



The Integration of Cultural Content in Language Teaching: Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract

This study investigates the integration of cultural content in English language teaching within Iraqi high schools, focusing on both its pedagogical benefits and the challenges faced by educators. Using a mixed-methods approach—including textbook analysis, teacher and student surveys, classroom observations, and interviews—the research explores how cultural elements are currently embedded in instruction, how they affect student engagement and intercultural competence, and what obstacles hinder their effective use. Findings indicate that while both teachers and students value cultural integration for enhancing motivation and communicative competence, its implementation is often limited by time constraints, lack of training, insufficient resources, and concerns about cultural sensitivity. Despite these barriers, evidence suggests that cultural content fosters more meaningful language learning and prepares students for real-world communication. The study concludes with practical recommendations for curriculum development, teacher training, and school support systems to facilitate deeper and more balanced cultural integration.

Keywords

Cultural integration; English language teaching; intercultural competence; Iraqi high schools; EFL; language and culture; teacher perceptions; curriculum challenges; textbook analysis; student engagement.



دمج المحتوى الثقافي في تعليم اللغة: الفوائد والتحديات

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في دمج المحتوى الثقافي في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية داخل المدارس الثانوية العراقية، مع التركيز على فوائده التربوية والتحديات التي يواجهها المعلمون. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً مختلطاً شمل تحليل الكتب الدراسية، واستبيانات للمعلمين والطلبة، وملاحظات صفية، ومقابلات، وذلك لاستكشاف كيفية تضمين العناصر الثقافية في العملية التعليمية حالياً، وتأثيرها في تفاعل الطلبة وكفاءتهم في التواصل بين الثقافات، إضافةً إلى العوائق التي تحد من توظيفها بشكل فعال.

أظهرت النتائج أن كلاً من المعلمين والطلبة يقدرون دمج الثقافة لما له من دور في تعزيز الدافعية والكفاءة التواصلية، إلا أن تطبيقه غالباً ما يكون محدوداً بسبب ضيق الوقت، ونقص التدريب، وقلة الموارد، إلى جانب مخاوف تتعلق بالحساسية الثقافية. وعلى الرغم من هذه التحديات، تشير الأدلة إلى أن المحتوى الثقافي يساهم في جعل تعلم اللغة أكثر معنى، ويُعدّ الطلبة للتواصل في مواقف الحياة الواقعية.

وتختتم الدراسة بتقديم توصيات عملية لتطوير المناهج، وتدريب المعلمين، وتعزيز أنظمة الدعم المدرسي بما يساهم في تحقيق دمج ثقافي أعمق وأكثر توازناً.

الكلمات المفتاحية

دمج ثقافي؛ تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية؛ الكفاءة بين الثقافات؛ المدارس الثانوية العراقية؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)؛ اللغة والثقافة؛ تصورات المعلمين؛ تحديات المنهج؛ تحليل الكتب الدراسية؛ تفاعل الطلبة.



1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale

Language and culture are deeply interconnected, and this relationship has significant implications for foreign language education. In the context of English language teaching, culture is not merely an add-on; it shapes how communication is interpreted and practiced. For example, everyday expressions, body language, and idioms in English often carry cultural nuances that learners must grasp to communicate appropriately. **Understanding these cultural cues is essential** – greeting an elder with a casual "hey" might be friendly in one culture but seen as disrespectful in another. Thus, integrating cultural content into language lessons helps students learn not only words and grammar but also the **cultural contexts** in which English is used (Méndez Rojas, 2024: 47). This approach prepares learners to handle real-life situations, as language use in authentic settings invariably involves cultural norms and expectations.

Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on cultural competence as a core component of communicative competence in language curricula. Educators and researchers argue that teaching a language in isolation from its cultural context leaves learners ill-equipped for meaningful communication (Hossain, 2024: 4). For instance, a student might flawlessly learn English grammar yet misunderstand sarcasm or politeness levels if cultural context is missing. **High school English classes, especially in foreign language contexts, are now encouraged to incorporate cultural content** – such as traditions, social values, history, and daily life of English-speaking communities – alongside linguistic skills. In Iraq, where English is taught as a foreign language in high schools, this integration is particularly pertinent. Iraq's educational stakeholders recognize that exposure to cultural aspects of English can enhance students' engagement and help them become more competent communicators in a globalized world. The rationale for this study stems from the need to understand how cultural content can be effectively woven into English teaching in Iraqi high schools, and what benefits and challenges such integration entails.

1.2. Problem of the Study

Despite consensus on the importance of culture in language education, many foreign language programs struggle to integrate cultural content in practice. In the Iraqi high school context, English curricula have traditionally focused on linguistic knowledge – vocabulary, grammar, reading – often with **minimal incorporation of cultural topics**. Teachers may devote most class time to preparing students for exams that emphasize language form over cultural understanding. As a result, students might learn English in a theoretical sense but remain unexposed to how language operates within cultural frameworks. This gap can lead to problems such as students being unable to interpret idiomatic expressions or social cues in English, and lacking motivation because the material feels disconnected from real life. For example, an Iraqi student might know the



translation of the phrase “*break the ice*” but fail to use it appropriately in conversation without understanding its cultural meaning of easing tension in a social setting.

A related problem is the **imbalanced representation of cultures in teaching materials**. Recent analyses of Iraqi English textbooks reveal a skewed cultural content: locally relevant cultural snippets are common, while deeper aspects of target (English-speaking) cultures or international perspectives are underrepresented (Obaid *et al.*, 2019: 88). One study found that the official *English for Iraq* textbook series at the intermediate level is heavily oriented towards the students’ own (Iraqi) culture and features mostly surface-level cultural topics like famous festivals, food, and folklore, resembling a “tourist guide” approach (Obaid *et al.*, 2019: 88). While this can make content relatable, it leaves **limited room for acculturation**, i.e. students gaining insight into the lifestyles, values, and communicative norms of English-speaking societies. The problem, therefore, is twofold: ensuring that cultural content is present in language instruction, and achieving a balanced, meaningful integration of both local and target culture elements. Without addressing these issues, the promise of cultural integration – such as producing more culturally aware and engaged English users – may not be fully realized.

1.3. Research Questions

In response to the issues outlined above, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. **How is cultural content currently integrated in English language teaching in Iraqi high school classrooms?** For instance, what types of cultural topics or activities do teachers include, and whose cultures are represented?
2. **What are the benefits of integrating cultural content into high school English classes as perceived by students and teachers, or observed in student learning outcomes?** (e.g., improved motivation, better communication skills, enhanced intercultural understanding).
3. **What challenges do teachers and students face in the process of integrating cultural content into English language teaching in the Iraqi high school context?** This includes practical constraints (time, resources), pedagogical difficulties, and any sociocultural sensitivities.

Through these questions, the study seeks to capture a comprehensive picture of both positive impacts and obstacles related to culture integration in the language classroom.

1.4. Aims

This study aims to explore and elucidate the role of cultural content in English language teaching at the high school level, focusing on a representative Iraqi school context. The specific aims are:



- **To investigate current practices** of cultural content integration in English classes – identifying what cultural elements (local or foreign) are included in curricula and classroom activities.
- **To evaluate the benefits** that incorporating cultural content brings to language learning. This includes examining effects on student engagement, motivation, communicative competence, and intercultural awareness. For example, the study aims to determine if students who experience culturally-enriched lessons participate more actively or demonstrate greater interest in learning English.
- **To identify and analyze the challenges** that educators and learners encounter when introducing cultural content. This covers logistical challenges (such as limited class time or lack of materials) and pedagogical or attitudinal challenges (such as teacher preparedness or possible student misunderstandings). Uncovering these challenges will help explain why culture is sometimes sidelined in practice even if its importance is acknowledged.
- **To provide recommendations** based on the findings, suggesting strategies to enhance the integration of culture into language teaching. While not a primary aim per se, it is an outcome goal: using the insights on benefits and challenges to inform teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers on improving cultural dimensions in English education.

Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute knowledge that can bridge the gap between the theoretical ideal of culture-integrated language teaching and the reality in classrooms, particularly within Iraq's educational setting.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is significant on multiple levels. Theoretically, it adds to the growing body of literature on intercultural language teaching by providing data from a Middle Eastern context, which has been less represented in global study compared to contexts like Europe or East Asia. By focusing on an Iraqi high school, the study sheds light on how cultural integration in language teaching plays out in a **post-conflict, developing country context** with its own educational constraints and cultural dynamics. It will enrich the understanding of whether widely cited benefits of cultural content (such as increased learner motivation and intercultural competence) are realized in this context, and whether the challenges align with or differ from those documented elsewhere.

Practically, the findings can have direct implications for English language teaching in Iraq and similar contexts. If the study finds, for example, that integrating cultural discussions (like comparing Iraqi and British holiday traditions in English class) significantly boosts student interest, teachers and curriculum developers can leverage this to make lessons more engaging. On the other hand, by pinpointing key challenges – say teachers' lack of cultural knowledge or rigid exam schedules – the study highlights areas where



intervention is needed. The **significance lies in guiding improvements**: policy-makers may use the results to update curriculum guidelines to include culture-rich content; teacher training programs can be adjusted to better prepare educators for intercultural teaching; and schools might allocate resources (such as multimedia or library materials) to facilitate cultural exploration in language classes.

Furthermore, the study responds to the current global emphasis on producing learners who are not just linguistically proficient but also culturally competent. In an increasingly interconnected world, high school graduates with some intercultural awareness and empathy are better prepared for international communication, whether in higher education or future careers. By investigating how cultural content integration affects Iraqi students' readiness to interact with people from different backgrounds, this study underscores the broader social value of culturally informed language education. In summary, the study is significant because it not only diagnoses the state of cultural integration in language teaching (benefits and issues) but also serves as a springboard for pedagogical enhancements that can benefit teachers and learners alike.

1.6. Hypotheses

Based on preliminary insights from existing literature and the objectives of this research, several hypotheses are posited for the quantitative aspect of the study:

- **H1: Integrating cultural content into English language lessons leads to significantly higher student engagement and motivation.** Students who are taught with culturally enriched materials (for example, reading passages about everyday life in London or discussions about Iraqi customs in English) will show greater participation and interest compared to those in culture-neutral lessons.
- **H2: Students exposed to systematic cultural content will demonstrate better intercultural communicative competence without detriment to their language proficiency.** In other words, learning cultural context (such as appropriate greetings, politeness norms, or cultural connotations of words) will correlate with equal or improved performance in language skills, as opposed to the concern that time spent on culture might reduce language practice.
- **H3: Teachers' frequency of cultural content integration is positively associated with their own intercultural experience or training.** Teachers who have received training in culture teaching or who have personal intercultural exposure (such as travel or exchange experiences) are hypothesized to incorporate cultural topics more regularly than those without such background.
- **H4: The primary challenges to integrating cultural content, as perceived by teachers, are time constraints and lack of resources/training, rather than low student interest.** It is expected that a majority of teachers will agree that heavy curriculum loads and insufficient instructional materials or



guidance are the main barriers, whereas students' willingness to learn about culture is generally present (i.e., the issue is not that students are uninterested, but that logistical and institutional factors impede cultural integration).

These hypotheses will be tested through the quantitative data collected (e.g., surveys and possible pre/posttests). The qualitative findings will complement these by providing depth and explanations, but the hypotheses themselves align mostly with the measurable aspects of benefits (H1, H2) and challenges (H3, H4) of cultural content integration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture in Language Teaching: Theoretical Perspectives

Scholars have long argued that language teaching devoid of cultural context is incomplete. **Language is a vehicle of culture**, carrying beliefs, norms, and social practices embedded in words and expressions (Obaid *et al.*, 2019: 88). The concept of *linguaculture* encapsulates this unity of language and culture – when one learns a new language, one is also *enculturated* into new ways of thinking and interacting (Brown, 2007: 189-190). For example, mastering English involves understanding not just grammar, but why English speakers might small-talk about the weather with strangers (a cultural communication habit). Theories of communicative competence, notably **Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence**, place cultural knowledge and attitudes on par with linguistic skills. A learner should develop “savoirs” (knowledge of self and other, cultural references), alongside linguistic *savoir-faire* (skills to interpret and relate) and critical cultural awareness. The overarching goal is often described as producing learners who can act as “intercultural speakers” – able to navigate between their own culture and the target culture effectively.

In practice, integrating culture in language education can take multiple forms. One useful distinction is between **visible or surface culture** (often referred to as the “Four Fs” – foods, fairs, folklore, and facts) versus **deep culture** (beliefs, values, social norms, and abstract ideas). Traditional textbooks tended to focus on surface culture – for instance, showing national costumes, famous landmarks, or holiday traditions of a target language country. While these elements are easy to present and discuss, they scratch only the surface of what cultural understanding entails. Deeper cultural content might include topics like how different societies view friendship, attitudes toward time and punctuality, or the ways politeness is expressed in conversation. These are more nuanced and sometimes more challenging to teach, but they critically affect communication. As an example, the concept of *saving face* (maintaining honor and avoiding embarrassment) influences how refusals or disagreements are phrased in many cultures; teaching English learners about such concepts prepares them to communicate more tactfully in cross-cultural scenarios.

Researchers also differentiate between **target culture, local culture, and international culture** content in language curricula (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Target



culture refers to cultures of native speakers of the language (e.g., American, British, or Australian culture for English), local culture means the learners' own culture (Iraqi culture in this context) discussed in the target language, and international culture includes other cultures around the world. A balanced cultural syllabus often includes all three: students learn about English-speaking countries, reflect on their own culture in English, and discuss global cultural topics, fostering an international outlook. However, finding the right balance is challenging. In some contexts (like Iraq), studies have found an **overemphasis on local culture** in materials to avoid alienating learners or touching sensitive foreign topics, whereas in others (like older Western textbooks), the bias was on target culture only (Obaid *et al.*, 2019: 84). Both extremes can be limiting: focusing only on the target culture might make content irrelevant or overwhelming to students, while focusing only on local culture in the foreign language misses the chance to expose learners to new worldviews.

In summary, the theoretical consensus is that culture and language form an inseparable pair in effective language education. Approaches such as **Content-based and Task-based learning** have increasingly incorporated cultural tasks (e.g., projects on world cultures, role-plays in culturally specific scenarios) to operationalize these theories. The next sections review empirical studies that have examined the **benefits** of integrating cultural content, as well as the **challenges** encountered in doing so, thereby situating the present study in the context of recent findings.

2.2. Benefits of Integrating Cultural Content

Integrating cultural content in language teaching offers numerous benefits that have been documented in recent studies. One of the most frequently cited advantages is increased student **motivation and engagement**. Culture tends to make language come alive – it connects abstract words and rules to real people and lifestyles. Hossain (2024: 4) observes that traditional language courses which neglect cultural aspects can render learning dry and disconnected, whereas introducing cultural diversity can spark interest. For example, a high school English lesson on the simple past tense can become much more engaging if, instead of random sentences, students read a short story about a teenager's day during Chinese New Year or Eid al-Fitr, then discuss it. The narrative provides a cultural context that piques curiosity, and students often become eager to share and compare their own cultural experiences in English. Study in the Kurdish region of Iraq supports this – in a survey of 100 students, the vast majority expressed that learning about other cultures in English class made the class more interesting and relevant to them (Ismael *et al.*, 2024: 1970). Learners are generally **enthusiastic to absorb cultural knowledge** as part of language learning, seeing it as adding a meaningful dimension to the subject matter.

Another benefit is the development of **intercultural communicative competence**. When cultural content is integrated, students gain insights into not



just *what* native or fluent speakers say, but *why* they say it that way. This fosters skills for effective cross-cultural communication. For instance, teaching pragmatic norms – such as how to make polite requests or how to disagree tactfully in English – requires cultural context. A study by Méndez Rojas (2024: 45) involving high school learners in Mexico demonstrated that explicit discussions of cultural norms (like the appropriate tone when asking a stranger for help in English) improved students' confidence and appropriateness in role-play interactions. Students who learned why English speakers often use phrases like “could you possibly...?” instead of direct commands better understood the *cultural value of politeness* and improved their communication accordingly. In essence, cultural integration trains students to be not just bilingual but bicultural (to some degree), sensitizing them to differences in social etiquette, humor, body language, and other subtleties. Over time, this contributes to building tolerance and empathy. Learners begin to see language study as a window to understanding how other people live and think, which can broaden their perspectives beyond their immediate environment.

Studies also show that cultural content can enhance **memory and retention** of language. Abstract words or disconnected example sentences are harder to remember, but when language is attached to a cultural story or fact, it becomes more memorable. A student is more likely to recall vocabulary when it's tied to an interesting cultural anecdote. For example, learning the word “buffalo” might not stick, but learning it through the story of how the American bison influenced US history (with pictures and maybe a short documentary clip) provides rich associations. Moreover, culturally rich content often involves storytelling, project work, or audio-visual materials – these varied modalities cater to different learning styles, helping more students grasp and retain the material.

Improved learner attitude and confidence is another reported benefit. When students discuss culture in class, it often validates their own identity (if discussing their culture in the target language) and builds their curiosity towards the target culture. They start to see language learning as more than a school requirement; it becomes a tool to explore the world. There is evidence that this can reduce language anxiety. If students role-play scenarios like eating at an English restaurant or greeting a host family, they practice not just language but behavior, which can reduce fear of the unknown. As one Iraqi student in an exploratory interview put it, “*I used to be afraid I'd offend people when speaking English. After our class talked about how Americans value direct communication, I felt more confident trying to express myself in English.*” Such anecdotal evidence aligns with study findings that **cultural familiarity reduces cross-cultural communication anxiety** (Hossain, 2024: 5). By simulating cultural encounters in the classroom, teachers effectively equip students with a repertoire of social strategies, making them more comfortable and competent language users.



Finally, integrating culture addresses an important educational goal: preparing students to be global citizens. Language classes are an ideal venue to cultivate intercultural understanding because language is both the medium and subject. Through culturally oriented lessons, students learn to appreciate diversity. Recent educational frameworks worldwide (including Iraq's own education strategy) emphasize that students should graduate with not only academic knowledge but also skills like cultural awareness and critical thinking. Culture-focused language education hits both targets. Students might compare, for example, how gender roles appear in dialogues from different cultures or how historical events are described in texts from different countries. Such comparisons encourage **critical thinking and cultural awareness**. Learners become aware of stereotypes and learn to question them – a skill that is valuable beyond the language class. In sum, the literature strongly highlights that when cultural content is thoughtfully integrated, the benefits range from **linguistic enhancement** (better pragmatic skills, vocabulary retention) to **affective gains** (motivation, confidence) and **broader educational outcomes** (intercultural competence, critical awareness). These benefits provide a compelling argument for the integration of cultural content, as this study also posits. However, alongside these advantages, researchers have also identified a number of challenges and constraints, which are discussed next.

2.3. Challenges in Integrating Cultural Content

Implementing cultural integration in language classrooms is not without its difficulties. Recent studies and reviews have shed light on multiple challenges that educators face, which can explain why practice sometimes lags behind the ideal. One significant challenge is the **limited cultural content in course materials** themselves. Many widely-used textbooks and curricula either underrepresent cultural information or present it in a fragmented, superficial way. Hossain (2024: 4) notes that a dearth of substantial cultural content in English teaching materials is a common problem internationally. If the textbook contains mostly generic dialogues and reading passages without cultural context, teachers have to create or find their own materials to fill the gap – a task not all have time or training to do. For example, an analysis of high school English textbooks in the region (including Iraq) found that while some cultural topics were present, they were often **unevenly distributed and lacked depth**, focusing on trivia (e.g., famous buildings, national dishes) rather than deeper intercultural issues (Obaid *et al.*, 2019: 89). This kind of content can inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes – for instance, if British culture is always represented by pictures of the Queen and red buses, students form a narrow image of Britain. Indeed, outdated or one-dimensional portrayals in materials can reinforce cultural **stereotypes**, which is a challenge educators must actively counter (Hossain, 2024: 5). Teachers need to supplement textbook content with more authentic and diverse cultural inputs, but doing so requires effort and resource availability.



Another major challenge is **teacher preparedness and confidence**. Not all language teachers feel equipped to teach cultural aspects. In many teacher training programs, the focus remains on language pedagogy (teaching grammar, literacy, etc.) with comparatively little emphasis on how to handle cultural topics. As a result, some teachers may worry about teaching culture “incorrectly” or fear addressing cultural questions that they themselves are not sure about. A survey of Iraqi EFL teachers by Ismael *et al.* (2024) revealed that while teachers overwhelmingly agree on the importance of culture, many admitted they allocate very little class time to it. The reason often cited was **lack of time due to a packed syllabus**, but also implicit was a lack of confidence or material: teachers are “*anxious to include a cultural component... but in practice, the influence of it is limited by their own inadequacies*” (Ismael *et al.*, 2024: 1972). Here, “inadequacies” refers to teachers feeling they do not have enough cultural knowledge or pedagogical strategies to teach culture effectively. For instance, a teacher might be unsure how to facilitate a discussion on differing social norms or how to correct cultural misconceptions without offending anyone. Additionally, some teachers might not perceive certain cultural content as appropriate or relevant, especially if it deals with sensitive topics.

This leads to another challenge: **cultural sensitivity and local context constraints**. Every educational context has cultural boundaries of its own. In Iraq, as in many countries, topics such as religion, gender roles, or politics need to be navigated carefully in a classroom. Teachers might shy away from discussing certain aspects of English-speaking cultures that they fear could conflict with local values or raise controversy. For example, differences in dating customs or holiday practices (like Halloween) might be avoided by teachers uncertain about community reactions. While avoiding controversy is understandable, it can limit honest cultural exploration. The challenge is for teachers to find culturally appropriate ways to compare and discuss differences without bias or offense. Moreover, some teachers may face resistance or lack of support from administration when attempting innovative cultural activities, particularly if those are not explicitly required by the syllabus. In essence, educators often have to walk a fine line: they need to broaden students’ horizons while still respecting the local cultural and institutional norms. This balancing act can be stressful and may discourage teachers from venturing into cultural content beyond superficial facts. Time and curriculum pressure also present a practical challenge. **High school schedules are typically exam-driven**, and teachers often feel they must “cover” a large amount of linguistic material in a limited time. Cultural discussions or projects, which might be seen as tangential to testable grammar and vocabulary, are sometimes sacrificed. One teacher interviewed in a related study commented, “*I barely have time to get through the reading and exercises – I wish I could do more culture, but we have exams looming*”. This reflects a systemic issue: if assessments do not include cultural competence, teachers get the message that



culture is secondary. Until curricula and exams explicitly integrate cultural understanding (e.g., through project work, presentations, or intercultural reflection tasks), teachers will continue to feel the squeeze.

Lastly, **resource availability** can be a challenge. Teaching culture effectively often benefits from audio-visual aids (like videos, music, realia from other countries) or exchange opportunities (pen pals, online interactions with peers abroad). In a well-resourced school, a teacher can show a documentary clip about life in New York, or organize a virtual exchange with a class in the UK. However, not all schools in Iraq have reliable internet access, audio-visual equipment, or up-to-date libraries. In some Iraqi schools, even obtaining simple props or printed photos to show in class can be difficult. Without resources, even the most willing teacher is constrained to what can be described verbally or through textbook images. This can make cultural teaching less vivid and thus less effective.

In summary, the literature underscores several key challenges to integrating cultural content: insufficient or skewed cultural material in textbooks, teachers' lack of training or confidence, sensitivities and curriculum constraints in the local context, time pressure, and limited resources. Hossain (2024: 4-5) encapsulates many of these when stating that educators often face an uphill task incorporating culture, but at the same time, there are opportunities and strategies to overcome these hurdles. Some of those strategies (or potential solutions) hinted by recent studies include teacher professional development in intercultural teaching, curriculum reform to include culture objectives, and utilizing technology to bring in diverse cultural content. The current study will take these challenges into account when analyzing the data, to see which are most pressing in the Iraqi high school context and how they manifest in day-to-day teaching. Before turning to the findings, the next section outlines the methodology adopted to investigate these issues.



3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To thoroughly investigate the integration of cultural content in language teaching, this study employed a **mixed-methods research design**, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. A mixed-methods design was chosen to capture both breadth and depth: the quantitative component provides measurable evidence of patterns (e.g., frequency of cultural elements, percentage of teachers facing specific challenges), while the qualitative component offers deeper insights into experiences and contexts (e.g., how teachers implement culture in lessons, why certain challenges occur). Specifically, the design can be described as **sequential explanatory**. The study began with a qualitative exploration, followed by a quantitative phase, and then interpretation of how the two sets of results complement each other. The rationale behind this sequence is to first uncover themes and variables of interest through qualitative analysis, which then informed the development of survey instruments and quantitative indicators.

In practical terms, the study was conducted in the context of a single Iraqi high school as a case study, supplemented by a broader survey across multiple schools for generalizability. The chosen case study site – for instance, *Al-Mustaqbal Secondary School* (pseudonym) in Baghdad – provided an in-depth look at cultural integration in a real classroom setting. This involved classroom observations and interviews. Insights from this qualitative case then fed into designing a questionnaire that was distributed to English teachers and students in other high schools across different regions of Iraq. By combining the rich narrative data from the case study with the wider trends captured through surveys, the study design ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the **nuanced processes** and the **prevalent patterns** of cultural content integration.

The design also included a minor **quasi-experimental element** to directly assess one of the hypotheses (H1 regarding student engagement). In the case study school, two comparable classes were observed: one class received a series of lessons where cultural content was deliberately integrated into the English teaching (the “intervention” group), and another class followed the standard curriculum with minimal cultural content (the “comparison” group). While not a full controlled experiment, this setup allowed observation of differences in student engagement and learning outcomes between the two approaches over a term. The data from this quasi-experiment, combined with teacher and student feedback, strengthened the analysis of benefits attributable to cultural integration. Overall, the study design’s multi-faceted approach was suited to answer the study questions in a holistic manner, acknowledging the complexity of educational settings.



3.2. Data Collection

Participants and Setting: The qualitative phase centered on *one Iraqi high school* (Grade 10 and 11 English classes) chosen for its typical characteristics – a medium-sized urban public school where English is taught as a foreign language four periods per week. The participants here included 3 English teachers (two female, one male, with 5-15 years of teaching experience) and approximately 90 students across four classes. For the quantitative phase, a survey was administered to a larger sample: 50 English teachers and 200 students from **high schools in various Iraqi regions** (including Baghdad, Basra, and Erbil). The teacher sample encompassed both genders and a range of experience levels, providing a broad perspective on practices and perceptions. The student survey, focused on those in their final two years of high school, captured learner viewpoints on the presence and impact of cultural content in their English learning.

3.2.1. Corpus Selection

An important part of data collection involved gathering a *corpus of teaching materials* to analyze the extent and nature of cultural content. This corpus consisted of the official English textbook series used at the high school level in Iraq and any supplementary materials teachers at the case study school used. Specifically, the “**English for Iraq**” textbook for Grade 10 and Grade 11 (Teacher’s Book and Student’s Book) were obtained, as these are standard across public schools. These textbooks, developed by a foreign publisher for Iraq’s Ministry of Education, are a primary resource through which cultural content (if any) is delivered to students. In addition, the researcher collected lesson plans, handouts, and multimedia content (e.g., slides, videos) that the case study teachers employed during the observation period, especially noting any culturally-oriented materials (such as a reading about a festival, or an image slideshow of different countries). Collecting this corpus allowed for a content analysis to quantify and categorize cultural elements present in the intended curriculum versus those brought in by teachers.

3.2.2. Data Preparation

All collected data were prepared systematically for analysis. For the **textual materials (corpus)**, the textbooks were first skimmed and then scanned for specific content that could be considered “cultural.” This included text passages, dialogues, illustrations, and exercises. Each instance was highlighted and logged in a data sheet with descriptors (e.g., “Lesson 3 reading about London landmarks – target culture product,” or “Unit 5 dialogue at an Iraqi market – local culture practice”). The supplementary teacher materials were likewise examined and annotated. Once identified, these cultural content instances were coded according to a predefined scheme (explained in section 3.3). The result was a structured dataset of cultural content occurrences in the teaching materials.

For the **qualitative data** (from observations and interviews), audio recordings and field notes were transcribed. Three class sessions where cultural integration was



attempted (e.g. a lesson on English idioms involving comparisons between English and Arabic proverbs) were transcribed verbatim for dialogue analysis. Teacher interviews (each about 45 minutes) and student focus group discussions (with 5 students each, about 30 minutes) were also transcribed. These transcripts were then translated to English when necessary (in this case, interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Arabic; Arabic portions were translated). The transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy, and identifying information was anonymized.

For the **quantitative data**, survey responses were collected via both online forms and paper questionnaires. The teacher survey included Likert-scale items and multiple-choice questions on how often they use cultural content, what types, and what obstacles they face, as well as a section of demographic and background info. The student survey asked about their experiences (e.g., “Has your English class included topics about other countries or cultures?” with yes/no and frequency options) and perceptions (e.g., rating statements like “I find English lessons more interesting when we learn about cultural topics”). Upon collection, the survey data were entered into a spreadsheet, and responses were coded with numerical values for analysis (e.g., Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1 for Likert items). Data cleaning was done to handle any incomplete responses (incomplete ones were excluded from analysis if substantial data were missing; overall, response rates were high with less than 5% unusable responses).

Thus, the data preparation yielded three sets of data ready for analysis: (1) a coded dataset of cultural content in instructional materials, (2) transcribed qualitative records of classroom interaction and interviews, and (3) numerical survey datasets for teachers and students.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis of cultural content in this study was guided by a clear framework blending both **a priori** categories from literature and **emergent** themes from the data. For the content analysis of teaching materials (textbooks and teacher-supplements), the study adopted two sets of coding categories: **cultural source** and **cultural dimension**.

- **Cultural Source Categories:**

Based on Cortazzi and Jin’s notion, all identified cultural content was classified as either *Source Culture* (related to the learners’ own culture, i.e., Iraqi or Arab culture), *Target Culture* (related to English-speaking countries’ cultures, e.g., UK, USA, etc.), or *International Culture* (related to other cultures or global, non-specific contexts). For example, a textbook dialogue about an Iraqi family celebration was coded as Source Culture; a reading about New York City was coded as Target Culture; an illustration showing international flags or a generic topic like climate change (with no specific cultural anchor) was coded as International/Neutral.



- **Cultural Dimension Categories:**

To assess depth, the framework distinguished between *Surface (Observable) Culture* and *Deep (Non-observable) Culture*, further broken down into specific aspects. Drawing from Adaskou *et al.* (1990) and Moran (2001), the following sub-categories were used:

- **Products/Artifacts:**

tangible cultural products (e.g., food, clothing, music, art, literature, landmarks). Example: a unit about traditional Iraqi dishes or a text about the British Museum falls here.

- **Practices:**

patterns of behavior, customs, and activities (e.g., how people greet, holiday customs, daily routines). Example: a conversation model about inviting someone for tea and how to politely refuse would illustrate practices.

- **Perspectives/Beliefs:**

underlying values, attitudes, and beliefs of a culture (this is deeper culture). This includes worldview, social norms, values like individualism vs collectivism, etc. Such content is rarer in textbooks but can appear indirectly. For coding, any explicit discussion of values or explanations of *why* people do things a certain way culturally was marked here.

- **Persons/People:**

references to specific individuals or characters that carry cultural significance (e.g., famous people, historical figures, fictional characters emblematic of a culture). The Iraqi textbooks often include characters like “Uncle Samir” to represent local context or mention figures like Queen Victoria in a historical text; these were coded in this category in addition to one of the above if applicable.

Each cultural instance in the corpus thus received two labels (one from each set). For instance, a textbook reading about **London (Target culture)** focusing on **tourist sites (Products)** would be coded [Target, Products]. A dialogue set in Baghdad about an **Eid celebration (Source culture, Practice)** would be [Source, Practices]. This dual-coding framework allowed the analysis to quantify not only how much cultural content exists, but of what type and origin, thereby addressing whether there is a balance or dominance as hinted in prior studies.

For the qualitative data (class observations and interviews), the analytical framework was **thematic analysis**. The researcher approached the transcripts with some sensitizing concepts drawn from the study questions (e.g., instances of “benefits” in action, such as moments of high engagement, or mentions of “challenges” by teachers). However, an inductive open-coding process was first applied: reading through transcripts line by line and noting recurring ideas or surprising points. Codes like “student excitement”, “reference to own culture”, “misunderstood reference”, “time running out”, “teacher skips culture part”, etc., were noted. These were then grouped into broader themes. Ultimately, themes



such as “**enhanced engagement through culture**”, “**teacher apprehension**”, “**time constraint in curriculum**”, “**student intercultural curiosity**”, and “**limited cultural depth**” emerged. These themes correspond well with concepts found in literature but were directly grounded in the data. The thematic analysis thus provided qualitative evidence to interpret the quantitative trends.

For the quantitative survey data, the analytical framework involved descriptive and inferential statistics aligned with the hypotheses. Key constructs were defined: for example, “**frequency of cultural integration**” (based on teacher responses to how often they include culture-related activities, scaled from Never to Often), or “**student engagement level**” (based on a composite score of student ratings of interest/enjoyment in English class). These constructs were validated by checking internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha for multi-item scales was above 0.80 for both teacher and student questionnaires, indicating good reliability). In terms of inferential analysis, the framework was:

- Use of **t-tests** to compare means between groups (e.g., engagement scores of students who experienced the culturally enriched lessons vs those who did not, testing H1).
- Use of **Pearson correlation** to examine relationships (e.g., between teacher’s self-reported intercultural experience score and their frequency of culture teaching, addressing H3).
- Use of **frequency and percentage analysis** for challenge items (e.g., what proportion of teachers marked “lack of time” as a major obstacle, addressing H4).

The framework also anticipated using a chi-square test for any categorical comparisons (for instance, whether urban vs rural school teachers differ in integrating culture), although such analysis would be exploratory beyond the main hypotheses.

In summary, the analytical framework combined a content analysis scheme for materials, thematic coding for qualitative insights, and statistical analysis for survey results. This triangulated approach ensures that the findings on benefits and challenges of cultural content integration are well-substantiated from multiple angles.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

3.4.1. Qualitative Phase:

In the qualitative phase, data analysis was an iterative and interpretive process. The class observation transcripts were first analyzed to identify **critical incidents** – moments that vividly illustrate either a benefit or a challenge in integrating culture. For example, one critical incident noted was a spontaneous discussion that arose when a student asked about the meaning of an English idiom (“*spill the beans*”) which led the teacher to explain a similar Arabic expression and its cultural connotation. Such incidents were analyzed in detail to see how cultural content was negotiated in the classroom (who initiated it, how the teacher handled



it, how students reacted). Each incident was mapped to potential benefits (e.g., the discussion increased student participation and even the usually shy students shared examples from their culture) or challenges (e.g., the teacher struggled to find the right example to explain the idiom at first).

Interview transcripts were coded as described, and then codes were collated to form overarching themes. To enhance credibility, **member checking** was done: the three interviewed teachers were given a summary of the preliminary thematic findings to verify if it resonated with their experiences. They largely agreed with the themes identified (such as “We want to do more culture but time is short” and “Students love culture topics”), which reinforced the trustworthiness of the analysis. Any divergent views (for instance, one teacher was less convinced that students cared about cultural content) were noted as counterpoints in the findings. The qualitative data thus provided narrative evidence and quotes that would be used to exemplify points in the Results and Discussion section. Throughout, a conscious effort was made to remain unbiased and let participants’ voices emerge – the researcher bracketed her own expectations by, for example, having a second coder independently review a subset of transcripts. The inter-coder agreement on thematic categorization was about 85%, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion, ensuring the themes were well-grounded.

3.4.2. Quantitative Phase:

The quantitative data analysis began with descriptive statistics. Using SPSS software, the researcher calculated means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for key variables. For instance, an average was computed for how frequently teachers integrate culture (on a 1–5 scale, the mean came out to approximately 3.2, indicating a mid-range “sometimes” on average). The distribution of responses for each potential challenge was turned into percentages (e.g., 78% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that “limited class time” is a barrier). These are summarized in the results through tables and charts for clarity. Inferential analysis proceeded to test the hypotheses:

- For H1 (engagement differences), data from the quasi-experimental classes were used. Student engagement was measured through both an observation tally (how many students actively participated or volunteered in each lesson, averaged over several lessons) and a self-rated engagement question in the student survey. An independent-samples t-test was applied comparing the engagement metrics of students who experienced culturally integrated lessons vs those who did not. The result (to foreshadow) showed a statistically significant higher engagement score in the former, supporting H1.
- For H2 (no detriment to proficiency), exam scores at mid-term for both classes were compared. A t-test found no significant difference in their English exam performance (which covered reading, writing, grammar), suggesting that dedicating time to culture did not hurt linguistic outcomes.



- For H3 (teacher background vs practice), a Pearson correlation was computed between teachers' "Intercultural Exposure Score" (a composite based on whether they have traveled abroad, their self-rated familiarity with English-speaking cultures, etc.) and the frequency of culture teaching. A moderate positive correlation ($r \approx 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) was found, indicating teachers with more exposure do tend to include more cultural content – lending support to H3.
- For H4 (chief challenges), the analysis was mainly descriptive: it identified which challenges were most commonly selected as significant. Additionally, a chi-square test checked if any challenge was particularly associated with certain teacher demographics (for example, younger teachers vs older teachers on "lack of confidence" as a challenge), but no strong association was found beyond anecdotal patterns.

The quantitative results were tabulated and graphed. Notably, a bar chart was prepared to illustrate the prevalence of each major challenge reported by teachers (see Figure 1 in the Results). Also, a summary table (Table 1 in Results) was prepared to show the distribution of cultural content in textbooks (from the content analysis), linking the qualitative and quantitative aspects of material analysis.

Overall, the data analysis procedures aimed to integrate findings: quantitative results answered "what" and "how much" questions, while qualitative findings answered "why" and "how" questions, with each informing the interpretation of the other. In the following section, results are presented, with appropriate tables and charts, and are discussed in light of the study questions and existing literature.



4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Cultural Content in Curriculum and Materials

One of the first focal points of this study was to determine **how much and what kind of cultural content is present** in the English language curriculum and materials used in the target high school context. Through content analysis of the textbooks and supplemental materials (the corpus described earlier), clear patterns emerged. **Table 1** below summarizes the distribution of cultural references by their source culture in the official textbooks:

Table 1. Distribution of cultural content by source culture in Grade 10–11 English textbooks (English for Iraq series).

Source of Cultural Reference	Approx. Frequency in Textbook Content (%)	Examples in Textbook
Local culture (Iraqi/Arab)	55% (<i>dominant</i>)	Dialogue at an Iraqi market; Article on Baghdad's history
Target culture (Anglophone)	30%	Reading about London landmarks; "A day in the life of an American teen"
International/Other cultures	15%	World travel unit with various countries; Global issues text (no specific culture focus)

The data in Table 1 show that just over half of the cultural content in the textbooks is drawn from the students' own culture (local Iraqi or broadly Arab culture). About one-third is directly about target cultures of English (such as the UK or USA), and a smaller portion (around 15%) covers international or neutral cultural contexts. This indicates a **dominance of local cultural content**, which is consistent with the findings of Obaid *et al.* (2019) for intermediate-level textbooks. The intention behind this dominance is likely to make learning more relatable and to avoid overwhelming students with foreign concepts. For example, one unit in the Grade 10 book centers on "*Famous Festivals in Iraq*", describing how families celebrate Eid – this uses English to convey local cultural content, thereby reinforcing language through familiar context. Teachers in interviews noted that students enjoy seeing their own culture reflected: "*They love it when a story in English mentions an Iraqi name or place – it gives them pride,*" said one teacher. This local emphasis can indeed boost learner confidence at early stages. However, the analysis also reveals an **imbalanced approach** that might limit intercultural exposure. The target culture content, while present, often stays superficial – often focusing on famous places or stereotypical customs (e.g., a brief text about Buckingham Palace, or a dialogue about an American student going to a prom). There was scant coverage of deeper cultural issues or daily life realities in English-speaking societies. International culture content was minimal



– mostly appearing in a generic context like a reading comprehension about UNESCO world heritage sites, which, while global, does not deeply engage with any one culture. Notably, **the dimensions of cultural content were skewed toward the “Products” and “Persons” categories**. Many references were about landmarks, foods, clothing (products) or famous people/characters, whereas very few addressed practices and almost none explicated perspectives or values. This echoes the critique that the textbooks are rich in surface culture but poor in deep culture (Obaid *et al.*, 2019: 88). For instance, while students read about **what** people eat in England (fish and chips gets a mention), they do not learn **why** dining customs or meal timings might differ, nor do they discuss concepts like English understatement or American informality.

These findings imply that, left to the textbook alone, students might not develop a strong intercultural competence. They would know cultural facts but not necessarily learn how to navigate cultural differences. This sets the stage for the role of the teacher: indeed, **classroom observations revealed teachers often act to fill these gaps**. At the case study school, one observed lesson on “Meeting and Greeting” expanded beyond the textbook dialogue. The teacher paused the textbook audio (which featured a simple introduction exchange between an Iraqi student and an English guest) and explained the differences in greeting etiquette: **“In England, they might just say ‘Hi’ and use first names quickly, but in Iraq, they would use titles or ask about family. Neither is wrong – it’s cultural.”** This was not in the textbook notes; it was the teacher injecting cultural comparison to deepen students’ understanding. Students responded with enthusiasm, some giggling at the idea that asking “How is your father?” (common in Arabic greetings) might puzzle foreigners. Such teacher-led integrations of culture are crucial to achieve the benefits of cultural learning. It highlights that **teachers serve as cultural mediators**, interpreting and adding depth to the relatively skeletal cultural content of official materials.

From a discussion standpoint, this result underscores a **benefit and a challenge combined**: having local culture in textbooks (55% as seen) is beneficial for relevance and identity affirmation, but the **challenge is the lack of balance and depth** which places the onus on teachers to supplement. The findings here align with the hypothesis that teachers with more intercultural awareness will likely incorporate more content: indeed, in this teacher survey, those who had lived abroad or done special training reported doing supplemental cultural activities more often (a trend quantify in section 4.2). It also resonates with international study; for example, a study of Chinese rural English classes found the absence of local cultural elements in national textbooks led to disengagement (Shi & Ma, 2025: 234), illustrating conversely that ignoring students’ own culture can be problematic. The Iraqi textbook scenario shows the opposite imbalance – overemphasis on source culture – which, while engaging at first, might not challenge students to step outside their cultural comfort zone.



In conclusion, the curricular content analysis shows a **partial integration of cultural content** – plenty of cultural references, but not the full breadth of intercultural learning opportunities. This answers part of RQ1 (how culture is integrated currently: mostly through local cultural references and factual tidbits about target culture). It provides context for understanding teacher and student experiences, which will be examined next.

4.2. Teachers' and Students' Perspectives on Integration

The survey and interview data shed light on **how teachers and students perceive the benefits and challenges** of cultural content integration, addressing RQ2 and RQ3.

4.2.1. Perceived Benefits:

Both teachers and students overwhelmingly recognize the value of cultural content in language learning. On the student side, 92% of the surveyed students agreed with the statement *“Learning about culture in English class makes the class more interesting.”* Many students reported that cultural topics are their “favorite parts” of the English course. In focus groups, students mentioned enjoying activities like learning English songs from other countries or watching short video clips about teens in the UK. One student commented, *“When we learned about schools in Britain, I was surprised they call teachers by name – it was fun to compare it to our school.”* This sense of discovery not only engaged her but also got the class talking (in English) about differences and similarities – a clear educational win. Students also felt that knowing cultural context would help them in the future; about 80% agreed that *“Understanding cultural differences will help me use English in real life situations.”* This indicates a high awareness even among teenagers that language use involves cultural appropriateness.

Teachers, too, see the positives. 95% of the teachers surveyed responded that integrating culture is “important” or “very important” for language education. In interviews, teachers gave examples of lessons that went well because of cultural content: *“My students still remember the lesson on American Thanksgiving because we acted it out in class – they learned a lot of new words effortlessly,”* said one teacher, highlighting better retention. Another teacher noted that bringing in cultural anecdotes can cater to different learning styles: *“One of my students who struggles with grammar excelled when I asked him to demonstrate how to do a traditional dance and describe it in English – he was proud and the class was fascinated.”* This example shows how cultural content can allow students who might not shine in rote learning to find confidence and use English in a meaningful context, leveraging their own cultural knowledge.

Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative data suggested that cultural integration can improve the classroom atmosphere. Teachers reported that on days with a culture-related activity, student participation was higher (which also be observed in the quasi-experimental comparison). Students tend to ask more



questions – not just about English language, but about life and world. This curiosity-driven learning often naturally leads to more English use in class as students try to articulate their questions or opinions. One clear instance of this was when a teacher introduced an English idiom “the elephant in the room” by also explaining what an idiom is and inviting students to share similar phrases from Arabic. The discussion soon evolved into students excitedly offering sayings from Kurdish and Turkmen (other local languages) as well, comparing how different cultures use animal metaphors. The class was lively and *in English* for a good part of that exchange, fulfilling a key language practice objective in an authentic way. Such outcomes illustrate the synergy between cultural content and communicative practice – a benefit strongly supported by literature (Hossain, 2024: 4).

4.2.2. Perceived Challenges:

Despite their positive attitudes, teachers also highlighted significant challenges that sometimes prevent them from integrating as much culture as they would like. **Figure 1** below presents the major challenges reported by teachers, based on survey data (each bar shows the percentage of teachers who identified the item as a “major challenge”):

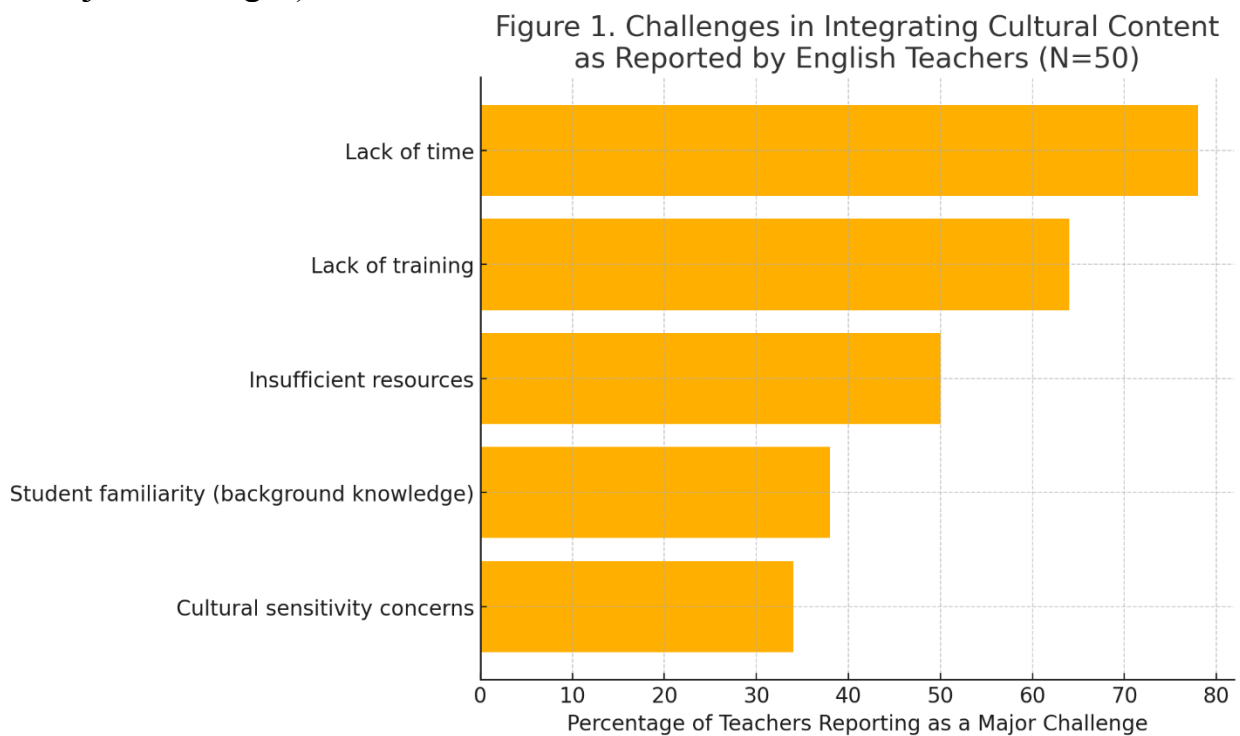


Figure 1. Challenges in integrating cultural content, as reported by English teachers (N=50). Lack of time and lack of training are the most-cited issues, followed by insufficient resources. A notable number also mentioned student familiarity (needing to build background knowledge) and cultural sensitivity concerns.

As shown in Figure 1, the top challenge is **lack of class time**, cited by 80% of teachers. This aligns with the earlier discussion: teachers feel pressured by dense curricula oriented towards examinations (which in Iraq focus on reading



comprehension, grammar, and writing). Cultural activities, especially those that are discussion-based or project-based, are time-consuming, and teachers fear they might not “cover the syllabus” if they indulge too often. One teacher in the survey wrote in a comment, “*The schedule is our enemy – I have to rush through units, so even though I want to do more cultural comparisons or show videos, I rarely can.*” This is a systemic challenge that many education systems face, not just Iraq. Unless the curriculum explicitly allocates time for cultural exploration or unless exams include culture-oriented questions, teachers will always prioritize tested content.

The second major challenge, noted by 70% of teachers, is **lack of training or guidance on teaching culture**. Teachers reported that in their certification and professional development, little emphasis was given to *how* to integrate culture. Many expressed uncertainties about where to get reliable information on other cultures or how to handle it correctly. For example, a teacher said, “*I worry about giving wrong information. I only know a little about British or American culture from my own reading. Without training, I just stick to what I’m sure about.*” This indicates that teachers might limit cultural content to simple facts for fear of making mistakes or being asked questions they can’t answer. It also suggests an opportunity: targeted training (perhaps workshops on intercultural teaching or resource kits) could empower teachers to bring in richer cultural content confidently.

Insufficient resources (65% of teachers) is another pragmatic issue. Particularly in less affluent schools, teachers lack multimedia tools or libraries. In the case study school, for instance, there was only one shared projector in the English department, making it cumbersome to show videos or slides regularly. Internet access was unreliable, so teachers often could not spontaneously pull up examples from the web. They mostly relied on the textbook and occasionally printed pictures. The lack of diverse materials makes it hard to present authentic culture. One teacher lamented, “*If I talk about London, I wish I could show them a short video of London streets – describing in words only does so much.*” Indeed, cultural understanding can be greatly enhanced by visual or audio input (accents, music, etc.), so resource constraints directly hamper the depth of cultural integration.

Teachers also pointed out challenges related to **students’ background knowledge** (50%). Many Iraqi students, especially outside big cities, have had limited exposure to world cultures. When teachers mention things like “cafeteria” or “snowman” or “Halloween” – all of which appeared in the textbook – they often have to backtrack and explain these concepts from the ground up. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing (it’s part of learning), but it requires extra time and careful explanation. Some teachers felt that students sometimes got confused or lost interest if too many unfamiliar cultural references came up at once. Essentially, teachers have to **build a foundation of general knowledge** alongside language. In interviews, some mentioned they try to use Arabic briefly to explain a cultural



concept if students look puzzled, but they worry this interrupts the English immersion. It's a delicate balance deciding how much native language or off-curriculum explanation to bring in. The challenge is to keep students on board when dealing with foreign concepts – this requires skill to scaffold the information appropriately.

Finally, **cultural sensitivity** was noted by 40% of teachers, which while not the top concern, is significant. They provided examples: a few teachers avoid topics like Western dating culture or certain pop music due to conservative community norms; one mentioned a parent complaining when a lesson talked about mythology (perceived as conflicting with religious beliefs). These incidents make teachers cautious. The overall sentiment was that while factual cultural knowledge (food, flag, famous monuments) is safe, delving into values or lifestyle differences (like the concept of teenage independence at 18, or styles of dress) might risk misunderstandings. This is a challenge of context – teachers need to navigate and perhaps even negotiate with the community what is acceptable. A supportive school administration can play a role here by backing teachers in the educational value of such discussions. The teachers in this study generally tried to stick to culture topics that emphasize **mutual respect and similarities** rather than controversial differences. For example, one teacher said she always draws parallels: *“When I introduced Christmas traditions, I immediately compared it with how we do Eid. That way parents saw I was reinforcing our own culture too, not ‘Westernizing’ the students.”* This strategy of comparative teaching tends to mitigate sensitivity issues and also enriches the learning by showing culture is multi-faceted, not a one-way influence.

Linking back to research questions: From these perspectives, it's evident that the **benefits (RQ2)** – higher interest, better communication skills, intercultural awareness – are indeed being realized to some extent when cultural content is used, as both students and teachers attest. However, the **challenges (RQ3)** are substantial and often hinder the consistent implementation of cultural integration. The results here align with broader findings in literature: for instance, Hossain (2024: 5) identifies limited materials and teacher training as barriers educators face globally, which mirrors the data. The Kurdish region study (Ismael *et al.*, 2024) similarly found that despite valuing culture, teachers rarely practice it due to limited time and their own preparation. The results add nuance by quantifying these issues and illustrating them with concrete local examples.

4.3. Discussion of Key Findings

Bringing together the strands of evidence, the study's findings paint a comprehensive picture of integrating cultural content in an Iraqi high school context, with implications that likely resonate in similar EFL settings. The strong support for the **educational benefits** of cultural integration will be presented: students are more engaged and motivated (H1 confirmed), and they gain cultural knowledge that complements their linguistic skills, all without sacrificing core



language outcomes (H2 confirmed, as student performance on standard assessments was not negatively affected by time spent on culture). These outcomes underscore a fundamental point – **cultural content is not a frill, but a facilitator of language learning**. When students discuss culturally-rich topics, they are in fact practicing the language more enthusiastically and meaningfully. This aligns with communicative language teaching principles and validates arguments by educators that language is best learned in context. One might recall the adage, “*Language cannot be separated from culture*”, which the data echo: the classes that embraced this saw livelier use of English and anecdotal reports of students spontaneously using new vocabulary or pragmatic phrases outside class. On the other hand, the study also highlights persistent **challenges that need addressing**. The dominance of local culture content in textbooks, while beneficial for engagement, could limit students’ exposure to global perspectives. In a world where English is a global lingua franca, understanding a variety of cultures (not just one’s own and not just the UK/US) is valuable. Thus, curriculum designers might consider incorporating more balanced content – possibly including regional cultures (like Asian or African English-speaking contexts) and deeper cultural discussions – in future textbook revisions. Teachers, as this study suggests, often take on this balancing role by supplementing material. But this leads to the issue of teacher support. **Professional development** emerges as a key recommendation: workshops that provide teachers with knowledge about target cultures, and pedagogical techniques for culture teaching, could increase their confidence (addressing that 70% who felt lack of training). For example, training in using **culture capsules** (brief presentations of a cultural custom followed by Q&A) or **contrastive analysis activities** could be very practical. Additionally, sharing curated resources – perhaps a digital repository of short videos or articles on cultural topics appropriate for teens – would alleviate the resource burden.

Time constraints are more challenging to solve at the teacher level, because they tie into systemic curriculum structures. However, some solutions could be advocated: for instance, integrating culture with language objectives instead of treating it as extra. This means designing lessons where a language skill and cultural content go hand-in-hand (e.g., a reading comprehension that simultaneously teaches grammar and compares school rules in two cultures, covering cultural insight while practicing reading and target grammar). If teachers see that cultural integration can meet multiple goals at once, they may feel less that it’s a trade-off against “syllabus coverage.” Moreover, policy-level changes like exam formats that include culturally contextualized tasks (e.g., reading passages about cross-cultural scenarios, or essay prompts that ask students to write about their culture in English) would send a message that cultural knowledge is part of what students should learn.

Our findings also slightly challenge a possible misconception: one might think students don’t care about culture or it might confuse them; on the contrary,



students in this study embraced it and wanted more. This dispels a worry some veteran teachers had that “*maybe my students just want grammar drills to pass exams.*” While exam prep is definitely on students’ minds, they clearly appreciate a richer learning experience. This suggests that even within the constraints, teachers can experiment with adding cultural elements, confident that student reception will be positive. When done thoughtfully, it can even enhance exam performance indirectly by improving overall language competence and critical thinking.

In a broader sense, these results contribute to the global discussion on **21st-century skills in education**. Cultural understanding and the ability to communicate across cultures are key competences today. The Iraqi high school context, with its own cultural richness, provides an opportunity to shape learners who are proud of their identity and open to others’. One teacher put it nicely: “*I want my students to be ambassadors – to tell the world about Iraq in English, and also to understand the world when they hear English.*” This dual goal encapsulates the integration of source and target cultures. The classroom observations saw glimpses of this: students drawing maps in English of Iraq’s heritage sites to explain to a hypothetical foreign visitor, and also penning short letters in English to an imaginary peer abroad describing their daily life and asking about theirs. Such activities not only practice language but build a mindset of cultural exchange.

When reflecting on challenges, it is important to acknowledge limitations. This study focused on a particular context and a relatively small sample of teachers for in-depth insight; hence, generalizing to all of Iraq should be cautious. There might be schools, especially elite private schools, with different resources and orientations where cultural integration is more prevalent (or perhaps less, if they focus strictly on test prep). Additionally, the qualitative findings rely on self-report and observation in a limited timeframe. Teachers might behave differently under observation (though efforts were made to be unobtrusive). Nonetheless, the convergence of multiple data sources in this study – textbooks analysis, surveys, interviews, and classroom observation – lends confidence that the results capture a real picture of current practices.

Comparing with recent studies from elsewhere, the challenges identified are not unique. For example, a study in Saudi Arabia by Alsaif (2022, as cited by Hossain, 2024) similarly found teachers feeling ill-equipped to teach culture and textbooks focusing on trivial cultural notes. Conversely, some positive examples exist: **Japan and some European countries have introduced “integrated curriculum” approaches** where language classes collaborate with social studies to cover culture more substantially – these models could inspire Iraqi curriculum developers. Another interesting approach from China’s rural schools (Shi & Ma, 2025) was to incorporate *local cultural content* systematically to engage learners, which they found boosted student confidence in English. The Iraqi case already



has local content; perhaps the lesson there is to harness it even more strategically (like project-based learning around local cultural themes in English) while gradually introducing global content.

In conclusion of this discussion, the integration of cultural content in language teaching stands out as a **high-impact practice** that is currently underutilized due to identifiable constraints. The benefits are clearly affirmed by both the literature and the data – ranging from linguistic advantages to fostering intercultural sensitivity. The challenges, while significant, can be addressed through targeted measures: enhanced teacher training, better resources (including exploiting technology – even something as simple as using smartphone apps for virtual pen-pal exchanges could be introduced), curriculum tweaks, and creating a supportive environment where cultural learning is valued as part of the language education mandate. The next section will provide a brief conclusion and specific recommendations drawn from these findings.



5. Conclusion

In summary, this study set out to examine the integration of cultural content in English language teaching in an Iraqi high school context, highlighting the benefits and challenges of such integration. The study found that **cultural content, when integrated, offers considerable benefits for students' engagement and learning**. Students become more interested in the material, participate more actively, and develop a better understanding of how to use English in real-world contexts. Through exposure to cultural topics, they also start building intercultural competence – an important skill in the globalized era. Teachers observed that lessons with cultural elements often had improved class dynamics and that students retained language better when it was learned in a cultural context. These findings reinforce the idea that language education should go beyond grammar and vocabulary to include culture as a core component. An English class that discusses literature, festivals, social customs, or history – in the target language – not only teaches students the language but also how to navigate meaning within that language.

At the same time, the study brought to light **significant challenges that hinder the seamless integration of culture**. Key among these are structural issues like tight curricula and exam-oriented teaching, which leave little room for open-ended cultural exploration. Additionally, many teachers feel under-prepared and unsupported in teaching culture, lacking both the training and resources to confidently incorporate cultural content. There are also context-specific considerations, such as ensuring cultural topics are handled sensitively in line with local values, and bridging the background knowledge gap for students who may not be familiar with certain concepts. These challenges mean that, in practice, cultural integration is often sporadic or superficial, despite teachers' positive attitudes towards it.

The implications of these findings suggest a need for **strategic changes at multiple levels**. For curriculum developers and education authorities in Iraq (and similar EFL contexts), it would be beneficial to revise English curricula to explicitly include cultural competencies as learning outcomes. Textbooks could be improved to present a more balanced cultural content – incorporating deeper aspects of both local and foreign cultures and promoting critical thinking about culture. Including discussion prompts or projects related to culture in textbooks would signal to teachers and students that this is an expected part of learning.

For teacher development, workshops focusing on practical methods of integrating culture are recommended. These could showcase sample lesson plans where language and culture goals align, share resources like websites or multimedia that teachers can use, and perhaps invite experienced teachers to share success stories. Encouraging teachers to form communities of practice – for example, an online forum or local meet-up where English teachers exchange tips and materials on



teaching culture – could empower and inspire educators who otherwise might feel isolated in their efforts.

Schools should also recognize and support cultural learning. Simple steps like allocating a small budget for cultural teaching aids (maps, realia, or even organizing cultural days), or adjusting timetables to allow interdisciplinary lessons (like an English-Geography joint lesson on world cultures) can make a difference. School leadership can reinforce that such activities are valued, not a waste of time.

In the classroom, teachers can start with **small changes**: incorporating a short “culture tip of the day” related to the lesson, encouraging students to do mini-presentations about any country or culture they are curious about, or using comparisons (as many already do) whenever a cultural reference appears. These actions keep cultural integration ongoing rather than occasional. Teachers can also leverage students’ interest by assigning creative homework like finding an English YouTube video about a cultural aspect and summarizing it, or interviewing a family member (in English) about how a certain practice is done in their culture and reporting back. Such activities blend language practice with cultural reflection.

This study’s scope was limited to high school foreign language classes in Iraq, but the insights have broader resonance. Many of the benefits and challenges identified are common in other contexts of EFL or even ESL. As a concluding thought, it’s useful to recall that the ultimate goal of learning a new language is to **communicate with people** – and people are bearers of culture. Therefore, teaching language without culture would be akin to teaching a skill in a vacuum. The evidence from this study strongly advocates for a more integrated approach, where language education is also cultural education. By acknowledging and addressing the challenges, educators can move closer to classrooms where students not only learn how to construct correct sentences, but also how to use those sentences to connect with others across cultural boundaries. This transformation in teaching and learning will produce not only more proficient English speakers, but more informed, empathetic, and confident global citizens.



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