

Intercultural Competence Among English Learners at Yarmouk University, Jordan

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Although English is the second language in Jordan and mandatory at its universities, intercultural competence among undergraduate students is still debated. It is therefore also debated that the lack of understanding of the vital importance of intercultural competence could be the reason for the poor learning of English among Jordanian students. Accordingly, this study comes to evaluate the intercultural competence among the undergraduate students at Yarmouk University, using a 5-point Likert questionnaire. The sample of the study consists of 150 students who were selected randomly and who passed the English courses EL 99 and EI 101. The questionnaires were analyzed by using the statistical package SPSS. The various hypotheses of the study were tested by using one sample *t*-test. The results of the study show that the students are not aware of the concept of culture and perceive English courses (EL 99 and EI 101) as the same as other taught ones. In addition, they think neither that the English courses can improve their intercultural competency nor that the integration of culture can do that in these courses.

Keywords: English, culture, competence, Jordan, education

Introduction

English is the second language in Jordan and a compulsory subject at schools and universities. Furthermore, most of the jobs in the country, such as in business, tourism, and higher education, favor English speakers. However, English language teaching is teacher-centered and bound to textbooks, which necessitates a reform in teaching standards to include programs that are culturally contextualized to cultivate students' cultural competence and as a result their English.

Foreign language teaching should be culture-bound (Valdes, 1986; Murphy, 1988). That is, detaching language from the culture that has inscribed its meaning, where languages become the true manifestation of a culture and people's value systems, cannot be acceptable (Ellis, 1986). A culture-bound person is the one

whose entire view of the world is determined by the value-perspective he has gained through a single cultural environment—who thus cannot understand or accept the point of view of another individual whose values have been determined by a different culture. He makes premature and inappropriate value judgments. He is limited in his understanding of the world. (Qu, 2010, p. 58)

A good strategy for staying clear of the premature status of judgment and not falling into the pit of prejudice is by learning a second language. Language is a carrier of culture and teaches the attitude and procedure in a way that a learner can adapt to its use and understand and appreciate the values of other cultures (Wei, 2005, p. 56; Tomalin, 2008). This means that people who speak the same language but do not share the same background

are less tolerant of each other than people who share neither language nor culture. The former already knows the language while the latter does not, but the latter has motivation, openness, and acceptance to learn both the others' language and the others' culture or background or ideas, in which the language exists; as a result, they are more tolerant to cultural aspects which they have not experienced as they were learning their own language and culture.

Generally, undergraduate students at Yarmouk University study two courses in English language as university requirements (English Language Skills EL 99 and EL 101). These courses acquaint the students with the basic knowledge of English, though not to a level that enables the student to enter the labor market or compete with other students from other universities in the region. The courses are currently offered online and thus lack the essence of communication and conversation. The textbooks are designed by the faculty members (Jordanians) of the Language Center of Yarmouk University, who are significantly attempting to delete all cultural aspects which do not fit with Jordanian culture. It is assumed that these inputs may affect the students' English language as an output. The study by Abu-Melhim (2009) showed that most of the English teachers in Jordan exhibited negative attitudes toward the teaching profession. In addition, many EFL instructors in Jordan are neither equipped nor prepared to teach English in a cultural context. This maybe because their teachers themselves taught them English detached from its cultural background (BaniAbido & Breen, 2010). This is the case even though all modern studies have proved that motivation and the willingness to learn are the most important factors in any learning environment.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the cultural competence among the undergraduate students at Yarmouk University. In other words, the study asks if teaching English at Yarmouk University enhances cultural competence among the students. The results of the study may guide further researches in the area of teaching English as a foreign language from students' perspective.

Study Hypotheses

The first hypothesis: Students are aware of what culture is; their own and the others. The questionnaire includes three items that were used to test the first hypothesis (see Table 1).

Table 1

The Items of the First Hypothesis in the Questionnaire

No	Items
1	Cultures are structured systems of patterned behavior.
2	I am aware of the differences and similarities across my own and the English culture.
3	My culture is superior to Briton and American cultures.

The second hypothesis: English can be studied in isolation from culture. Table 2 shows the items of the second hypothesis.

Table 2

The Items of the Second Hypothesis in the Questionnaire

No	Items
1	I am learning English, and I do not need to learn its culture.
2	I am not planning to have further courses in English.

(Table 2 continued)

No	Items
3	I rarely use English in everyday situations of my life.
4	I do not expect the reactions of native English speakers to certain actions.

The third hypothesis: English courses at Yarmouk University increase cultural competency. Table 3 shows the items of the third hypothesis.

Table 3

The Items of the Third Hypothesis in the Questionnaire

No	Items
1	The English courses at Yarmouk University show that English culture differs from what we see in movies and social media.
2	Online English courses at Yarmouk University enhance cultural competence.
3	The English lessons I had at Yarmouk University had adequate information about English culture.

The fourth hypothesis: Studying English in a cultural context enhances cultural competency. Table 4 shows the items of the fourth hypothesis.

Table 4

The Items of the Fourth Hypothesis in the Questionnaire

No	Items
1	I would like to have more friends who are native English speakers.
2	Most native English speakers are outgoing and friendly.
3	Knowing the English culture encourages me to try living in their homelands.

Operational Definitions

The term “culture” in this study means the “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1991, p. 215), where language education can develop knowledge, competence, and awareness in such a way that leads to better understanding of foreign culture (Fenner, 2000; Alptekin, 2002). The term “cultural competence” means “the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences” (Hammer, Bennet, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 422); it can be achieved through effective education (Diller & Moule, 2005). For the language to be learned effectively, the learner needs to learn about the normality of the target language, that is, the background or the context, in which the target language is spoken. Learning about the target language’s culture increases and assesses the learning process; it allows the learner to learn more easily and to learn the most natural form of the language.

Literature Review

“A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (Brown, 2000, p. 177). Language is a social institution that operates within a socio-cultural group or in “cultural niches” (de Saussure, 1988, p. 15). The setting of any language is the society and culture, and thus, the two interpenetrate and are intricately interwoven (Brown, 1987). This means that language is culturally transmitted (Jin & Coratzi, 1998); one learns better the language of the culture in which she/he is being raised. It is thus out on

display for the individual at an early stage in his/her life and is being used unintentionally or without much effort, and is considered more or less a norm for the individual.

English learning and culture are inseparable (Brown, 1994; Phillipson, 1992, p. 166), and there is a growing awareness of culture's role in the classroom (Sowden, 2007). Bennett (1993) introduced the term "fluent fool" to describe someone who speaks English but does not understand the language's social and philosophical content. According to McKay (2000), the learning of any language necessitates learning how to use the language correctly and appropriately according to native speaker norms. For example, many English idiomatic expressions are not literal, and so simply translating them literally would never give the intended meaning and would not link the idiomatic phrases to their context which allow them to mean what they mean.

The English language has become a necessity in many industries (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2013). Use of English as the lingua franca contributes to better business, satisfaction, and sustainability of industries (Kuppan, 2008). On the other hand, learning English on campus provides students with better acquaintance of the foreign cultures and understanding of others away from ethnocentrism. Consequently, an adaptive behavior will be seen on campus that contributes to students' success, achievement, and readiness for future job engagement. On the other hand, higher levels of acculturation are associated with higher levels of English proficiency and vice versa (Spender, 2011). In addition to that, surprisingly, the manner of learning English within its cultural framework, will allow the learner to identify to his/her culture and strengthen it; it will also expose the learner to different ways of thinking, and most importantly, it allows the learner to tolerate and include other cultures.

As cultural awareness underwrites language proficiency, a language curriculum should implicitly include elements of the culture, because language invariably reflects the speakers' knowledge and perception of the world and their cultural concepts and values (Byram, 1992, p. 169). Then again, educators should foster awareness of the local culture (Straub, 1999) and the target culture (Wei, 2005, p. 55) to nurture their intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses. In other words, the socio-cultural backgrounds of the students should be taken into consideration (Holliday, 1994; Coleman, 1996; McKay, 2002); otherwise, frustration and subsequent failure in language classrooms could happen (Holliday, 1994; Li, 1998). It is always a good idea to refer to issues and topics which are universal while learning a target language, as this encourages and motivates students to learn the target language and then move slowly to topics in which differences are incorporated, making learning easier.

Despite the prominent relationship between language and culture, some professionals advocate the term "neutral English" or "nuclear English" (Quirk, 1981), where they consider English as culturally unmarked and thus serviceable as a communication tool. They claim that English is international in character and cannot be bound to any culture (Chew, 1991). But in order to communicate successfully across languages and cultures, one must understand culturally different norms of interaction and people's values and thought (Saville-Troike, 2003). Yet, linguistically correct sentences could cause misunderstanding or confusion in different cultural context (Schulz, 2007). For this reason, English should be taught in a cultural context so that students can communicate better (Nguyen, 2017) beyond the context of their own culture (Marczak, 2010). Nevertheless, the lack of experience and knowledge about other cultures works toward minimizing cultural differences and emphasizing cultural commonalities among students (Sandell & Tupy, 2015). More experience and training may develop cultural competence among students (Altshuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003). The best method of teaching to enhance such a competency is probably class discussions (Carter-Merrill, 2006) and communications (Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & DeJaeghere, 2003).

A number of studies have used different approaches to enhance cultural competence. For example, Gomez-Rodriguez (2012) used English literary work for the purpose of developing cultural competence among English learners; Salem (2013) designed an intercultural course at the Lebanese University that developed the ability of the students to reflect on their own culture and the willingness to be more flexible, tolerant, and open toward otherness. A similar course that was designed by Georgiou (2011) for the English learners at the University of Nicosia revealed that the students portrayed cultural others positively. On the other hand, Sandell and Tupy (2015) found that undergraduate students who had improperly taught courses and/or experiences were ethnocentric, but after higher-impact activities, such as partnership and positive gains in their orientations to culture were noted.

Atay, Kurt, Camlibel, Ersin, and Kaslioglu (2009) investigated the opinions and attitudes of 503 Turkish teachers of English on integrating culture in teaching using questionnaires. They found that the teachers were aware of the role of culture in teaching English but unfortunately did not integrate it into their teaching. Li (2016) reviewed the literature about integrating culture in teaching English in China and found that most teachers have little if any idea of what culture should be and what should be taught in terms of cultural component.

The integration of culture in teaching English as a foreign language was the focus of many studies, such as the study by Ya-Chen (2008) who found that ethnographic interviews increased the cross-cultural awareness of Taiwanese students as well as their communication skills. Obaid (2015) studied cultural competence of Saudi students who study in the United Kingdom; he distributed questionnaires to 87 students. The results show that cultural awareness preparations, such as workshops aid to the attainment of cultural competence. In such workshops, stepping from one's comfort zone is imperative, as is the spirit of endeavor, where tribulations are considered a norm and effective for learning to take place.

Methods and Procedures

The sample of the study comprised 150 Jordanian undergraduate students, 72 males and 78 females, who were selected randomly. The selected subjects have passed the above two English language courses at Yarmouk University. This study is considered a descriptive one, where the various attributes of cultural competency were described in terms of frequencies and means. The collected data were analyzed using the statistical package of SPSS v. 13 to test the four major hypotheses from the students' point of view using a one sample *t*-test.

Table 5

Distribution of the Sample According to Gender

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	72	48.0
	Female	78	52.0
	Total	150	100.0

Instrument of the Study

The study used a Likert-type scale questionnaire of 5, in which all participants were asked 12 questions for the purpose of assessing how they ascribed to cultural aspects in language learning. The selected questions were adapted from the studies of Nault (2006), Wang (2008), Tokić (2013), and Hadziabdic, Safipour, Bachrach-Lindström, and Hultsjö (2016). The validity of the questionnaire was assured through evaluation by

faculty members at the Faculty of Education at Yarmouk University. The Cronbach's alpha that was run on the various items answered by all respondents is 0.762, which proves the reliability of the questionnaire.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The means and standard deviations for the items that are related to the first hypothesis "Students are aware of what culture is; their own and the others" are shown in Table 6 and Figures 1 and 2. The highest mean is 3.22, for Item 1.3, "My culture is superior to Briton and American cultures", then for Item 1.1, "Cultures are structured systems of patterned behavior" (3.15), while the lowest mean was 2.83, reported for Item No. 1.2, "I am aware of the differences and similarities across my own and the host language and culture". The mean of the three items is (3.07).

In regard to the second hypothesis, "English can be studied in isolation from culture", the highest mean (3.95) is reported for Item No. (2.3), "I rarely use English in everyday situations of my life", then Item No. 2.4, "I do not expect the reactions of native English speakers to certain actions"; then Item No. 2.2, "I am not planning to have further courses in English", then Item No. 2.1, "I am learning English and I do not need to learn its culture" with means of 3.67, 3.53, and 3.47 respectively. The averaged means for these items is 3.65.

The third hypothesis, "English courses at Yarmouk University increased cultural competency" shows the highest mean at 2.90 for Item No. 3.3, "The English lessons I had at Yarmouk University had adequate information about English culture", then for Items No. 3.1 and 3.2 "Online English courses at Yarmouk University enhance cultural competence" and "The English courses at Yarmouk University show that English culture differs from what we see in movies and social media" and with a similar mean of 2.88. The averaged means for these items is 2.89 with medium agreement degree.

The fourth hypothesis, "Studying English in a cultural context enhances cultural competency" has the highest mean at 4.20 for Item No. 4.2, "Communicating with native speakers at classroom would have enhanced my culture competency", then for Item No. 4.1, "I would like to have more friends who are native English speakers to enhance my cultural competency" with a mean of 3.65, and then for Item 4.3, "I prefer to learn English in its homeland" with a mean of 3.54. The averaged mean of the items is 3.66 with a medium agreement degree.

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviation for Each Item and Total Means of the Four Hypothesis (N = 150).

No.	Items	Mean	SD	Rank	Agreement degree
1.1	Cultures are structured systems of patterned behavior.	3.15	1.32	2	Medium
1.2	I am aware of the differences and similarities across my own and the host language and culture.	2.83	1.26	3	Medium
1.3	My culture is superior to Briton and American cultures.	3.22	1.11	1	Medium
Total means		3.07	1.23	-	Medium
2.1	I am learning English and I do not need to learn its culture.	3.47	0.97	4	Medium
2.2	I am not planning to have further courses in English.	3.53	1.12	3	Medium
2.3	I rarely use English in everyday situations of my life.	3.95	1.06	1	High
2.4	I do not expect the reactions of native English speakers to certain actions.	3.67	1.10	2	High

(table 6 continued)

Total means		3.65	1.06	-	Medium
3.1	The English courses at Yarmouk University show that English culture differs from what we see in movies and social media.	2.88	1.05	2	Medium
3.2	Online English courses at Yarmouk University enhance cultural competence.	2.88	0.96	2	Medium
3.3	The English lessons I had at Yarmouk University had adequate information about English culture.	2.90	1.01	1	Medium
Total means		2.89	1.00	-	Medium
4.1	I would like to have more friends who are English native speakers to enhance my cultural competency.	3.65	1.30	2	Medium
4.2	Communicating with native speakers at classroom would have enhanced my culture competency.	3.79	1.58	3	Medium
4.3	I prefer to learn English in its homeland.	3.54	1.10	1	Medium
Total means		3.66	1.32	-	Medium

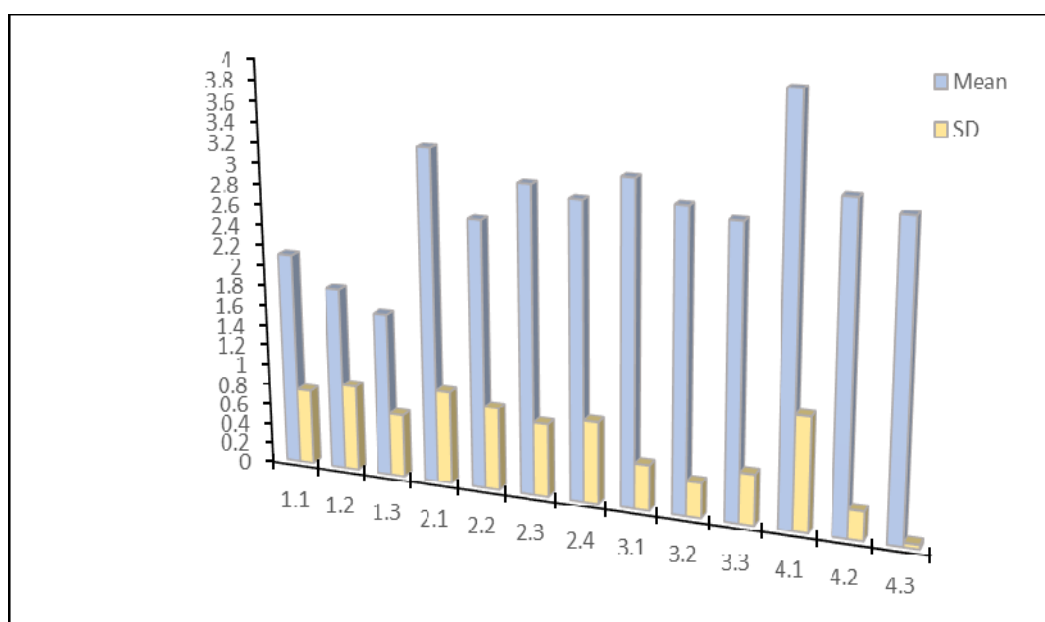


Figure 1. Mean and standard deviation for each item in the study.

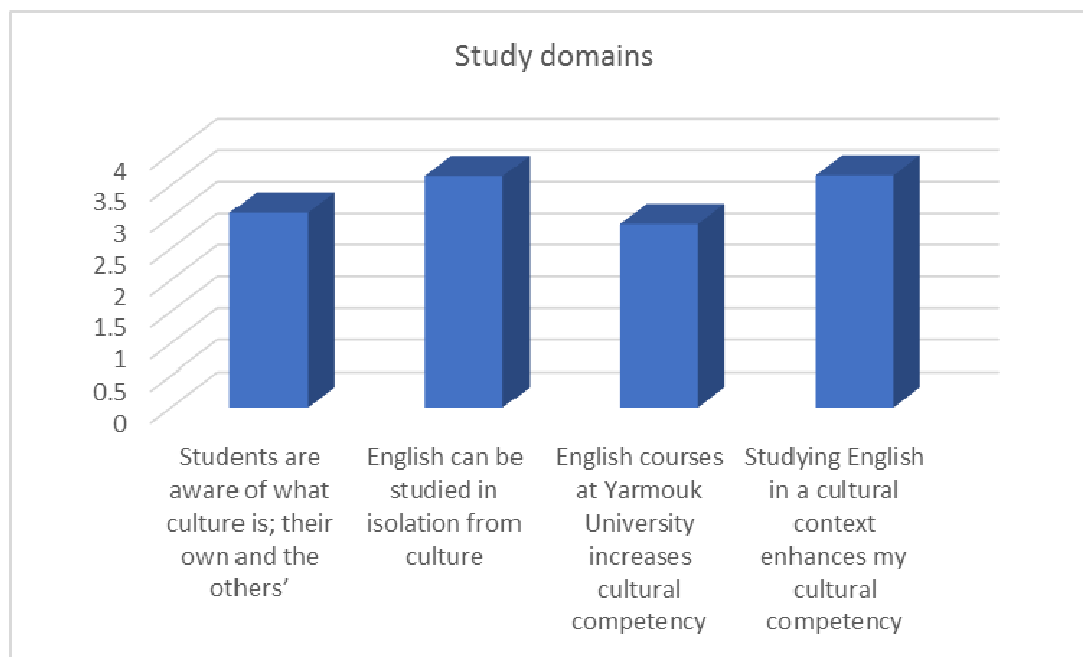


Figure 2. The means of study domains.

Hypotheses Testing

To test the various hypotheses in the study, the one-sample *t*-test was used within an SPSS environment. The results of the test are shown in Table 7. The first hypothesis, “Students are aware of what culture is; their own and the others” has a *t*-value of 1.11 with a significance of 0.48. The results also show a medium agreement degree that is not statistically significant; therefore, the first hypothesis is rejected. In other words, the students at Yarmouk University are not aware of the concept of culture. The second hypothesis has a *t*-value of 7.51 with a significance of 0.00 and a medium degree of agreement, which accepts the hypothesis. In other words, the students at Yarmouk University think that English can be studied in isolation from culture. The third hypothesis, “English courses at Yarmouk University increased cultural competency” is rejected because the *t*-value is 1.34, with 0.18 significance and moderate agreement. Here, the students were still convinced that even if the previous hypothesis were to be true, Yarmouk University courses are in effectual in enabling students to reach cultural competency. The last hypothesis was accepted, as the *t*-value is 7.35, with a significance of 0.00 and a moderate degree of agreement. Although the students agreed that English can be studied in isolation from culture, they think that cultural competency can be achieved once they communicate with native English speakers and once they have friendship relationships and/or live in an English-speaking country.

Table 7

The Result of (one Sample t-Test) on the Four Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Mean	SD	df.	<i>t</i> -value	Sig.	Result
Students are aware of what culture is; their own and the others'	3.07	1.23	149	1.11	0.48	Rejected
English can be studied in isolation from culture	3.65	1.06	149	7.51	0.00	Accepted
English courses at Yarmouk University increases cultural competency	2.89	1.00	149	1.34	0.18	Rejected
Studying English in a cultural context enhances my cultural competency	3.66	1.32	149	7.35	0.00	Accepted

Discussion

The study shows that the students at Yarmouk University are not aware of the concept of culture, neither their own culture nor the other's. Similar findings were also reported from students at the University of Jordan (Atoum & Al-Momani, 2016). Due to that, students at Yarmouk University perceive studying English as the same as any other university course; that is, they believe English can be studied in isolation from culture. They do not realize that it is through communicating in a particular language that culture is shaped and shared. This is rooted back to the method of teaching at primary and secondary schools, which, as mentioned earlier, is teacher and textbook centered. The study by Zughoul and Hussien (1985) at Yarmouk University reported that the students who are products of those schools tend to overestimate their abilities in the different language skills, which reflects their ignorance of the dimension of culture.

As previously stressed, culture is a vital component in teaching English (Genc & Bada, 2005); pure information develops neither learners' cultural awareness nor their critical thinking (Cakir, 2006). Students thus do not learn English correctly and quickly, since deleting background and culture from teaching aids causes more frustration and less progress in learning the target language. The study by Al-Hishoush (2006) reported that content analysis of some of the English textbooks in Jordan revealed more emphasis on the local Jordanian and Arab culture than on native English-speaking cultures, and that the views of other cultures were not always positive or neutral; an important component to learning a language is motivation, which can be reduced when all a student sees in his/her culture is negative attitudes toward the target language and culture. The findings of more recent research in Jordan stress the teaching of English apart from its culture but at the same time including the local culture to achieve better learning outcomes (Dweik & Al-Sayyed, 2015). The idea including the students' culture could be looked at as a means of encouragement, since the student already understands his/her culture, the innovation being that it is available within the framework of the English language. This could be a means of influencing the learner to accept, tolerate, and learn the culture which is attached to the target English language.

The students reported that the method of teaching English at Yarmouk University lacks the cultural context but focuses mainly on grammar (Asqalan, 2016), which is consistent with the study by Alzayyat (2014). Foreign language learning should go beyond the level of acquiring grammatical rules; foreign language learners need to know how to use the target language in the situated context (Neuner, 1997). Many of the terms, phrases, and expressions may remain vague (e.g., terms like partner and dating), or misinterpreted, and when intercultural differences are not perceived as "different," they are perceived as right or wrong (Zahrana, 1995). Consequently, this may impact how students will communicate effectively in English. Students should realize that there are no such things as superior and inferior cultures, and that there are differences among people of distinctive cultures as well (Wang, 2008, p. 4). However, the methods of teaching English at most of the Jordanian universities do not go beyond the classical way, which challenges teachers, makes teaching be a difficult task (Yassin, 2015), and guarantees weak learners or speakers of English as a result.

The subjects of the study deny that English as taught at Yarmouk University and other state universities in the country increase cultural competency (Ahmad & Bani-Khaled, 2013). Instead, they stressed the need to have real communications with native speakers or having friendly relationships rather than indoctrinational teaching. This situation is mainly the result of English being learned apart from its culture. Bada (2000) stated that such learners will have problems in communicating meanings when exposed to society's target cultural

elements. The students' English background at Yarmouk University does not qualify them to communicate effectively and to convey the basic skills and terms usually used in practical life (Zughoul & Hussien, 1985).

Contrary to the students' conception, the study by Wong (2009) showed that untrained native speaker teachers were incapable of explaining grammar and vocabulary, but according to the studies by Cheung (2002) and Mahboob (2004), students view speaking ability and lexical and cultural knowledge as the strengths of native speaker teachers. However, non-native English speakers are capable of acquiring the skills of speaking idiomatically correct language and having a diverse knowledge of the cultural connotations of the English language (Braine, 1999).

Intercultural competence among the students at Yarmouk University is relatively modest, which could be reflected in their attitudes, awareness, and cultural knowledge. The current English courses and the methods of teaching do not improve the communication skills of the students from their own perspective. Based on the results of the questionnaire, the attitudes of most of the students remained unchanged after completing the English courses. Attitude is defined as "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, 1997, p. 165). This is a matter that needs to be developed and integrated in the English courses at Yarmouk University.

Conclusions

Teaching English in a cultural context improves intercultural competence but also needs to incorporate the local culture of the learners to enhance awareness and eliminate ethnocentrism. Due to the preoccupied perception about English among the undergraduates and the nature of the taught materials in English courses (EL 99 and El 101), the level of the students' intercultural competence does not reflect effective communication of meanings; that is, meanings do not seem to have been communicated to students.

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