

Unveiling the World through Stories: Fostering EFL Learners' Intercultural Sensitivity through Storytelling Circles

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Abstract

In the wake of globalization, the world requires intercultural competent individuals with a heightened level of awareness and sensitivity towards others. This study addresses the effect of adopting storytelling circles on fostering students' intercultural sensitivity in EFL classrooms. To attain this goal, the study followed a quasi-experimental mixed methods design with a single case study of 8 students assigned conveniently from the population of third year undergraduate EFL students at the University of Guelma, Algeria. The intervention which was launched in the academic year 2023-2024 adopted Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale as a pre and posttest, besides audio recordings of the sessions, reflection tasks, and the field notes of the researcher. The quantitative analysis of the pre and posttest using the Wilcoxon-signed ranks test revealed a significant difference between students' intercultural sensitivity level before and after the treatment as $p=0,00>0,05$ in which learners moved from low to high level of intercultural sensitivity. Qualitative findings of other tools revealed that learners developed a shade of ethnorelativism, positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, and challenged their held stereotypes and prejudices. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis implying that storytelling circles foster intercultural sensitivity was retained. As a corollary, the study suggests more research on the effect of storytelling circles on intercultural sensitivity, the adaptation of critical intercultural education and a non-essentialist paradigm of culture when cultivating intercultural sensitivity, and systematic intercultural training for EFL teachers.

Keywords: intercultural competence; intercultural education; intercultural sensitivity; EFL classes; storytelling circles.

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Introduction

Over the last few years, growing attentiveness has been owed to the substantial role of intercultural education in promoting global citizenship. Having learners who are global citizens with the advent of globalization is highly desired due to the frequent contact between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Risager, 2006). Hence, learners, particularly EFL learners, have to have intercultural competence to function appropriately in such settings (Byram, 2021). The effectiveness of intercultural interaction lies in openness towards otherness; that is, accepting and embracing cultural differences (Bennett, 1993). This stage of openness is attained if learners enjoy a high level of intercultural sensitivity (henceforth ICS) which allows one to accept cultural diversity. The lack of ICS might block the line of communication in intercultural encounters by creating cultural conflicts and misunderstandings (Chen, 1997). However, intercultural competence is among the 21st century skills which are delayed in the Algerian EFL classes (Sellami, 2024). It is seldom to find EFL teachers who integrate intercultural education systematically in their classes. Even if culture is incorporated, it was found that some teachers still follow the native speakerism model in which they only provide learners with mere reductionist knowledge of Anglophone cultures (Doudi, 2021; Drissat, 2022). This practice surpasses the role of the English language as a lingua franca used internationally and jail it to its natives knowing that the possibility of using it with non-natives is higher than its use with natives (Block & Cameron, 2002). Henceforth, this research aims to examine the effect of storytelling circles on fostering EFL learners at the University of Guelma ICS in which storytelling is deemed effective in intercultural education (Deardorff, 2020) despite the recognizable lack of research on ICS development through storytelling circles. This research is then an opportunity to address this research gap. Hence, the following research question needs meticulous answers:

RQ₁: What are the effects of storytelling circles on EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity?

In light of the aforementioned research aim and question, we hypothesize that:

H₀: If EFL learners are involved in storytelling circles this would not foster their intercultural sensitivity.

H₁: If EFL learners are involved in storytelling circles this would foster their intercultural sensitivity.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Intercultural Education

Accrediting the synergy of language and culture, teaching culture along with language learning is stressed. It is by now widely acknowledged that developing learners' intercultural competencies is essential. Policymakers worldwide shifted attention to preparing learners to be global citizens given the dynamics of the 21st century (Liu, 2020). Modern foreign language education has drastically moved from promoting learners' communicative competence to intercultural competence through systematic intercultural education (Newton et al., 2010). Intercultural education (IE) promotes intercultural communicative learning, i.e., it surpasses the traditional approach of providing learners with cultural knowledge to allow them to compare, contrast, and reflect on diverse cultures (Zhang, 2007). Learners are expected to be effective in and out of their classes; that is, they have to be equipped with skills and competencies allowing them to function properly in life after school. Among these 21st century competencies is intercultural competence which prepares them to be global citizens who have sufficient

intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills to cope in any sociocultural milieu other than theirs (Barrett & Golubeva, 2022).

Seminal pedagogies of culture teaching jailed it into a superficial comparison between learners' culture and the target one. This reductionist paradigm of culture teaching discards criticality and negotiation of cultural aspects. This view, despite still being adopted by some teachers, was harshly reacted against and replaced by intercultural communicative teaching. The latter promotes 'doing' instead of 'knowing', i.e., communicating interculturally instead of declaratively knowing about cultures (Chen & Le, 2019). This target is realized through the application of critical intercultural education (CIE) which stresses learners' critical awareness, reflection, and understanding of cultural differences instead of accumulating knowledge on them (Gashi, 2021). CIE prepares learners to be cross-cultural mediators who can fit in any intercultural context (Sevimel-Sahin, 2020).

Critical intercultural education frees culture teaching from the essentialist paradigm of culture which restricts culture and cultural identities to their geographic boundaries (Dervin & Clark, 2014), instead, it helps learners to comprehend the complexity and multifacetedness of culture and cultural identities of one's and others (Baker, 2022). The essentialist paradigm of culture that dominated culture teaching for years was replaced by a non-essentialist one which surpasses the mere imitation of the native-speakerism model, i.e., teaching only Anglophone cultures in EFL classes. CIE equips learners with a set of intercultural competencies learners can amply in any intercultural encounter. Preparing EFL learners to interact only with natives of the English language shortens effective intercultural education (Baker, 2022). Put it simply, CIE is a process-oriented pedagogy which helps learners to communicate effectively and not a product one which generates cultural knowledge possessors (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This research has followed a CIE in which learners were continually encouraged to reflect on and negotiate sociocultural realities and challenge their wrongly held claims, and a non-essentialist paradigm of culture since learners had to converse about different cultures and not only Anglophone ones given the status of English as a lingua franca used worldwide not only by natives (Kachru, 1988).

1.2 Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity (henceforth ICS) is a bedrock component in any intercultural education. The construct has received tremendously different definitions. In its simplest definition, ICS captures one's positive reaction to cultural diversity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Straffon, 2003). In its broad conception, ICS represents the developmental stage from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism one goes through, i.e., moving from one's tendency to evaluate sociocultural realities through the lens of one's culture to the acceptance of cultural diversity (Bennett, 1986; 1993). ICS tapes into the cognitive ability of a person to deal with, accept, and respect cultural differences (Hammer et al., 2003). Contradicting yet complementing Hammer et al. definition, Chen and Starosta (1997) view ICS as having positive emotions towards cultural differences which would impact one's behaviours in intercultural encounters. It can be observed that ICS amalgamates cognitive, affective, and behavioural properties.

ICS is desired in any multicultural milieu; it eases the interaction with people from different cultural affiliations (Anderson et al., 2006). ICS impacts intercultural communication. It helps one to develop a complex perception of others (Bennett, 2017). It is an essential component in intercultural communicative competence (ICC); the latter entails having sufficient cultural knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness to act and communicate appropriately in intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997; 2021). To foster learners' ICS in formal instructional settings, different models of ICS were proposed. This research relies on Bennett's model of ICS (1993) and the one of Chen and Starosta (2000). In his model, Bennett (1993) categorised experiences and responses to cultural differences into ethnocentric and ethnorelative continuums.

Ethnocentrism consists of three stages: denial, defence, and minimization. Ethnorelativism consists of acceptance, adaptation, and integration.

The first stage of ethnocentrism is denial. Herein, learners are ignorant of cultural differences. Once cultural differences are recognized, the defence stage takes place yet within this stage cultural differences are negatively conceived. When learners start to free themselves from negative perceptions of others, the stage of minimization takes place. On the other end of the continuum, the stages of ethnorelativity start with acceptance which reflects learners' acceptance of cultural differences in which no culture is seen as superior and/or inferior to the other. The adaption stage follows the acceptance stage in which learners adopt a set of intercultural competencies. The last stage is the integration. In this final station, learners fully internalize cultural differences in which they start considering them in their intercultural encounters (Bennett, 1993; 2017). It is praiseworthy to note that being ethnorelative does not necessitate transforming one's cultural identity but only empathizing and respecting others (Bennett et al., 2003).

The ICS model of Chen and Starosta (2000) includes three abilities one should possess to act and communicate effectively in intercultural encounters: cognitive, affective, and behavioural abilities. The cognitive dimension concerns one's cultural awareness of cultural complexity and diversity. The affective dimension embraces one's positive emotions towards otherness, i.e., being open-minded, empathetic, non-judgmental, and having self-esteem to be involved in intercultural interactions. The behavioural abilities include manifesting appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviour in intercultural encounters (Chen & Starosta, 1996). The amalgamation of these qualities promotes intercultural awareness, appropriateness, and understanding.

A wide range of empirical research has been found on fostering EFL learners' ICS. A study conducted by Timaz and Narafshan (2020) has employed intercultural TV advertisements to foster EFL Iranian students' ICS. Learners had the opportunity to compare, contrast, and reflect on different advertisements from different cultures. This intervention has positively fostered learners' ICS. Another study by Bennouioua (2023) has investigated the impact of critical incidents on learners' ICS. It was, therefore, found that integrating critical incidents in EFL classes fosters ICS. Hagley (2020) has employed a virtual cultural exchange program to develop Japanese students' ICS. A recognizable good level of learners' ICS was observed. These works and many more have all employed different methods to cultivate ICS yet no research on the possible effects of storytelling circles on ICS was found. This research is the first to experiment with the possible relationship between ICS and storytelling circles in EFL classes.

1.3 Storytelling Circle

Storytelling Circle is a UNESCO methodology developed by Darla Deardorff in 2020 to nurture learners' intercultural competencies. As its name suggests, the methodology involves putting a group of people together in non-judgmental talks to bridge divides and explore cultural differences (Fast, 2023). Story circles can be used in both formal and informal contexts by a facilitator who is not necessarily an expert in anthropology, and does not require many resources but a group of people and some chairs, optionally (Deardorff, 2020). Storytelling circle dates back to ancient history; it is not an innovative technique of story sharing but it is in intercultural education (Arévalo-Guerrero, 2009; Holliday et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2017). This technique has been lately restored in intercultural education to suit non-Western contexts where Western tools for intercultural development are not plausible.

Besides developing learners' intercultural competencies, story circle taps into learners' listening skills, critical thinking, reflection abilities, empathy, cultural awareness, and many more. It has the potential to change behaviours and reinforce some values (Haven, 2007; 2014). Story circles stimulate different facilities of learning: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The

cognitive mode concerns helping learners to develop their critical thinking and reflection abilities, the affective one fosters empathy, and the behavioural one promotes intercultural (Deardorff, 2020). The overriding aim of these circles is to bring people together to share and reflect on cultural similarities and differences and gain new insights from others' sociocultural experiences. When participants share their life experiences in reference to a particular cultural setting, they get to learn about themselves and their counterparts and in return this would culminate in their development of some intercultural competencies, namely, self and other awareness, empathy, respect, cultural humility, and so on (Deardorff, 2020). At the crux of any circle, reflection is the bedrock through which participants get to reflect and revise their perceptions and prejudgments (Deardorff, 2020).

Developing students' intercultural competence is a vivid area of inquiry which opened up great opportunities for researchers to investigate effective ways to attain this target. Using storytelling circles in intercultural education is gaining considerable attention. Ghosn (2002) has accentuated that using storytelling in EFL classes raises students' cultural awareness, empathy, and respect for cultural diversity. Similarly, Ellis and Brewster (2014) have found that adopting storytelling inside the classroom fosters cultural awareness as it raises learners' understanding of themselves and others. Storytelling also fosters intercultural understanding and comparison which help learners understand oneself and others (Mourão, 2009). Having reviewed diverse works on the use of storytelling circles in intercultural education yielded the inexistence of any work which investigated the impact of storytelling circles on learners' intercultural sensitivity. Therefore, this enquiry is an attempt to address this research gap and investigate the impact of storytelling circles on EFL learners at Guelma University intercultural sensitivity.

2. Research Methodology and Design

This study aims to investigate the impact of adopting storytelling circles in EFL classes to foster students' ICS. To retort the question of this study and verify its hypotheses, the study follows a single intrinsic case design. A case study entails a deep and scrutinized examination of a single case within a specific context which yields highly authentic data on the participants' perceptions and worldviews (Hamilton et al., 2013; Simons, 2009). The cardinal motive for this choice is that storytelling circles desire a small number of participants for the discussion to remain focused and well-monitored, applying them along with dialogic learning with an intact group consisting of more than 30 students is by all means impractical. The research could not follow a true experiment as it lacked random assignment of participants to the study, hence, it followed a quasi-experiment which followed a non-random sample. It also followed a mixed-methods design as it embraced quantitative and qualitative tools of data collection.

2.1 Participants of the Study

The population of this scrutiny was third year EFL students at Guelma University. The impetus which actuated targeting this population is that intercultural education was found scarcely introduced to this undergraduate level despite having it in their yearly syllabus as found by Oumeddour (2023). Given the choice of a single intrinsic case study, working with a whole population was far-reaching, thus, opting for a sample was plausible. The sample of this study consisted of 8 students conveniently assigned to the study. The overriding aim for choosing a convenient sample is that the researcher was in charge of the third year level for the oral expression module. Participants took part in the study based on their availability and willingness to participate which was sought verbally (Cohen et al., 2018).

To address internal and external threats to the validity of the study, participants of the study were randomly selected to the research group despite being conveniently assigned; that is, they were not selected based on some criteria or characteristics they possess. When some participants showed interest in participating, the teacher randomly selected 8 of them. The participants which

were 5 females (P=62.5%) and 3 males (P=37.5%) shared approximately the same age and had studied equally the same program, their cognitive development was also assumed to be paced the same due to their identical age (Phakiti, 2014).

2.2 Data Gathering Tools

This study relied on a range of quantitative and qualitative tools for data collection. To assess learners' ICS before and after the treatment, Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) was adopted as a pre and posttest (See Appendix 1). The test contained 24 items divided into 5 dimensions: interaction engagement (items 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, and 24) respect for cultural differences (items 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, and 20), interaction confidence (3, 4, 5, 6, and 10), interaction enjoyment (items 9, 12, 15), and interaction attentiveness (items 14, 17, and 19). However, ICS cannot simply be assessed through a quantitative self-survey (Deardorff, 2016), classroom audio recordings, teacher's fieldnotes, and some progress tasks were also adopted to obtain accurate shreds of evidence of learners' ICS development.

2.3 Procedures of Data Analysis

The scrutiny embraced quantitative and qualitative procedures of data analysis. The quantitative procedures concerned descriptive and inferential statistics of the ICS test using Social Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The central tendency (Mean) was measured for learners' pre and posttests. For the inferential statistics, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test for related samples was run. The choice of this test pertains to the fact that the study contained no control group to contrast results with and that the test is non-parametric, hence, this test is deemed relevant. For the qualitative analysis of other tools, thematic analysis through Nvivo software was conducted.

3. The Experiment

The quasi-experiment of this scrutiny commenced in February and ended in March 2024, covering as a whole 6 sessions of 2 hours each. The treatment contained 4 units. Dialogism or dialogue-based learning lies in the impulses of the treatment. Learners were engaged in talks about their intercultural experiences using thought-provoking questions to allow the teacher to revise their wrongly held assumptions and free them from any existing negative attitudes. The learners played an active role in (de/re)constructing their sociocultural knowledge. The teacher was a dialogue facilitator, monitor, and topic initiator.

The content of the experiment was realized through 4 units. The first unit entitled 'A journey through cultural practices and traditions' embraced discussion on different cultural practices and traditions. It is praiseworthy to mention that the discussion surpassed the reductionist view of culture and contained different cultures not only Anglophone ones. Besides, it aimed to familiarize learners with the construct of culture and help them understand the complexity and multifacetedness of their cultural identities. This unit aimed to promote openness towards otherness. The second unit entitled 'Dismantling Stereotypes and Prejudices about oneself and the imagined other' targeted learners' recognition of the stereotypes and prejudices they held as stereotyping is a major barrier to any effective intercultural communication (Samovar et al., 2017). It aimed also at helping learners base their judgments on solid rationale instead of information picked from uncredible sources. Within this unit, learners were asked to prepare posters about the stereotypes they had about different cultures and ways of challenging them.

The third unit 'Navigating cultural values and norms around the world' and the fourth one 'Discovering Worldviews and Beliefs Variability' share approximately the same overriding aim which is to make learners fully aware of the variability of values, norms, and worldviews across cultures; understanding how cultures are deeply rooted in such constructs is pivotal in any critical intercultural education. Ethnographic interviews were adopted as a practice for unit 4 in

which learners were asked to pick a topic which held different cultural perceptions, gender roles, family concept, feelings manifestations across cultures, and many more, ask some people about it then write a report. The following table summarizes the content of the intervention.

Table 1: Organization of the Content of the Treatment

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Objective(s)</i>	<i>Progress Tasks</i>
1. A journey through cultural practices and traditions.	To familiarize learners with cultural differences across the globe, hence, they would develop positive attitudes towards others.	*****
2. Dismantling Stereotypes and Prejudices about oneself and the imagined other.	To help learners recognize, debunk, and challenge stereotypes about themselves and others.	Stereotypes Posters
3. Navigating cultural values and norms around the world.	To help learners surpass simplified generalization and discover the variety of values and norms across cultures.	*****
4. Discovering Worldviews and Beliefs Variability.	To help learners understand the multiperspectives different people have.	Ethnographic Interviews

4. Analysis and Interpretations of Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of the ICS Pretest

The statistical analysis of the ICS pretest and posttests was done through SPSS, version 26. The analysis contained a descriptive analysis of the central tendency (the mean) of learners' answers which were evaluated against predetermined categories adopted from Wattanavorakijkul (2020). Then hypotheses testing inferential statistics using the Wilcoxon-signed rank test for related samples was applied to both tests in the post-treatment phase.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for ICS Pretest

ICS Dimensions	Central Tendency (Mean)	Evaluation
interaction engagement	2,34	Low ICS
respect for cultural differences	2,70	Moderate ICS
interaction confidence	1,91	Low ICS
interaction enjoyment	2,47	Low ICS
interaction attentiveness	3,20	Moderate ICS
Overall ICS	2,52	Low ICS

Table 2 proffers descriptive statistics of students' ICS pretest. As noticed, learners at the onset of the treatment had a low level of ICS (M=2,52). Their level in the different dimensions of ICS was restricted between low and moderate but never very low, high or very high. Their interaction engagement (M=2,34), interaction confidence (M=1,91), and interaction enjoyment (M=2,47) were low compared to their respect for cultural differences (M=2,70) and interactive attentiveness (M=3,20) which were moderate. Overall, students lacked ICS before launching the treatment.

4.2 Analysis and Interpretation of the Treatment's Findings

Classroom discussions represent a vivid source of rich authentic materials. As noted by Byram and Guilherme (2000) the language used by learners reflects their beliefs and worldviews. Thus, through language use, learners were critically encouraged to negotiate and interpret their

sociocultural experiences and reflect on them. The transcription of the audio recordings of the sessions culminated in the following 4 emerging themes:

➤ **Who I am? Delimit One's Cultural Identity**

At the onset of the treatment, it was pivotal to familiarize learners with the construct of culture and help them understand the complexity and multifacetedness of their cultural identity. Discussion on culture demonstrated that learners lacked an ample comprehension of it. They looked at culture from a superficial level. The following extract represents how the discussion on this commenced:

Extract 1: Understanding Culture

T: what is culture? How can we define it?

SS: [**collective answers**] our traditions, rituals, food, customs, religion.

T: what else?

SS: [**moments of silence**] Language as well and political systems!

T: yes these are some of the components of culture [explaining culture and its different components and stressing those which function at the deep level, i.e., values, worldviews, beliefs, perceptions, and so on].

As noticed in Extract 1, learners despite being in their third year they lacked understanding of culture. They looked at it from a tourist perspective. None of the respondents mentioned religion, values, norms, worldviews, beliefs, and so on. This is because learners are not receiving any systematic intercultural education in their classes.

After having explained culture and its ubiquitous nature and cruciality in one's life, learners were engaged in a discussion of negotiating their cultural identity. When asked about their identity, they mentioned various aspects of personal, social, and cultural identity. However, none of them provided a full statement to define oneself, instead they provided random words. At first, students jailed their cultural identity to embrace them as Algerians only but then they realized that it could be shared with others. Yet absoluteness seemed to mark their answers; learners seemed to generalize whatever conclusion they reached. The following extract demonstrates this:

Extract 2: Delimiting One's Cultural Identity

T: now tell me, if I say who are you, what would you mention?

SS: [**collective answers**] My age, my gender, my name, my hobbies, my nationality, my language, my preferences, my religion, my culture...etc.

T: are these characteristics shared by everyone?

SS: No, they differ from one person to another!

T: all of them?

SS: [**moments of pondering**] Some of them are the same like religion, language, culture...etc.

T: same for whom exactly?

SS: for us Algerians! [**not certain**].

T: do we share them with people from other cultures/nationalities?

SS: yes, with nearby countries like Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya.

T: if we exactly share them with people from these countries, what marks our difference then?

SS: [**moments of realization**].

As the discussion continued, it was noticed that learners sometimes generalize their cultural identity to include everyone unexceptionally and other times to include only them, Algerians. Such a conclusion coincides with the reductionist view of culture which stresses a direct relation

between culture and the geographic boundaries where it exists, i.e., people living in the same geographic location share the same aspects of culture (Baker, 2015). To help learners surpass such a false idea, the teacher directed the talk to the variety of cultural identities of people in Algeria.

Extract 3: *Surpassing a Generalized View of Cultural Identities in Algerian*

T: now tell me, do we all share the same cultural identity in Algeria? Do we all have the same cultural practices?

SS: no! Despite having some mutual aspects we differ.

T: When did you realize the difference? Was there a situation where you felt the difference?

S₁: usually in summer, whenever we spend a couple of days in Jijel [**an Algerian coastal eastern city**] I get to meet new people from different parts of the country. I always find them different starting from our dialect, our perception of things, and ways of behaving.

S₂: yes, our summer vacation is always spent in the west of Algeria like Mostaganem, Tlemcen, and Oran [**Algerian coastal western cities**] things are so different from us, I like how they are different despite all being Algerians. Western people in Algeria are like marocains, especially in their dialect and food, which have nothing to do with ours.

S₃: my sister lives in Ourgla [**a southern Algerian city**] whenever we visit her I get to mingle with her in-laws. They are such nice and well-mannered people. Yet I never felt to belong, they are different from us in all aspects, especially in their traditions and weddings which I attended once and they are not like ours [**by ours she refers to Algerian eastern weddings**].

As shown in Extract 3, learners get to share their experiences. This step was pivotal in their intercultural education because openness towards otherness desires knowing first then accepting others. It is worth noting to stress that despite helping learners to not generalize cultural identities in Algeria, as a case in point, it was essential to stress their similarities at the same time to stress the complexity of delimiting them. Having commenced the intervention with learners' culture and cultural identities was ideological as noted by Byram (2021) who stressed that students' cultural awareness is nurtured through familiarizing them with their culture and cultural identities at the regional, provincial, and national levels and then moving towards the international scale.

➤ **(In)tolerating Cultural Differences**

Throughout the intervention, learners had a nonlinear line of attitudes. While sometimes they were tolerant, open, and respectful towards some cultures and religions other times they were intolerant. Positive attitudes are the fuel to any effective intercultural communication. Yet it is daunting to change negative ones in a formal instructional setting. When discussing different cultural practices, traditions, and rituals, learners manifested (in)tolerance towards cultural diversity. The teacher asked learners to share aspects of cultures they find interesting. Their contributions covered Eastern and Western cultures. Eastern cultures like South Korean, Indian and Japanese cultures and Western like US and UK cultures. The following Extract represents learners' cultural attitudes:

Extract 4: *(In)tolerating Otherness*

S₁: the Korean culture is one of the best in my estimation. They are so advanced, their food seems amazing, their manners and punctuality as well.

S₂: [**in response to S₁**] Yet they are weird they eat everything weird!! Insects for example.

T: [in response to S₂] We might eat things they find weird as well!! We should not generalize, not all Koreans eat insects!

S₃: [after providing an exhaustive overview of the Indian culture and civilization] Am fond of the Indian culture, it is so vast and interesting. I think I got to love them from Bollywood movies [laughter].

S₄: [in response to S₃] With due respect, I do not see any uniqueness, whenever I watch reels on Instagram and TikTok I see their disgusting videos about their street food. I still do not know how people can eat such dirty food!! It is made with microbes, not love.

S₅: [in alliance with S₄] yes! Could not agree more, I once had an Indian friend. We used to talk a lot about us and them. She knows nothing about us, and indeed what we see in their series and movies is the truth. They worship many gods and their weddings are like festivals [laughter].

T: [in response to S₄ and S₅] Having talked to one person from India does not allow you to generalize. India is a big country with different cultures and religions.

S₆: am fond of Turkish culture. I find it very similar to ours in some aspects. Their food, language, and country are all beautiful. I once had a friend from Izmir, she was a medical student in Ankara, many things they do we do, like bridal h'annah for example. Their life in the series seems to be their reality.

S₃: [in response to S₆] My cousin studied there, but did not finish her studies and came back. They are racist she could not resist them. No way I would love some people who undervalue us Arabs. She always used to tell me their food was not that tasty as well.

As proffered in Extract 4, learners (in)tolerance towards others is based on their personal experiences which cannot be used to generalize a claim about a whole community. Learners seemed to lack the criticality of evaluating things objectively. They were either too open or too close. The discussion contained many shreds of evidence on learners' (in)tolerance, yet for precision purposes, only some of them are mentioned to exemplify. Extract 5 highlights learners' (in)tolerance towards western fiestas.

Extract 5: *(in)tolerance towards Western Fiestas*

T: what do non-muslims and non-Arabs celebrate as fiestas?

SS: Halloween, Christmas, Valentine, similar to us some national days.

T: what else?

SS: [collective silence].

T: the one you mentioned besides, eastern eggs, for instance, are western fiestas. Yet there exist a lot of fiestas you do not know about because they are not globally known. What do you know about the fiestas you mentioned?

SS: [providing different basic explanations].

T: [had to amply explain them and the reasons for their celebration].

S₁: some of their fiestas like Halloween have no solid ground! I bet some people celebrate it without knowing it.

S₂: now am concerned about Muslims who celebrate Halloween!! It is insane to celebrate a day where people aim to connect with dead people!!

S₃: people are becoming brainwashed with all that is Western! Western pop culture is gradually erasing ours!

S₄: I personally like Halloween despite the meaning it bears. I like its vibes, and I like the ones of Christmas as well, like if I ever get to be abroad I'll enjoy experiencing them, yet this does not mean I would give them meaning.

S₅: [in response to S₄] Why would you celebrate it? Do they fast Ramadan with us or celebrate the birth of our prophet (PBUH)?

Learners' intolerant attitudes can be attributed to their evaluation of other cultures from the perspective of their culture. Their evaluation is based on their Islamic principles most of the time; that is, all that is similar and right from the lenses of Islam is toleratable, while all that is not is intolerable. The following extract was excerpted from the discussion of the fourth unit entitled: 'Discovering Worldviews and Beliefs Variability' which demonstrates learners' intolerant attitudes towards some worldviews which do not exist in their culture and religion.

Extract 6: *(in)tolerance of Diverse Cultural Worldviews*

T: [explaining the difference between collective and individualistic societies].

S₁: With time am convinced that living individualistically is relaxing! Living in a society has become a burden. I wish I could live alone [a response from a male student].

S₂: could not agree more! Living alone would open up many opportunities for you and you will learn how to be fully independent [a response from a male student].

S₃: let me disagree here, there is no living alone in Islam due to its bad consequences for both genders [a response from a female student].

S₄: [in agreement with S₃] True, I see it as an opening door for the decline of one's manners, plus one would develop some psychological issues living alone [a response from a female student].

S₅: [in disagreement with S₄] I think this applies to females only!! We men are free to do whatever we want [laughter].

S₃: [in response to S₅] We are witnessing a moral decay while everyone is still living in their parental house, do you imagine how life would look like if we ever followed their exotic individualistic principles!!!!

As noticed, learners had no empathy and tolerance towards others' worldviews. Their ethnocentric tendency was a major barrier for them to accept the existence of unlike others. It was noticed that some students (students 1, 2, and 5 in Extract 6) had a complexity of superiority vs inferiority in which their continuous talks in the session mirrored their glorification of all that is Western while they undervalued some aspects of their culture. This might coincide with their massive exposure to other cultures through social media which never provides a full image but some stereotypical representations.

➤ **Dismantling Stereotypes and Prejudices about the Imagined Other**

Having learners reflect on their held stereotypes is pivotal in intercultural education (Houghton, 2010). Throughout the intervention, learners manifested different stereotypes and prejudices. Their stereotypes, which were picked from social media, had no solid sources but some generalizations learners believed. Before helping learners debunk their stereotypes, it was essential to familiarize them with the concept and its danger in intercultural communication. Surprisingly, some learners were found to not know what a stereotype and/or prejudice mean. Learners were asked to narrate personal stories about situations where they were badly treated because others held stereotypes about them. Extract 7 summarizes their stories:

Extract 7: *Discovering Stereotypes about Oneself*

S₁: after passing the baccalaureate exam I went to study translation in Annaba [an Algerian coastal city] where I resided with a lady from X city, I

thought we could be friends but she never opened up to me instead she constantly did bad things to me...one day she called me a 'sorcer' and told me that I and people from my city are known for doing sorcery. I cried a lot that day because of her nonsense claim.

S₂: my brother is pursuing PhD in an Algerian big city, he is always asked: 'Do you have a university in Guelma?, where did you study?', he always laughs at this but I know that deep down it hurts.

S₃: I always play video games online in which I get to make friends from different nationalities. They think of us Muslims and Arabs badly. They think we are wealthy, terrorists, outdated, and close-minded. I remember I had a friend from X country who once told me Islam is a barbaric religion, why do you stop eating for a whole day in Ramadan?

T: how did you all feel when others perceived you wrongly?

SS: bad, offended, desire to correct their misconceptions.

T: Do you think all people from the cities you mentioned hold the same view?

SS: yes!

T: It could not be. People may have different experiences which make them have different perceptions of imagined others.

Learners were also asked to speak out about the stereotypes they have about others. Different stereotypes, negative and positive, were debunked and challenged by the teacher. The teacher tried to carefully debunk their stereotypes for each student using some thought-provoking questions, this was possible due to the small number of students. Thereafter, they were asked to prepare posters for the upcoming session where they jot down some stereotypes they have about different cultures, their sources, and ways to revise them as a reflection task to them.

➤ **A Transition from Ethnocentrism to Ethnorelativism**

Helping learners move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism lies at the crux of fostering learners' intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). Through the intervention, learners gradually moved from an ethnocentric tendency to an ethnorelative one. Yet, this move is neither absolute nor constant but nonlinear. At the onset of the treatment, learners were ethnocentric due to their lack of ample understanding and empathy towards the unlike others. They manifested negative attitudes towards some cultural groups and religions in which they and their practices were subjectively evaluated and judged as manifested in the following extract which was excerpted from unit 1:

Extract 9: An Ethnocentric Tendency

T: [in a discussion of some wedding Traditions of X African Tribe].

S₁: [Laughter] Why would a girl swim half-naked to be liked by someone who would give her a piece of fabric as a sign that he liked her?

S₂: God created us dignified why do they do this to us!!! Women should be modest. Third world countries.

S₃: this is humiliating, I prefer to stay single forever instead of doing this.

S₄: [Laghter] Let me romanticize our traditions, by now and after all these discussions, I find them the best.

As noticed in Extract 9, learners had no acceptance of an African tradition which they made fun of. Learners evaluated it subjectively from the lenses of their culture and religion in which all that might coincide with things they are familiar with and common to them is right and accepted, whereas all that is strange is perceived negatively. After having discussed many topics and

narrated different stories, some shades of ethnorelativity were manifested. Learners got to see things from a critical perspective and base their evaluation on solid arguments. The following extract represents an instance of learners' adaptation of the ethnorelative tendency which was elicited when the teacher provided learners with some imaginary situations:

Extract 10: An Ethnocentric Tendency

T: suppose that you are studying abroad in a Western country and your roommate in the dormitory is a non-muslim who does not believe in the institution of marriage, supports the absolute freedom of women, and is an atheist, how would you feel and think of him/her?

S₁: I dunno exactly, especially since she would be an atheist, but I think I have to respect this. Mutual respect is a key. I would not interfere as these are her worldviews and preferences and I have no right to disagree on them.

S₂: As X [**student S₁ name**] mentioned, respect is mandatory. I would respect her if she respects my Islamic principles and things I find right.

S₃: it seems that it would be hard for me to act normally, I would not care about her not believing in the idea of marriage she is free, but being an atheist is intolerable. Well, it would depend on the situation, if she won't spread her thoughts to me, I would do the same, and be neutral despite disagreeing on this.

S₄: I would act normally as we do not see the world from the same standpoint. I would try to be open and understand her but always try to preserve my cultural identity and my principles.

S₅: I might try to convince her to convert to Islam or probably to have a religion, I would respect her but always try to not get influenced by her orientations.

As seen in the above extract, learners freed themselves from shallow prejudice of others by adopting a culture of peaceful coexistence. This outcome was reinforced by the findings they obtained from the analysis of their ethnographic interviews, a student reported, 'having interviewed different people on the topic of marriage was surprising. I thought we share the same perspective with others given our mutual religious, cultural, and social identity but it seems I was mistaken. Different people have different perspectives. Similarly, another one stated, 'when I asked my surroundings about feelings manifestations, their answers made me realise that I used to generalize what I believe in! I thought we all do not share our feelings openly, but I was wrong this seems to be applicable only to my family members'.

4.3 Descriptive and Inferential Statistics of the ICS Posttest

4.3.1 Descriptive Statistics of the ISC Posttest

Table 3: *Descriptive Statistics for ICS Posttest*

ICS Dimensions	Central Tendency (Mean)	Evaluation
interaction engagement	3,38	High ICS
respect for cultural differences	4,10	High ICS
interaction confidence	3,21	High ICS
interaction enjoyment	4,07	High ICS
interaction attentiveness	3,80	High ICS
Overall ICS	3,72	High ICS

Table 3 demonstrates descriptive statistics of students' ICS posttest. As shown above, learners at the end of the treatment had a high level of ICS (M=3,72). Their interaction engagement

(M=3,38), respect for cultural differences (M=4,10), interaction confidence (M=3,21), interaction enjoyment (M=4,07) and interactive attentiveness (M=3,80) were all equally high. Overall, students gained ICS after being engaged in storytelling circles.

4.3.2 Inferential Statistics of the ICC Posttest

To retain or reject the aforesaid hypotheses, the Wilcoxon Signed-ranks test was run. This test is for related samples only, i.e., it compares ranks of the same group before and after treatment (Gay et al., 2012). As the ICS scale is a non-parametric test which yields ordinal data categorized from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', the choice of this test is relevant for accurate and reliable results (Jamieson, 2004). The probability level of such a test which is usually used in social sciences is ($p=0,05$); that is, 95% of change on the dependent variable- ICS in this study- is because of the treatment and only 5% is by coincidence. Provided that the Sig. (P value) is $>0,05$ then no significant difference is detected before and after the treatment, thus, the null hypothesis is retained, but if $p=<0,05$ then there exists a difference within the same related sample which implies retaining the alternative hypothesis (Cohen et al., 2018).

Table 4: Wilcoxon Signed-ranks Test for ICS Pre and Posttests

ICS Dimensions	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig.
interaction engagement	14,35	165,58	-3,486	0,00(<0,05)
respect for cultural differences	16,68	185,95	-3,584	0,00(<0,05)
interaction confidence	13,49	126,95	-3,184	0,00(<0,05)
interaction enjoyment	17,69	212,25	-3,668	0,00(<0,05)
interaction attentiveness	16,76	197,69	-3,629	0,00(<0,05)
Overall ICS	16,91	183,95	-3,586	0,00(<0,05)

Table 4 exhibits the hypothesis testing inferential statistics. As demonstrated, the p-value for all dimensions of ICS is $p=0,00>0,05$ which means there exist significant differences between ICS before and after the treatment. Eventually, the null hypothesis implying that storytelling circles would not foster EFL learners' ICS is rejected and the alternative hypothesis assumes that storytelling circles foster learners' ICS is retained.

5. Discussion of Findings

Intercultural education is important for EFL learners to acquire intercultural competencies allowing them to be global citizens (Barrett & Golubeva, 2022). Fostering learners' ICS is an overriding aim which is seldom considered in the Algerian EFL classes (Bennouioua, 2023). At the beginning of the treatment, learners were found to have no ICS, instead, they were full of negative attitudes and stereotypes, and lack of cultural knowledge despite being in their third year. Dialogue-based learning through storytelling circles has opened up opportunities for learners to openly discuss and negotiate different culture-based concerns. For such, the teacher had the chance to adjust their wrong perceptions, help them recognize and debunk their held stereotypes, and more importantly be ethnorelative. However, assuming to the fullest that learners have become ethnorelative after the treatment is problematic since an instructional formal setting cannot accurately depict such progress. Learners have to be in an authentic sociocultural milieu to proffer their possession of ICS or not. Having adopted the storytelling technique has helped learners to adopt some positive attitudes towards the unlike others as they got to understand them instead of judging them from the lenses of their culture and religion. These findings coincide with those found by Ghosn (2002), Ellis and Brewster (2014), and

Mourão (2009) which revealed the impact of storytelling on cultural awareness and understanding of oneself and others. Also, learners were critically encouraged to base their evaluation and prejudgments of other cultures on explicit arguments instead of basing them on random information picked from various uncredible sources (Byram, 2021). By the end of the treatment, the results of the ICS posttest revealed that learners, compared to their pretests, have developed the different dimensions of ICS in which they become interculturally sensitive towards cultural diversity. These results mirror the positive effect storytelling circles have on learners' ICS.

In light of these results, this scrutiny outlines the following set of pedagogical recommendations to ameliorate intercultural education, in general, and intercultural sensitivity, in particular, in the Algerian EFL classes.

- Intercultural education in the Algerian EFL classes has to be stressed and prioritised, especially in oral expression classes.
- Intercultural sensitivity is essential for learners to act fitly in diverse sociocultural settings more research on plausible ways of fostering it is requested.
- Limited research has been found on the use of storytelling circles to foster ICS, hence, this single case study, which cannot be generalized, is an opportunity to apply similar interventions with control/experimental groups in other contexts.
- When fostering learners' ICS, a critical intercultural pedagogy is desired to free learners' from simplified generalization, help them critically challenge their wrongly held prejudgments, and understand the complexity and multifacetedness of culture and cultural identities.
- Following a non-essentialist paradigm of culture is plausible when fostering learners' ICS; that is, surpassing a reductionist view of culture teaching which restricts it to Anglophone cultures in the EFL classes.
- For an effective intercultural education, teachers themselves have to be individuals with heightened levels of intercultural sensitivity and awareness. Thus, systematic intercultural training directed to teachers is advised.

Conclusion

At the dawn of the 21st century, new desired skills and competencies have emerged while others declined. Intercultural competence is stressed more than at any time before given globalization which sets the geographical boundaries blurred. This scrutiny aimed at fostering learners' ICS through storytelling technique. ICS lies at the crux of any intercultural education as learners need to adopt an ethnorelative tendency and positive attitudes towards cultural differences to effectively act in intercultural encounters. Having adopted storytelling helped learners foster their ICS which moved from low to high. Learners were helped to understand and empathise with others and challenge their wrongly held stereotypes about others. Over and Beyond, this small-scale research contributed to the existing literature on ICS by providing a vivid technique to foster it. Yet, a replication of this work is needed to check its credibility given its exusion with a small case study which leaves it inept to be generalized.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Intercultural Sensitivity Pre and Posttest

Dear Students,

You are hereby informed to fill out the following intercultural sensitivity test. The results of this test will be used anonymously for research purposes only. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree), please pick the option that matches your opinion on the following statements.

- 1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
- 2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
- 3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.
- 4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.
- 5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 6. I can be as social as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 7. I do not like to be with people from different cultures.
- 8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.
- 9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.
- 12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.
- 13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.
- 14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.
- 17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.
- 18. I would not accept the opinions of people from other cultures.
- 19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meaning during our interaction.
- 20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.
- 21. I often give positive responses to my culturally distinct counterpart during our interaction.
- 22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally distinct persons.
- 23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or non-verbal cues.
- 24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.