).

Crucial to building intercultural awareness is to enquire about the elements considered acceptable or unacceptable. Without this awareness, teachers may be prone to many problems as the data showed about the incident of Gillian Gibbons, a British school teacher in Sudan who was the spotlight of international media in November 2007 (Gettleman, 2007):

But if you are not familiar with them then you can end up with the same fate [as]... a teacher faced in Sudan.... she wrote the name Mohammad on the teddy bear and she landed [herself] in deep trouble... so,... you should know the sensitivities... [and] be aware of the norms and values of the society. And then you can take a decision on how to do certain things, how to deliver a certain unit in your class (Amjad).

Observation data also indicated that even with some knowledge of their host students, understanding could not be taken for granted, as seen in a video during one of Corey's classes:

Corey asks: "Do you want your wife to work, your future wife?"

Students reply: "Of course."

Corey replies in surprise: "WOW! This is your mindset ... you Saudi boys! My idea, my preconceived idea was that most Saudi women do not work" (Corey).

Despite Corey's three years of teaching experience in Saudi Arabia, he was quite surprised that Saudi male students actually wanted their wives to work. Although Corey displayed some general knowledge about the status quo of women in Saudi Arabia, although this is changing (Trofimov, 2019), he was unaware that the students who may be considered the new generation of Saudi Arabia, actually wished for something against the norm. This phenomenon emphasises further the dynamic nature of culture and that the knowledge one may acquire about a people and their culture may not always be accurate for all and for all times.

Teaching effectiveness is also another reason given for why teachers need to have adequate awareness of their students.

I am sensitive to what we discuss in class due to my students'... culture. I always relate my discussion to what they experience and... their beliefs. I believe that a language teacher is effective when she or he relates the lesson to the learner's experience (Jane).

In this sense, the role of the ELT teacher is not only about bringing new knowledge and experience to the students, but bringing it in a way that can be understood by students based on what they already know and have experienced. Hence, if a teacher does not relate their teaching to their students' experiences and culture, then they will not be as effective. A view that was echoed throughout the data and in a study by [Ling & Braine \(2007\)](#).

Although teachers may learn about cultural concepts in their context, they cannot take for granted that such new knowledge could be used to facilitate their teaching, a point emphasised by [Duff & Uchida \(1997\)](#). Despite placing effort on developing their cultural awareness, the data showed that teachers constantly met challenges and were required to be constantly observant during their teaching.

In a classroom observation, Corey was discussing beautiful buildings and was asking students to make comparisons with other buildings in the Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates. After making mention of the Kingdom Tower in Riyadh, he was quick to exclude the two holiest mosques for Saudis and Muslims, which seemed to be an effort to avoid any offence and degradation, and to keep the subject neutral. It is a reminder of how observant and aware teachers felt they needed to be so that teaching was without controversy. Thus, students were not left with many options in answering the question because the exclusion of the two revered mosques paved way for the ultimate lesson objective.

This illustrates that awareness can be built through a teacher's interaction with their students by way of probing and asking for clarification to information or concepts that seemed unclear. In fact, in their quest for awareness of the host culture, many teachers in this study seemed to take advantage of their interactions with their students and took the opportunity to ask them about their culture and acquaint themselves with information about it. Khan, for example, admits taking opportunities to enquire about what he called gaps (elements not understandable about Saudi culture) and made his enquiries habitual throughout his teaching:

... talking about customs and traditions in Saudi Arabia. I came to know that when there is a special guest, you slaughter an animal... so that was information for me. So I keep asking whenever I see some gaps or something which I don't know so there is no harm in asking the students about that (Khan).

Some students were reported to have actually initiated enlightenment about their culture and interests to prepare their teachers for advanced awareness of their limits and preferences. Although the data showed teachers instigated en-

quiry into the host culture, it also showed students took advance opportunity to inform their teachers, an important active process students are identified as having in the classroom (LoBianco, Liddicoat & Crozet, 1999). Dania, for example, reported that her students informed her that they were conservative students and had little interest in Western culture:

my students let me know early in the semester that they were pretty conservative. While they are typical teens in many ways, they seem[ed] to be less into Western pop culture than some of the other students... So, their behaviour from the start set the tone for the semester (Dania).

2.2. Awareness of Taboos

Most teachers in the study understood that topics regarding male and female relationships, especially dating, were considered taboo in Saudi culture. For example, Dania admits surprise when the topic about dating appeared during a listening exercise she had made little preparation for:

There was one listening exercise that I wasn't prepared for and my eyes got big when I heard the topic of dating, again... the unit we're working on about finding a spouse in English [for Linguistics] is a cultural incident waiting to happen (Dania).

Dania was aware that topics related to dating were considered taboo and fore-saw the unit as problematic for her students. Students also explicitly informed their teachers about how they viewed such topics:

Before I discussed the article [Are You in Love] to the class, I asked the students, "Are you in love?" As expected, they quickly replied, "No Miss! We cannot; it is *haram* (forbidden) for us to date with [a] male" (Jane).

While teachers were generally aware of taboos, some felt censorship was a pedagogical necessity. Corey was one of these, admitting that developing an awareness of taboos was challenging because he had a different culture to his students and did not share the same religion as them:

Being [a]... person who doesn't practice Islam here... it took me time... and... a lot of reflection and introspection [to] understand... the culture, particularly the taboos. This is something that I don't want to get entangled with... I do a little censorship [of] the content of the book... because I find it totally inappropriate... I just choose the units that I [deem] the students... really need (Corey).

Clearly, teaching without censorship placed considerable pressure on the teacher who had the extra task of explaining and engaging in content considered taboo. Censorship relieved the pressures of delving into such topics even if they aroused the interest of students. Furthermore, teachers felt that because of their awareness and respect of the students' culture it was better teaching practice to

simply avoid taboo topics which would also preserve the students' identities.

To summarise, crucial to the teachers' development of awareness of the Saudi ELT context, and elements considered taboo were the experiences of cultural incidents in class, understanding students' concerns, and heeding their explicit warnings or advice. These were all important for their pedagogical decisions, since the logical step after developing an awareness of the taboo was to think of methods and strategies to deal with such topics in a harmonious non-threatening way.

3. Pedagogical Decisions during Teaching

Teachers' awareness of the culture and taboos in the Saudi Arabia ELT context greatly affected their teaching. Their pedagogical decisions during instruction were also an identified factor required to understand IS in ELT and these include the considerations teachers give to intercultural sensitivity and the various forms of censorship of ELT materials.

3.1. Considerations of Intercultural Sensitivity

Many teachers consider intercultural sensitivity important to their pedagogical decisions; it is an aspect whose importance is also just as important as other considerations relating to syllabus and language items, as strongly advocated by [Byram & Morgan \(1994\)](#). An emphasis on the importance of intercultural sensitivity was evident in the data and the role it should play in an ELT teacher's pedagogical decisions:

these [intercultural] considerations... have to [be] take[n], period! We just have to, otherwise [there will be] chaos. And so it is necessary whether we are in Saudi Arabia or any other part of the world, we are going to have to take this into... serious consideration (Dania).

Dania believes the context of teaching and audience have a close bearing on intercultural considerations, and that teachers must give due thought to the culture presented in the teaching materials and how to address it whilst maintaining consciousness of the sensitivities of the students, otherwise they risk creating disorder in the classroom. Teachers in this study generally supported Dania's view about the importance of giving consideration to intercultural sensitivity as part of their overall pedagogical decisions:

In all our teaching decisions we make, whether it's a pacing schedule and deciding which units we are going to teach, which ones we are going to leave out, we take the culture, we think about it, and we decide which units we are going to do based on what we anticipate is going to be their reaction and we make split-second decisions trying to decide what topics we are going to cover in class. Of course intercultural sensitivity plays a part in all pedagogical decisions (Safia).

Other data shows cultural considerations are important in communication in

general; a universal consideration that becomes even more important in the teaching context:

I just would like to add that not in teaching, in every relationship, every place we have to consider this... Teaching is more sensitive so we have to consider intercultural sensitivity (Zarina).

The importance given to this point concurs with the literature, which maintains that English teachers are exposed to more diverse people than any other profession, although previously counsellors, and mental and health practitioners held this position (Slowinski, 2002). As Zarina explained, the sensitivities involved in teaching are great because a teacher could be dealing with a multitude of cultures in one class and thus needs to be attentive and vigilant as one teaching text may offend not just one student, but many.

It is evident that intercultural sensitivity has a bearing on pedagogical decisions. It was seen as a constant force for pedagogical direction and change as well, “pedagogical decisions and considerations are changed and are kept on changing while keeping in mind intercultural sensitivity” (Nasreen). The relationship between pedagogy and intercultural sensitivity was intimate and dynamic. Amir maintains that intercultural sensitivity directly, “steers [teachers] toward certain methodology in [their] teaching” (Amir). These views further point to the importance of the teacher’s awareness of the students’ culture. In addition, they denote a direct relationship between pedagogy and students as explicated by Flutter & Rudduck (2004). Pedagogical considerations are necessary to engage students in their lessons, “we want our students to be engaged, if they’re offended or shocked, etc, they have difficulty being engaged” (Jake). This points that a lack of intercultural sensitivity towards students will lead them to become disinterested and discontented with learning. Thus, it becomes important during lesson planning to ensure teaching materials are appropriate enough to engage the students. These views were recurring in the data, “if the cultural components in what you’re introducing are not comprehensible to the students, then they will not have production” (Saeed).

Thus, it becomes crucial for ELT teachers to think of teaching strategies that not only consider how they teach students, but also whether the nature of the teaching content is something comprehensible to the students. This could mean as a strategy utilised by teachers in Gray’s (2000) study, planning to present it in a way other than how it is presented in the books:

But there are—when you are preparing your lessons, maybe you look at the text and you say, “Oh this is so American, or this is so British and they so won’t understand this point if I present it in this way” (Dania).

Striking a balance between the culture presented in books and an awareness of the students’ culture has an effect on pedagogical choices and lesson plans. This shows that teachers are indeed challenged not only in how they teach cultural content, but how they engage their students with culture as well.

3.2. Censorship

While preplanning ELT material and making considerations about intercultural sensitivity for their ultimate pedagogical decisions, many teachers in this study also deemed censorship of some content necessary, especially taboo and other topics considered inappropriate and offensive to Saudi students concurring the results of a study in Spain by Gray (2000). As Khan explained; “We can teach culture but we’ll have to sift. There are aspects of culture which are not fit” (Khan). Teachers are sometimes left with little choices and avoiding certain cultural content altogether seemed like the most appropriate way of dealing with them:

The problem is that sometimes, against... your wishes, you find yourself... [in]... a need to modify, adapt or sometimes skip certain or particular messages (Hakeem).

As a result, all teachers engaged in two main types of censorship in an effort to maintain student interest and authenticity of the English language, and avoiding offence: skipping and substitution.

3.2.1. Skipping

Teachers’ engagement with the Saudi ELT context, and notably its students, appeared to have impacted greatly on their teaching. Many teachers saw a simple way of dealing with inappropriate cultural content, and used the word *skip* to mean leaving out certain teaching materials that were considered taboo or insensitive to Saudi culture: “one way is I would just totally skip it” (Khan):

but now I know, I usually skip questions or particularly topics that would require students to inform the names or tell something or other interesting details about their family members, specifically when the gender[s] are... female (Corey).

The skipping strategy was prevalent during the course of teaching. It was not only a pedagogical strategy used in the classroom context, but also as an instruction given to students, “Sometimes I ask them to jump; I mean to just skip that sentence” (Saeed).

Although these pedagogical decisions were a demonstration of the teachers’ intercultural sensitivity, they seemed very limited in developing their students’ intercultural communication skills, a skill whose importance in ELT has been advocated many including Byram & Morgan (1994) and Kramsch (1993). Not only could it be considered positive that teachers were able to identify themes or teaching materials considered inappropriate to their students, because they seemed to deal with them in a way that essentially avoided a clash with their culture, it also was seen as necessary for some teachers.

3.2.2. Substitution

Another censorship method that recurred in the data was substitution. Unlike complete avoidance of some texts that teachers confessed to doing by skipping,

some teachers instead chose to substitute the content but retain their language objectives. Thus, instead of skipping a question in total, or page/s, teachers would retain at least the objectives and use what they deemed more appropriate with other content and materials. A clear example of this method is one found in an incident interview with Saeed. Saeed mentioned a lesson whose theme was “Falling in love—Are you in love?” and felt he could not teach it as he did not see any linguistic benefit to the students. He believed that such a theme embarrasses the students and is too personal; from past experience, he believed students would not respond to such themes. As a result, he changed the text to, “The future of energy” which he felt was more appropriate and thought the lesson was a success (Saeed).

Although there seemed pedagogical justifications based on previous experience teaching Saudi students, the teacher’s substitution in questions was not seen to encourage knowing about the other nor was it a similar theme; it was quite different. The justification was that the new text focused on the same language structure objectives as the original but was something deemed culturally “appropriate” far from the spotlight of culture itself. The data however, showed that such whole-text substitution methods were not practiced by other teachers:

I’ll give you one example. There [wa]s one unit about dating. So I didn’t talk about dating; rather, I used the same language and the same structures for meeting a friend (Amjad).

Instead of changing the text to a different source, Amjad’s method of substitution seemed concentrated on the language presented and not the culture. So there was no new text and substitution was the focus on meeting a friend instead of dating; a theme that bore similarities to the original. Students were exposed to the original content with this substitution method, but were given instructions to relate it to something culturally appropriate and applicable to the students’ lives. Although this exposure was limited in terms of developing intercultural sensitivity, it still gave students some exposure by retaining the text and not totally ignoring it, as in Saeed’s method.

The pedagogy of substitution shows that teachers’ level of understanding of intercultural sensitivity in the ELT context is denoted by an ability to adapt ELT material to the culture of learners.

3.2.3. Issues with Censorship

Although many teachers in this study confessed to skipping or substituting taboo and other cultural content for reasons of sensitivity and necessity, some teachers questioned the value of this strategy. Some warned about leaving out any cultural content that was contrary to Saudi culture and called for some kind of balance:

I think we have to be careful, again of course, in respecting the culture and being sensitive to all this, but then again I think we should be careful not to censor every single [cultural] item and element (Amir).

Although the culture of students should be respected and teachers should be sensitive to it, it was incumbent on them to find some kind of middle course on the issue. Thus, the censoring of all cultural content that is taboo or contrary to students' culture was not the solution, nor was it sound pedagogy. To elaborate his point, Amir gives an example related to alcohol:

I mean talking about alcohol, for instance, it is mentioned in the Koran. And there is no problem if in one of the units, say for instance, McDonald's in one place, they serve beer with the meal instead of a coke (Amir).

Amir acknowledges that alcohol is mentioned in the Koran, the students' holy book, and although it may be prohibited to drink in Saudi Arabia, it was still very familiar to students and hence there was no justification for its censorship. Such pedagogy would have the effect of maintaining students' narrow mindedness:

These are in fact the pedagogical skills of the teacher himself; how he deals with all substitutions. And if you're going to skip each and everything, how will the students come to know about reality because they will never come to know what alcohol is (Maheer).

The data indicates that intercultural sensitivity for English teachers does not mean avoidance of texts contrary to the culture of their students nor the teachers, but rather, being skilful in the way they deliver such content to their students:

I think it's the way of administering it, rather than depriving them of knowledge. Administer it sensibly... like an adult is given an injection whereas a child is given a suppository. So be sensible, be careful and don't be all apprehensive (Amjad).

The whole issue of addressing culture is related more to the skill of teachers. Censoring seemed to deny students knowledge, while teaching foreign cultural content was a demonstration of the quality and ability of a teacher. Thus, denying students knowledge by censoring cultural aspects does not seem to be an astute teaching strategy; it is not a strategy that equipped students with sufficient intercultural communication skills and knowledge which should be an objective in ELT as advocated by *Byram & Morgan (1994)* and others. It instead limited students' engagement with cultural content which *Gray (2000)* suggested could be turned into opportunities for students to respond and challenge.

Therefore, a more competent teacher is one whose teaching strategies are aimed at developing their students' intercultural communication skills by these cultural challenges as such skills are deemed required in a world of increased communication and border crossings as *Byram & Morgan (1994)* and many others have advocated. With this view and added objective to language, ELT teachers require initiative and skill in teaching foreign cultural content—not censorship of it, “So these are the dichotomies that we find over here and... I don't

suppose that we have to skip the unit of any topic” (Maheer); “I do believe that we shouldn’t skip or escape any message because it is culturally irrelevant” (Hakeem). The data shows that teachers should have the necessary skills to deal with foreign culture in other ways than total censorship. These views were from Moslem teachers who shared the same faith as the Saudis but were open to engage in any foreign culture that differed from their students’. In addition, most students were seen to already know and have access to foreign cultures through various media channels, so there was no justification for censorship:

I don’t think we should hide every single kind of element that’s totally foreign and just kind of pretend as if it’s not there because we know that definitely they have access to all these somewhere else (Amir).

There’s no place where one is sort of not exposed to the influences coming from other cultures and other backgrounds. Everybody to some extent through media and internet is exposed to the influences from certain other cultures, and so are the students (Amjad).

Thus, the ELT classroom was not the only place that exposed students to foreign culture. Students generally had access to Western and other cultures through the various forms of available media. Therefore, it was reasonable for teachers to assume students had more exposure to other cultures outside class, and that any culture presented in the syllabus would not have been new to students and, therefore, did not demand censorship. Some teachers even saw foreign culture as teaching opportunities and not obstacles which required censorship:

I find... too much censorship... really... puts them off and sometimes you bring an issue, a hot issue for instance and suddenly you find the whole class... really erupts and then everybody wants to get involved... talk about girls, talk about marriage, talk about some kind of political issue and... suddenly... the dormant are alive and everybody’s participating (Amir).

Taboo topics have the potential to energise an ELT classroom despite societal constraints. It seemed such topics livened up the classroom and engaged the students, and censorship of such topics had the opposite effect and were a cause for disinterest among students. This point emphasises the point that despite teachers’ knowledge of the host culture and the taboo, it was not a knowledge that could be totally relied upon for their pedagogical decisions. On many occasions, students showed interest in topics considered taboo and the experiences of people of other cultures. Although not all students may have shown the same level of interest, teachers were seen to have more reason to teach them by striking a balance between the teaching materials and their students. Cultural difference in this sense is seen as an opportunity and not as an issue to be censored, especially taboo topics:

So a culture should never be an issue in language teaching. It should be an opportunity; a resource that you can practice the skills with. You can turn to the culture, use it for discussions in speaking classes. In reading, you can

read different things about different cultures. You can write; in writing class, use culture for answering different essay questions... you know they make a comment if they agree or they disagree with something different from a different culture... I always give them their chance to make their comments and they'll jump right in (Safia).

The data shows that teachers could profit from the students' enthusiasm of cultural topics which can create discussion and shared views for language purposes. This strategy is in stark contrast to mere skipping, and demands more effort and skill by teachers, which makes what seems impossible for other teachers, possible, and especially beneficial for developing students' intercultural communication skills.

3.2.4. Pre-Emption and Pacification

Considering what teachers knew about the host culture and what was considered taboo and offensive, some teachers in the study resorted to a strategy used to pacify students before engaging them in sensitive content. This mainly seemed like a strategy used when teachers actually knew or had strong ideas that the teaching content may have been inappropriate or offensive to their students:

warn them beforehand... if you apprehend that there [are] going to be... problem[s], pre-empt it. Tell them that we are going to study this and this... has such and such material; "... I am not trying to convert you [n]or [am] I... trying to ask you to follow these practices, but this is the language and we are going to learn it. And without learning it, our knowledge will be incomplete" (Amjad).

pre-empt students by giving some kind of warning. [I] would say something like "this is the topic, we don't need to adopt but just know how to use the language in it" (Amjad).

With this strategy, students were informed that, although the culture in the teaching materials may be offensive and contrary to the host culture, the whole idea of engaging with it was only for language purposes. Amjad used this strategy to emphasise the point that students were not obliged to adopt any part of the culture nor discouraged from their culture. The texts were simply to familiarise the students that other people see the world differently than the students' and that the focus should be on the language structure being presented. In addition, without learning the intended language structure in the context of its use by its native speakers, the learning of English will be deficient. This strategy seems sufficient to pacify students enough to accept the underlying learning purposes of the texts from which a teacher can produce a productive lesson without offending their students.

Similar pacification strategies were possible by teachers of similar backgrounds to the students who directed the viewing of offensive concepts through a Saudi worldview:

As far as teaching approaches, I started the unit by explaining that we would be reading about traditions very different from their own. When we began, the topic was met with shock and laughter. I did whatever I could to let them know that I am with them, in this case. As I mentioned, this was a topic on which we shared a common belief. However, I found that I had to explain “courtship” in terms related to their own culture. I told them that while courtship in Saudi Arabia is vastly different from what we read, it does exist. So, they sat attentively while I tried to explain courtship in Saudi terms. I believe they appreciated that (Dania).

Emphasising that she shared her students’ faith, Dania promoted the view that intercultural sensitivity starts with the acknowledgment that certain concepts are viewed differently by other people around the world and that exposure to such concepts can help students understand other people and their use of language in its context. In this way, the teacher is like a role model where they are able to demonstrate how their principles and faith are unshaken despite exposure to other people and their culture. This may lead students to feel that if it is easy enough for their teacher to know and be exposed to people and their culture and not be threatened, then they should be able to follow that example without too many difficulties.

Addressing students’ reactions to topics or texts with sarcasm and laughter was another strategy the data showed was used to pacify students. Having been adequately acquainted with the Saudi ELT context, Dania was able to make instantaneous comments during the course of her lessons:

My class is used to me saying, “*Masha’Allah*” (If God wills) in a seemingly sarcastic way. For some reason, they find it amusing. So, when the sentence talked about the boyfriend asking his girlfriend to marry him while they were on a date, I immediately said, “*Masha’Allah*” and they erupted in laughter because they knew that I didn’t approve. In the other sentence I simply responded with, “Isn’t that nice” and again they laughed because they know that it’s not acceptable for their culture (Dania).

This strategy seems easier for teachers who shared the religious or cultural background of their host students. Therefore, there was no requirement to censor any teaching material despite its apparent sensitivities

4. Conclusion

The data have shown how teachers addressed intercultural sensitivity in their classroom practices. All teachers engaged in some form of censorship; some felt they had little choice, while others saw censorship as necessary for effective teaching. Teachers had different ways of censoring teaching materials that were sensitive to students. Avoiding teaching materials by skipping them was seen as the easiest strategy. Teachers who chose not to use the skipping strategy resorted to warning and pre-empting students instead, mainly to allow students to realize

that differences existed between cultures and that the focus should be on the language. Others however, exerted more effort and sought to substitute materials in the textbooks with materials deemed more culturally appropriate. Despite censorship being a prevalent pedagogy, teachers still considered intercultural sensitivity important for the English curriculum and it has an important bearing on how English is taught in any ELT context. The study confirms the importance of English teaching as intimately involving the development of the intercultural communication skills of students, as advocated by many educators in the literature, and the ELT context of teaching is more than the traditional teaching of form and function.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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