The Case of Culturally Sensitive Topics in the English Language Classrooms: Secondary School Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines secondary school teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics in three private schools in the United Arab Emirates. In light of this, it probes into teachers' perceptions on the relationship between culture and language and whether English can be taught without covering its cultural aspects. It also investigates the implications of discussing such topics on the teachers' career paths. By the same token, it questions whether there are consequences on the students' cognitive skills when teachers cover taboo topics, such as sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues in classrooms. Data were gathered through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and careful examination of the English language teaching materials used in the respective schools. The results indicate general positive teacher attitudes towards the strong connection between language and culture. They also show that the majority of teachers avoid discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in order to avoid creating problems for themselves or the school or because they believe that they have no positive impacts on the students' cognitive skills. The research indicates that the country's overall cultural framework is the determinant behind what to cover in class and what not to cover. The study concludes with some pedagogical recommendations for foreign ELT teachers.

Keywords: ELT teachers' perspectives, culture and language, culturally sensitive topics, taboos, high school students, United Arab Emirates

Introduction

In the course of a person's life and upbringing, parents, surrounding family members, schools and the society at large inculcate values such as love and respect. We grow up, for instance, cherishing and absorbing certain ideals, certain customs and habits which clearly show through our daily practices. We start having regulators of culture in our life at an early age; i.e., values that we hold to, heroes we look up to, languages we like to learn and speak, and topics we appreciate discussing. Among these regulators in the Arab world, the dominant religion of Islam stands out (Cannadine, cited in Jandt, 2013). In Arab countries, education is viewed as a means for "stabilizing religious and cultural norms" (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015, p. 4**).** For example, "Islam continues to fortify didactic practice throughout the UAE and remains integral to the educational structure" (ibid, p. 5). Hence, several topics, concepts and/or practices spread a reputation for being "culturally sensitive". Expressed simply, "cultural sensitivity" means topical areas that are perceived by the society as off-limits. Examples of these in the Arab world include, but are not limited to, sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues (Gobert, 2015), that may be normal to talk about and discuss in books, TV shows, and newspaper reports outside Arab countries.

In order to find out what best serves students' communicative and cognitive needs, this research examines expatriate secondary school teachers' perceptions (SSTPs) on "culturally sensitive" topics in three private secondary schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and explores whether these topics are covered explicitly, implicitly, or totally ignored. Moreover, this study sheds light on the importance of the cultural competence of ELT educators so as to establish effective intercultural communication with students and overcome any potential cultural conflict that could hinder the teaching and learning processes. This area of research would be of concern to all ELT professionals, especially teachers in the Middle East who might be facing the same critical issues in their respective classrooms.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1) What is the perception of expatriate English language teachers working in secondary schools in the UAE of "culturally sensitive" topics?
2) What are the perspectives of expatriate English language teachers working in secondary schools in the UAE towards discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in classes?
3) What are the implications of discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in classes on the teachers' career paths (i.e., job retention)?
4) Do age and years of teaching experience play a role in the coverage or non-coverage of "culturally sensitive" topics in class?
5) Do the study participants believe that the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics impact the students' English language competence?

To put this research in the EFL teaching context of the UAE, some background information is needed to warrant prospective readers' understanding of the arguments presented in this investigation.

The educational system in the UAE

There are several educational systems in the UAE. First, public schools within the seven emirates follow the same curriculum: students take uniform Ministry of Education (MoE) exams at the same time. All school subjects are taught in Modern Standard Arabic with the exception of English. The majority of students in public schools are Emiratis; however, there are some Arab expatriates, but all students are Arabic speakers. Second, there are also private international schools, such as American, Australian, British, Russian, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Filipino, and French schools. Although these schools implement different curricula, use different textbooks with students, recruit expatriate teachers, and follow different educational systems, all programs follow the regulations stipulated by the MoE in the UAE.

Review of literature on culture, language and culture and intercultural communication

This section presents a critical review of definitions of culture, language and culture, language and intercultural communication, linguistic and cultural differences between teachers and students and the teaching materials, taboo in English language teaching, and multiculturalism in the UAE.

Culture: Definitions and facets

Despite several attempts to define the concept "culture", scholars have not come up with a shared definition yet. According to Triandis (1994), "Culture is a shared meaning system found among those who speak a particular language, dialect, during a specific historic period" (p. 34).

In simple terms, culture is defined as "perceptions concerning our system of values, our ways of thinking, our beliefs, and our psychological orientations" (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & McDaniel, 2015, p. 4). Thus, culture reflects the way we think and the things we do as well as the elements we acquire as individuals from the people around us and the society at large. Culture can also be viewed as a set of values, beliefs, approaches and assumptions, behavioral traditions, certain rules and regulations that are shared by society members and affect the way they deal with others (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Raddawi (2015) argues that "Culture can be understood as a nation and/or ethnicity, or can be faith based or gender based and even be discourse based (community speeches and styles)" (p. 2). This suggests that people's identity, gender, and beliefs affect their understanding of culture and their attitudes towards other cultures. Hence, culture is a "very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life" (Seelye, 1993, p. 15). Consequently, these broad definitions of culture leave English language teachers to determine the aspects of culture that should be taught to students.

Language and culture

As culture is one of the components of a language (Alptekin, 2002), the latter cannot be taught without discussing its culture. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) note that students should know how to use the language in socio-cultural contexts. According to Stoller (2006), since language emerges from societal interactions, second language learners cannot truly learn the language without acquiring knowledge about cultural denotations and connotations of its lexis and its native speakers. In a similar vein , House (2007) argues that "language is viewed as embedded in culture such that the meaning of any linguistic item can only be properly understood with reference to the cultural context enveloping it" (p. 8). Hence, it is important for language teachers and learners to be culturally competent in order to be effective users of the language (Huang, 2019).

Language and intercultural communication

Teaching language without focusing on its culture leaves the job half complete Aliakbari (2005). This is not only the case with English, but also with all languages in general. Risager (2007) notes that "apart from developing the students' communicative competence in the target language, language teaching ought … to enable students to develop into multilingually and multiculturally aware world citizens" (p. 1). Furthermore, House (2007) notes that, "in several linguistics schools of thought, culture has been seen as intimately linked with language" (p. 8). In other words, some linguistic items are difficult to understand unless the recipient is aware of the culture and the reference behind such items. Thus, several researchers believe that culture is an essential component in language teaching. Wei (2018), for instance, points out that "language teaching consists of teaching the four skills plus culture" (p. 298). According to Jandt (2013), "Communication and culture are inseparable. Culture cannot be known without a study of communication and communication can only be understood with an understanding of the culture it supports" (p. 39). Therefore, in order to successfully communicate with native speakers of the language and to maintain the relationships without misunderstanding or miscommunication, language users should be competent intercultural communicators. Zhu (2011) defines intercultural communication as:

> A situation where people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact with each other; or a subject of study concerned with interaction among people of different cultural and ethnic groups and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures. (p. 422)

Thus, successful communicators should be able to understand and respect each other's cultures and ideologies when exchanging messages. Consequently, it is essential that teachers and students should know the culture of the language they teach and learn.

Linguistic and cultural differences between teachers and students and the teaching materials

Textbooks are usually used as the main resource in educational institutions at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels (Ariyan & Pavlova, 2019). These textbooks may also contain culturally inappropriate topics or pictures that may conflict with the students' values, religions, and beliefs (Abd Rashid & Engku, 2018; Hinkel, 1999). Besides, such textbooks are mainly produced in English-speaking countries for learners of English as a first language and they might present culturally inappropriate pictures, texts, ideas or topics when used outside the borders of these countries. Therefore, such textbooks may not address EFL learners' needs since textbook designers assume that learners can function well linguistically, socially, and culturally in English communicative acts. However, as the majority of students in the UAE are foreign language learners, students' ideologies and values might be affected as they discover new ideologies which sometimes are far away from their own (Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned issues, some countries and educational institutions contextualize the contents of the teaching materials to avoid any clashes with their local culture. Examples of these cases are studies conducted by Hajjaj (1981, as cited in Aliakbari, 2005, p. 4) in Kuwait; Krishraswamy and Aziz (1978, as cited in Aliakbari, 2005, p. 4) in Yemen; and Al-Quraishi, Watson, Hafseth, and Hickman (1999) in Saudi Arabia. The researchers found out that the English language teaching materials mirrored the source culture of the countries in which the English language was being taught. In other words, book designers contextualize the topics and illustrations in textbooks to make them conform to the students' culture. Some of these institutions use in-house tailored English language textbooks that reflect students' culture, background, values, and beliefs instead of presenting the culture of the English language (Aliakbari, 2005; Hinkel, 1999). For instance, in a swimming context, instead of showing a female in her swimming suit, she is introduced wearing the traditional clothes of the UAE, an *Abaya*, a loose dress that covers the whole body: The former being the outfit of foreign cultures, and the latter being one of the local cultures. However, it is essential that the educational materials used in class include the important cultural components of the lexis of the language being taught. Thus, the question that arises is: Whose culture should be taught in the ELT classroom? Should students' culture or native English speakers' culture be integrated into language teaching? There are several factors that affect what students learn in classes, such as educators, trainers, authorities and the institutions themselves (Gobert, 2015; Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016). According to Motha (2014), teachers' identities affect their teaching and the students' learning as well.

This is also supported by Luu (2013, as cited in Motha, 2014, p.13) who writes, "Who you are is as important as who you teach". This point leads us to "culturally sensitive" topics and how different teachers approach them.

Taboo in language teaching

The word "taboo", according to Allan and Burridge (2006, as cited in Gobert, 2015, p. 109) holds a "comprehensive meaning that includes actions which cannot be done, objects which cannot be touched, or words that cannot be said". Along the same lines, Crystal (2003) defines "taboo" language as the language that is avoided for being embarrassing, inappropriate or offensive. "Taboos" differ from one culture to the other; as such, they are culture specific.

Hence, a topic that could be discussed in the USA or Australia could be inappropriate or forbidden in the Arab world (Gobert, 2015). In this regard, Haynes (2000), in a study conducted on foreign EFL teachers working in Japanese high schools, investigated the question of whether teachers should discuss "taboo" topics such as AIDS in their classrooms. The researcher surveyed and interviewed 69 EFL teachers. He found that Japanese students did not mind discussing topics, such as AIDS with their teachers; however, some teachers faced several challenges by offending someone in class. Although it is impossible to keep everyone happy, this conclusion suggests that teachers should seek help from school administration regarding what to cover and what not to cover in class.

Along the same lines pointed out earlier, Timina and Butler (2011) examined the topics that would make Taiwanese students uncomfortable to discuss in the classroom. To know students' perspectives on the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics, 70 English language major students (58 females and 12 males) were studied. The authors reported that Taiwanese university students do not feel comfortable when discussing "culturally sensitive" and controversial topics, such as boyfriend/girlfriend, sex, politics, personal family income, gay and lesbian families, death, ghosts, and childless and adoptive families. The students in this study mentioned that such topics are not usually discussed in their native language; thus, it is also hard to discuss them in the second/foreign language.

Method of the study

This exploratory study took place in three private secondary schools in the UAE: one in the Emirate of Sharjah, another in the Emirate of Dubai, and the other in the Emirate of Ajman. The motivation for selecting these three different Emirates was to examine if the Emirate's conservative style impacts the teachers' freedom in covering "culturally sensitive" topics, since it is locally known that Dubai is the most open cosmopolitan city in the Emirates, that Sharjah is more conservative and traditional than Dubai and that Ajman is less wealthy and more reserved than both Dubai and Sharjah.

These schools, in addition to having to use the English language textbooks prescribed by the MoE, opt for other English language textbooks they deem suitable for their schools' vision and mission and the English language level of the students. Worth noting that private schools take pride in selecting textbooks that carry the names of renowned publishers such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Routledge, among others. Public schools were not considered for this study since they use commissioned English language textbooks. That is, textbooks specifically tailored to meet the UAE's cultural context. In other words, the schools are assigned their English language textbooks for the various levels by the MoE.

Thirty expatriate secondary school English language teachers from the three private schools were involved in the study; 10 teachers from each selected school. All participants were English language teachers of grades 10, 11, and 12. On top of this, a senior female English language teacher from one of the schools and a senior male teacher, who had 30 years of English language teaching experience and English language teacher training in the UAE, Canada, and Iran, his home country, were interviewed as consultants for the researchers for further questions and clarifications.

To get a deeper insight into teachers' perspectives, three teachers, one from each selected school, volunteered to be interviewed. The first interviewee was an Arab female English language teacher who had four years of teaching experience at private schools and language institutes in the emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi. The second participant was a head teacher at one of the schools, with a teaching experience of over 15 years, and the third was a senior English language teacher with over 25 years of ELT teaching experience in

the UAE.

Twenty participants were initially supposed to be surveyed from each school; however, some teachers refused to be part of the survey as they felt it might affect their employment. In other schools, the number of teachers who teach secondary classes was not enough.

Participants' demographics show that 66.7% were female teachers, and 33.3% were males (see Table 1). Participants were from different nationalities: the USA, Canada, Britain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, and Tunisia. The majority of them, however, speak Arabic as their first language. Teachers' ages ranged from 21 to more than 50 years.

Table 1
Demographic information of participant teachers

Biographical information	Participants	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	20	66.7
	Male	10	33.3
Age	21 - 29 years old	15	50
	30 – 39 years old	9	30
	40 – 49 years old	4	13.3
	50+ years old	2	6.7
First language	Arabic	18	60
	English	5	16.7
	Urdu	3	10
	Tagallo	2	6.7
	French	2	6.7

In order to answer the research questions, this research utilized mixed research methods and data were triangulated through both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments as discussed below.

The English language textbooks used by the selected secondary schools were examined for the existence of any "culturally sensitive" topics. Although these textbooks were checked by MoE representatives for conformity with the local cultural context, some "culturally sensitive" topics were found in the reading passages in the textbooks. These were highlighted and used as examples for the purposes of this study.

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was administered in English to the teachers to know whether or not they will cover any "culturally-sensitive" topics they may come across in the English language textbooks they use in their respective schools. Questionnaire items included participants' personal information: gender, age, ethnicity, first language, and their qualifications. The second section asked about experiences, situations, and perspectives on teaching English and the teachers' understanding of the concept of "culturally sensitive" topics. This section covered topics such as the ethnicity of students, the relation between culture and language, textbook materials, teachers' practices in classrooms and school policies and regulations. Other open-ended questions were also added in order to individualize the responses.

The questionnaire was piloted with five volunteer expatriate teachers from the selected schools. Based on the teachers' responses and feedback, some questions were revised and fine-tuned. The questionnaire was also verified by an expert educationalist. Besides, teachers who participated in piloting study were excluded from the study. The final questionnaire version was handed to the participants by the first researcher. The questionnaire required participants

who participated in later interviews to supply their names and contact details.

After collecting the completed questionnaires from the teachers, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with three volunteer secondary school teachers from the selected schools, followed by interviews with the research consultants. These interviews gathered in-depth background information about the teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics and the constraints teachers may face when covering such topics in UAE schools (see Appendix 2 for questions). Some of these teachers' testimonies are provided below. They are also accompanied by the teachers' pseudonyms, gender and age.

Pseudonyms were used for all the participants. After collecting the completed questionnaires and conducting the interviews, a thematic analysis for the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the interview questions was carried out. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves rich accounting of the data. It allows for the generation of both explicit and implicit themes from a direct and critical interpretation of the evidence. Explicit themes emerged from area identifying vocabulary used in the responses. Examples of these are the topics that the respondents consider as "culturally sensitive". For this categorization process, Braun and Clarke's (2006) stipulated steps were used as the framework for the analysis through progressing in this order:

1) familiarization with the data;
2) generating initial codes; and
3) constructing, renaming, and reviewing themes.

Moreover, the concept of "topic", defined by Brown and Yule (1983, p. 73) as "what is being talked/written about", was also of great help in this regard. Brown and Yule's (1983, p. 67) concept of "topic shift" was also useful in this process. The emerging "culturally sensitive" topics were broken down into categories and checked by a reviewer for reliability of results.

Results and Discussion

In order to understand teachers' ideas and beliefs of what "culture" is, they were asked to provide a definition of "culture". Teachers' responses were content analyzed by breaking their definitions into themes and calculating totals. Table 2 displays the topics from the most to the least frequent.

According to the teachers' responses, customs, traditions, and beliefs are the factors that shape someone's culture the most. When asked to define "culture", the senior teacher, said the following in English:

> In my view, culture is an intricate system of written and unwritten values that emerge when people live in groups or societies. Such values are collectively decided and are often influenced by religion and literature although they're not the whole story. I think an important component of any culture is the framework that shapes people's attitudes to and judgment of others' behaviors (appropriate vs. inappropriate). Such "codes" vary across cultures and can significantly influence how successfully one can integrate into the larger community. (Youssef, male, 54)

Table 2
Defining keywords of culture

Keywords	Number of Appearances
Customs	7
Traditions	7
Beliefs	7
Way of life	4
Behavior	4
Ideas	3
Norms	2
Habits	2
Identity	1
Rules and codes	1
Thoughts	1
Arts	1

This concurs with the views of Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and McDaniel (2015) who regard culture as values, ways of thinking, and beliefs. Spencer-Oatey (2008) also sees culture as values, beliefs, approaches, behaviors, traditions, rules and regulations. As different teachers expressed varying views of what culture entails, this may lead to variations in their responses to the other survey questions. Furthermore, teachers were asked if there is a relationship between language and its culture. Ninety seven percent indicated a strong relationship between language and culture; whereas, only three percent expressed disagreement. One of the participants explained that:

"language is a means to expressing culture". (Alia, female, 33)

Another noted that:

"culture and language represent the identity of a nation" (Allen, male, 39).

Omaima, a senior female teacher, commented:

I believe that language and culture cannot be separated. They have a reciprocal relationship, too. When we communicate with others, we constantly, and perhaps subconsciously, gauge the appropriateness of our utterances – a process that is informed by culture. Cultural norms and values inform the decisions we make in terms of what is appropriate or inappropriate and without this knowledge, we are likely to confuse, disengage and even offend others. In some cases, culturally inappropriate behavior may even cost someone his or her life. (Omaima, female, 45)

In response to the question whether language can/cannot be taught without touching upon culture, six percent of the participants believe that language can be taught without culture; whereas, ninety-four percent note that culture cannot be separated from language teaching.

Teachers' elaborations on the question- whether language and culture can be separated in language teaching are summarized in the response below:

culture influences language especially when it comes to literature. Some stories/novels cannot be taught to students without discussing the culture of its people, culture affects the way we think and therefore it affects what we say, language, language is acquired through someone's culture and language tells stories of a particular culture. (Nabi, male 28)

In support of the above stated response, Wei (2018) views culture as one of the core skills of language and believes that language and culture cannot be separated. In the same vein, Jandt (2013) and Mahmoud (2015) argue that verbal communication cannot happen and succeed without the understanding of its culture. This may indicate that language teaching cannot happen without understanding the culture and teaching it to students to "become proficient in cross-cultural communication" (Wei, 2018, p. 296).

The participants were questioned on how often they come across sensitive topics in the textbook(s) they use in class. Some teachers mentioned that they spend the first couple of weeks to go over the syllabus, the topics to be covered and the lessons in the teaching materials to ensure that they do not contain any sensitive topics. Other teachers said that they design their own teaching materials in an attempt to relate the topics covered to students' cultures and backgrounds. This aligns with Hinkel's (1999) statement that some institutions design their own textbooks to mirror students' values and beliefs rather than presenting native speakers' culture that might be too distant from their own. This is echoed by one of the teachers who stated,

> We never encounter any sensitive topic, but if we do, we remove it completely after consulting others whether such a topic is sensitive or not. In the public sector (public schools, researchers' insertion), however, this does not happen because before any material reaches the teacher, it has already have been screened several times … but if we want to use any additional materials from the internet, we do make sure that the words are removed or the pictures adapted. (Julian, female, 40)

It is worth reminding again that UAE public schools use contextualized textbooks, specifically designed for EFL learners. However, in the case of imported textbooks, according to Ahmed, male, 48, one of the research consultants, a committee is entrusted with the task of going over the "soft copies" of these textbooks before sending an order to print them as they might include "culturally sensitive" topics. He added:

> We had to ask for a replacement of picture of a girl standing in the balcony wearing a swimming suit.

However, he also noted that some of the topics may still be in the English language teaching textbooks. In this regard, 16% of the teachers mention that they always encounter "sensitive" topics, 65% said they occasionally do; while only 19% indicated that they never encounter such topics. Yet, some participants from the same school reported encountering "sensitive" topics whereas others remarked that they never come across them in the same textbooks. To verify this issue, the researchers examined samples of the textbooks used and found some topics/texts that had escaped their attention. Some of these were gay rights, lesbians, a boy kissing his girlfriend, having ham for breakfast, wife swapping, etc. Therefore, there comes a time during which teachers and students face "culturally sensitive" topics.

The aforementioned responses show that there is no agreement on which topics are "in/sensitive". In other words, topics that might be "sensitive" to some teachers might not be so for others.

To know what actions teachers take when they encounter "culturally sensitive" topics in the English language teaching materials, they were asked whether they teach or skip them. Although 94% previously mentioned that language cannot be separated from culture, 48% of the teachers reported skipping such topics; whereas, 52% did not. In order to have more insights into the reasons for this discrepancy in the responses, the participants provided further explanations in the interviews. One of the Dubai-based teachers commented,

I teach these topics, but I never go into details to avoid further explanation and parents' complaints. (Ferdinado, male, 38)

A second teacher said,
Students won't benefit anything from discussing foreign cultures. (Ji, female, 51)

To analyze teachers' responses and the reasons behind the different comments, two variables were compared; the correlations between teachers' ages, years of teaching experience in the Gulf and the teachers' coverage of "sensitive" topics (see Table 3).

Table 3
Correlation between teachers' ages, years of teaching experience and coverage of sensitive topics

Age ranges	I explain them (%)	Frequency (n)	I skip them (%)	Frequency (n)
21- 29	73.3	11	26.7	4
30- 39	44.4	4	55.6	5
40- 49	25	1	75	3

From Table 3, it can be inferred that the younger the teachers, the more inclined they were to cover "culturally sensitive" topics. However, the percentages of coverage of these topics seem to decrease with older teachers. Results also show that 73% of the teachers, 21 - 29 years old, explain "culturally sensitive" topics whereas 27% skip them. This could be due to the assumption that younger teachers realize the importance of covering these topics or that they are used to discussing them in the societies they come from. This point supports Yamazaki's (2000) argument that culture is not fixed; it goes through several transformations because of different generations and the never waning influence of globalization. This might explain the observed differences in the teachers' responses. By contrast, correlations between the teachers' responses to the same question and the years of their teaching experience in the Gulf region reveal that the more experience teachers have in the Gulf region, the less the coverage of sensitive topics in class (see Table 4).

Table 4
Correlation between years of teaching experience and coverage of sensitive topics

Years of experience	I explain them (%)	Frequency (n)	I skip them (%)	Frequency (n)
0- 3	66.7	4	33.3	2
4- 8	55.6	5	44.4	4
9- 15	33.3	3	66.7	6
More than 15 years	16.7	1	83.3	5

Table 4 shows that 66.7% of the teachers with between 0-3 years of experience tend to explain "culturally sensitive" topics, whereas 33.3% skip them. On the other hand, this percentage gradually decreases in the responses of the teachers who have between 4-8 and 9-15 years of experience. This might suggest that the more experienced the teachers are, the more likely that they might have encountered situations where they were told not to cover these topics.

Another item on the survey asked teachers to write and rank the five most "culturally sensitive" topics in the region. Results show that "sex", with 47%, is the most highly-ranked

sensitive topic. Teachers' responses include: sex education, sex orientation, and out-of-marriage love; all of these sub-topics are categorized under "sex". Furthermore, "religion" is the second-ranked sensitive topic, 42%, while "politics", 11%, is the least ranked. Nonetheless, the senior teacher (Youssef) ranked "religion" as the first since he believes that "sex" comes under religious values and beliefs.

Results also show that family affairs, gay rights, and racism are seen as "sensitive" topics. Some of the proposed topics could be considered part of politics (racism) and others are related to religion (gay, family affairs). This means that some teachers might discuss some sub-topics that are related to politics, but they choose to avoid other controversial topics. For example, a teacher (Rehab, female, 36) who mentioned that she avoids discussing political issues mentioned that she discusses topics related to refugees with her students. Other teachers' responses also indicate coverage of other topics, such as relationships, and gay rights, which are part of sexual orientation.

On a different note, participants were asked to identify three "culturally sensitive" topics that they may discuss with their students and mention three other topics that they will never discuss with them (Table 5).

Table 5
Culturally-sensitive topics teachers might/never discuss in class

Culturally-sensitive topics	Frequency of response	Percentage (%)
Topics that teachers NEVER discuss		
Sex (sex education, homosexuality)	15	50
Religion	11	36.7
Gay rights	2	6.7
Politics	6	20
Transgender issues	2	6.7
Social relations	2	6.7
Nationalities,	1	3.3
Abortion	1	3.3
Topics that teachers MIGHT discuss		
Discrimination	4	13.3
Traditions	3	10
None	3	10
Race	3	10
Refugees	2	6.7
Customs	2	6.7
Word expression	2	6.7
Personal views	1	3.3
Segregation, politics, social class, social habits, relationships, identity, media coverage, roles of family members	1 each	3.3 each

All teachers reported that they never discuss religion or sex while only one teacher mentioned that she discusses politics. However, some teachers said that they discuss race, refugees, segregation, social class, and identity, which are related to politics and religion. This indicates that there is no agreement on what is related to politics or religion and should not be discussed and what could be explained to students. Therefore, teachers' responses are most likely related to their beliefs and attitudes and experiences in the region towards which issues are sensitive and which are not.

As for the consequences of covering or discussing sensitive topics, results indicate that

39% mentioned that it affects the reputation of the school; 32% believe that such discussions affect the culture of students only; and 16% remarked that it affects the identity of students. This suggests that the majority of teachers believe that the school reputation is being negatively impacted by discussing taboo topics. We as researchers believe that when teachers cover such topics, such a practice does not mean that teachers or their students should adopt taboo topics and make them part of their culture. Conversely, students and teachers should have a proper understanding of others' culture(s), which will hopefully foster respect and tolerance of cultural differences.

Worth noting here is that our study found no significant differences between the teachers' perceptions from the three emirates selected. In other words, although it is locally known that Dubai is the most open cosmopolitan city in the Emirates, that Sharjah is more conservative and traditional than Dubai and that Ajman is less wealthy and more reserved than both Dubai and Sharjah; it can be concluded that teachers are impacted by the country's stance on such issues. The document included in Appendix 3 could be viewed as evidence for this interpretation. Putting the above -stated teachers' perceptions in the context of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about cultural features "that people's understanding of the world, their cognitive processes and behavior, correspond to features of the lexicon and grammar of the language that they speak" (Tulviste, 2019, pp. 215-216), will require experimental evidence of positive or negative impact of effect, which may suggest using two groups of students- one as control and another as experimental to teach these culturally sensitive topics and see what the effects will be. Yet, we should realize that this may result in harming the members of the experimental group, which is unethical.

Implications of discussing culturally sensitive topics on teachers' career paths (Job retention)

Among the factors that affect teachers' discussion of taboo topics, institutional constraints were the most noticeable. Teachers were asked if they faced any restriction(s) when they discussed such topics. Although 51% mentioned that they explain sensitive topics, 55% said they never faced any institutional restrictions, while 45% stated that they were asked not to cover certain topics.

One of the participants remarked that:
> Subject coordinators advise them on what topics to go over in detail and which topics to avoid in order to avoid problems. (Tim, male 27)

The fact that supervisors tend to hold meetings and advise teachers on what to discuss and what to ignore is an important feature of the filtering system. Nevertheless, 22% mentioned that there is a total agreement between them and school administrators on the discussion of taboo topics; 23% said there is an average agreement, and 55% said that there is none.

Moreover, one of the questionnaire items asks whether teachers have been in a situation when they covered a sensitive issue and the school administration warned them. Results show that 13% were approached by principals or language coordinators, who asked them not to cover such topics. One of the participants said,

> I received a complaint from one of the parents who addressed the issue to the school administration, and I was in trouble. (Karen, female, 33)

Furthermore, results show that teachers face different situations when covering or skipping cultural topics. Some of them encounter problems while others do not. This might suggest that

teachers tackle sensitive topics using different methods. According to Gobert (2015), teachers should be careful when covering a sensitive topic and should be aware of their students' needs. This might mean that teachers are not supposed to cover cultural aspects of different cultures that their students might find explicitly offensive; however, they should be able to address such topics in a way that makes students comfortable and that does not offend anyone's local culture (Gobert, 2015).

As some teachers faced problems when they covered sensitive topics, they were asked if they were guided on how to touch upon "culturally sensitive" topics in class. Results point out that 58% received training or guidance on how to tackle such issues while 42% did not. One of the teachers commented,

> We were asked to skip any topic that might cause troubles with parents. (Renad, female, 26)

Another teacher mentioned,

> We were not given formal training. The English coordinator told us to explain the topic, not explicitly though; however, she advised us to inform students the origin of a topic. (Lara, female, 34)

Another participant said,

> I never tackle such issues. There are no clear guidelines or written documents on which topics can be covered in class and which ones should be avoided. (Mango, male, 45)

According to Zarate (1986, as cited by Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), covering "culturally sensitive" topics has been problematic in some institutions as no clear instructions are provided to practitioners on what is to be taught and how. As a result, these teachers receive warnings and sometimes dismissal from schools because they cover issues they were not told not to cover.

The impacts of discussing culturally sensitive topics on students' English language competence

In order to know the reasons why some teachers choose to cover or skip "culturally sensitive" topics, they were asked to rate the usefulness of discussing such topics. Results reveal that 81% view teaching these topics as having a positive impact on students' English language development compared to 19% who do not. Teachers' comments were as follows:

> Discussing culturally sensitive topics broadens the students' perspective. (Rayan, female, 35)
> They can better understand each other. (Hans, male, 28)
> It helps them develop intellectually. (Stewart, male, 44)
> A broad culture horizon will lead to tolerance. (Hanna, female, 52)
> It is better to be aware of culturally sensitive topics from school rather than other sources. (Mena, female, 47)
> It opens their minds to different aspects of life; we do not need to be overprotective, and it is useful to explain what is related to the curriculum only, not more or less. (Noor, female, 44)

One of the research consultants noted,

> It is useful to discuss culturally sensitive topics as these students will be culturally competent. They will develop intellectually as well. (Reema, female, 56)

On the other hand, other opposing views mentioned,

> It has negative effects on the society. (Sabir, male, 47)
> What they do not know will not harm them. (Tasqeen, female, 37)
> This leads to unnecessary arguments. (Nameer, male, 28)
> They come from different cultures, and these topics may not be discussed at home; therefore, they cause problems in class. (Cristian, female, 50)

The 19% who reported that discussing culture would negatively impact the students' language development believe that discussing these topics may lead to unnecessary arguments among students or between students and the teacher. In this context, Gobert (2015) mentions that discussing unrelated topics to students' culture may distance them from their learning. However, in order to overcome such a conflict, Gobert believes that teachers should not focus on the details of the topic rather than explaining the general idea. Estaji and Savarabadi (2020) also believe that communication cannot happen if participants are not aware of each other's cultures. This last point is also emphasized by Tatar and Adıgüzel (2019, p. 123) who argue that the discussion of controversial topics enhances students' critical thinking skills and intercultural communication; A point that may be difficult to objectively measure.

Conclusion

Although there has been research on the cultural representations in English language teaching materials (Aliakbari, 2005; Abd Rashid & Engku, 2018; Huang, 2019), it has limited itself to the examination of the teaching materials' cultural contents. We believe that what makes our present study unique is that it examined secondary school teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics in three private schools in the UAE by probing into teachers' perceptions on the relationship between culture and language and whether English can be taught without focusing on its cultural aspects. It also investigated the implications of discussing such topics on the teachers' career paths. Moreover, it questioned whether there were any consequences on the students' cognitive skills if teachers covered taboo topics, such as sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues; in the classrooms.

We are inclined to believe that our research distinguished itself from previous studies by having culled the study data through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and careful examination of the English language teaching materials used in the respective schools used for this investigation. The results indicate general positive teacher attitudes towards the strong connection between language and culture. Nevertheless, results also show that the majority of teachers avoid discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in order to avoid creating problems for themselves or the school or because they believe that they are not beneficial. They also reveal that some teachers might avoid covering "culturally sensitive" topics although they may have positive impacts on the students' cognitive skills. Our research indicates that the country's overall cultural framework is the determinant behind what to cover in class and what not to cover. It is, therefore, recommended that newly-recruited expatriate teachers, regardless of their nationalities or cultural background, are familiarized with and acclimated to the local

culture, its contents, taboos, sensitive topics and the like. In other words, they should be instructed on the overall social context of the country they are working in (Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016; Sifakis, 2019). Furthermore, foreign teachers should be presented with real and practical examples of such topics, given guidance on which ones are acceptable for class discussions, which ones to avoid, how to tackle potentially controversial topics, and how much coverage should be delivered to students. Such a practice would, if not totally erase any cultural conflicts, reduce students', parents', schools' and other stakeholders' complaints concerning new teachers' insensitivity to the specifics of the local culture and alert them to the sociopragmatic foundation (Nieto, 2020) of "culturally sensitive" words. In addition, all stakeholders need to understand that English language learners have to acquire some of these "culturally sensitive issues" so that they can develop "… proficiency for international communication …" (Lin, 2020, p. 131). This will also help "safeguard students against any potential negative attitudes they may encounter when learning about a new set of norms at odds with the ones of their own" (Mahmoud, 2015, p. 22).

We wish to acknowledge that the current study has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. Researchers may repeat the same study with a larger number of teachers from both private and public schools to find out whether their results will support those reported in this paper. Future researchers may also consider how teachers' and students' genders impact the coverage or avoidance of such topics. In this study, the number of female participants, 68%, was higher than the males, 32%; therefore, it was difficult to study the differences in perspectives between both genders. Future researchers may choose to investigate if females and males hold the same perspectives when discussing taboo topics or not. Future studies may also consider comparing teachers' perceptions based on their nationality and religion. Another interesting area is to compare and contrast between the perceptions of teachers in secondary schools in rural and urban areas. It should be announced here that the biggest portion of this study depended on the teachers' personal perceptions. This may require future researchers to personally attend classes and observe how certain "culturally sensitive" topics are approached by teachers to verify the opinions expressed in this current study. Research may also consider probing into secondary school students' understanding of "culturally sensitive" topics and see if their perceptions match teachers' perceptions.

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Appendix 1: Teachers' Questionnaire

ELT Teachers' Attitudes towards the Discussion of "Culturally Sensitive" Topics

This questionnaire aims to collect information about English teachers' attitudes in private secondary schools in the UAE. It explores their attitudes towards discussing "culturally sensitive" topics with students during class. The researchers would appreciate your help by answering the following questions. Your honest and sincere responses are highly valued. The questionnaire is anonymous which means that you do not need to provide your name. It is designed on a voluntary basis. It will take you around ten minutes to fill it in. Responses will be used for research purposes only. Thank you very much for your help.

"Culturally sensitive" topics refer to topics that allow you to understand and learn about people whose cultural background is not the same as yours. In the context of the study, these topics could be against students' culture, traditions, beliefs or religion and some of them can be considered taboos.

I. Kindly complete the following information about yourself.

1) Gender: a) Male b) Female
2) Age: a) 21-29 b) 30-39 c) 40- 49 d)50+
3) Ethnicity (cultural background, e.g. Lebanese, African, American, .etc):
     ....
4) What is your first language?
a) Arabic b) English c) Other: (Please specify).....................
5) Qualification:
a) A bachelor in …………. b) Master Degree in ……………. c) Other:……..
6) Country of qualification: ……………………….

II. Kindly complete the following questions about teaching English

1) For how long have you been teaching English in the Gulf?
a) 0- 3 years b) 5-8 years c) 9-15 years d) 15+ years
2) How many of your students are non- native speakers of English?
a) All of them b) Most of them c) A few of them   d) None
3) What is the ethnicity of the majority of the students' in your class? (Please specify).
……………………………………………
4) What gender of students do you teach? (Please circle all that apply)
a) Girls only b) boys only c) mixed students
5) Can you define culture from your own perspective? Culture is
…………………………………………………………………..…………
6) Do you think there is a relation between language and culture?
a) Yes b) No
How? ………………………………………………………………………….
7) Can language be taught without culture?
a) Yes b) No
Please explain:………………………………………………………………
8) In your opinion, what are the most "culturally sensitive" topics in the region (Please rank from the most to the least)
1) …… 2)....... 3) …… 4) …… 5) ……

9) How often do you come across sensitive topics in the textbook(s) that you use in teaching English?

a) Always b) Occasionally c) Never

10) What do you do when you encounter taboo words and/or sensitive issues in the textbook(s) or any teaching material that you use for teaching English?

a) I explain them b) I skip them c) Other action (Please specify) …………

11) Have you faced any institutional restrictions when teaching a specific topic? (If not, please go to question 13)

a) Yes b) No

12) If yes, how did you come to know about it?

……………………………………………………………………………..

13) Do you think the school environment impacts teachers' coverage or non-coverage of these topics?

a) Yes b) No

Why/ why not? ……………………………………………………………

14) Does your school provide any guidance as to how to handle "culturally sensitive" topics?

a) Yes b) No

15) Have you ever been in a situation when you touched on a "culturally sensitive" issue and the school administration warned you against repeating this?

a) Yes b) No c) Other action: (Please specify): …………………

16) Do you use sensitive words in your own language in class?

a) Yes b) No

17) How much agreement is there on sensitive topics between you and the school Administration?

a) Total b) average c) none

18) How much agreement is there on sensitive topics between you and your students?

a) Total b) average c) none

19) Do you believe in the hidden curriculum?

a) Yes b) No c) Maybe

20) Would you use it to discuss sensitive issues in class?

a) Yes b) No c) Maybe

21) Do you find it difficult to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics with students from the same gender as yours?

a) Yes b) No

Why? ………………………………………………………………

22) Do you find it difficult to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics with students from the opposite gender as yours?

a) Yes b) No

Why? ………………………………………………………

23) In your opinion, how useful is it for your students to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics?

a) not useful at all b) not useful c) useful d) very useful

Why? ……………………………………………………………

24) Why do you think there are restrictions on these topics?

………………………………………………………………………

25) Do you believe that teaching these topics would affect (Please circle all that apply)

a) Reputation of the school

b) Identity of student

c) Culture of student

d) Other (specify)

26) Mention 3 "culturally sensitive" topics that you never and will never discuss with your

students in class:

a. …………………   b. ………………… c. ……..................

27) Mention 3 culturally sensitive topics that you discuss or may discuss with your students in class?

a. …………………   b. …………..   c. ………………

Thank you for your time and cooperation!

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1) How do you define "culture"?
2) Can language and culture be separated? Why?
3) Are there any clear or written guidelines on teaching "culturally sensitive" topics?
4) How often do you encounter "culturally sensitive" topics?
5) What do you think affects the materials covered in class?
6) Have you been trained on how to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics with students?
7) Do you think it is useful for students to discuss culturally sensitive topics?

Appendix 3: Tolerance Document

Tolerance Document for Employees in Education System to denounce Discrimination and Hate

"The promotion and observance of human rights without discrimination as to origin, sex, religion or language and denunciation of speeches of violence and hate is a reflection of our tradition, and moral values, and represents an affirmation of the policies and principles of the late His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in the field of human rights, which we are very keen to remain   among the first countries in the world that protect and strengthen human rights".

His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan,
President of the United Arab Emirates

"The United Arab Emirates- "The objectives of the Government are to build a kind society… environment that supports tolerance …strong families… educated generations…. Equal economic opportunities for all"

His Highness Sheik Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum,
Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai.

Tolerance represents one of the original values in the United Arab Emirates community which derives its origins from our Islamic Religion as affirmed in the United Arab Constitution and reflects the obligation of the State of the United Arab Emirates in all international agreements, which concentrate on tolerance, co-existence, and denunciation of violence, extremism, and hate.

In accordance with the national program for tolerance in the United Arab Emirates and in order to strengthen the ambitions of our wise leadership of the United Arab Emirates to become a model to be followed in tolerance and denunciation of hate, and a beacon which will contribute in the dissemination of these valuable values in all countries as emphasized by His Highness Sheik Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai.

Accordingly, I the undersigned voluntarily and with full legal capacity and absolute conviction during my work (as an academic member) in governmental or private educational institutions agree on the following:

The commitment of teaching the educational programs as set by the relevant authorities and preparing the students for it;

Respect the United Arab Emirates Constitution and all legislations and rules in force;

Abide by the principles and values of tolerance and mercy, and cooperate in my interaction with all those concerned with the educational system from inside or outside, in order to build a cohesive society based on tolerance, peace and positive coexistence;

My conducts and interactions shall be governed by non-discrimination with all individuals based on origins, or nationality or convictions or social status, and   will seek to promote such moral values within and outside the educational system;

Maintain the stability and cohesiveness of the society and shall avoid any words or acts which may threaten the societal peace and security;

Making sure that the contents supporting the educational programs are free from any insinuation of discrimination or violence or hate;

Affirm that I have received a copy of the law by decree no. 2 for the year 2015 concerning the Suppression of Discrimination and Hate, and have read it, and undertake not to commit any

act punishable by this law or to violate any provision of this document.
Name:
Job:
Place of Employment:
Signature:
Date