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Treball de Fi de Grau

Intercultural Competence in a Foreign
Language Classroom

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Abstract

Intercultural competence could be defined as the ability to successfully interact with someone with a completely different background. The reason for this is because language is part of culture. The aim of this thesis is to find the role of intercultural competence in the process of learning English as a foreign language. The hypothesis was that people with a higher knowledge about culture of their target language have higher foreign language skills in that language. It was tested across 17 university students in various bachelor programs, none of which were enrolled in the English degree program. The participants completed two different tests, one on language and one on culture and the results have been compared to whether participants with higher skills of English obtain higher grades in their culture test as well. The results suggest that this is the case for most participants, therefore we can determine that there is a tendency of this happening.

Keywords: language, culture, EFL, interculturality

Resumen

La competencia intercultural podría definirse como la capacidad de interactuar con éxito con alguien que proviene de un entorno cultural completamente diferente. Esto se debe a que la lengua forma parte de la cultura. El objetivo de esta tesis es encontrar el papel que tiene la competencia intercultural en el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. La hipótesis era que las personas con un mayor conocimiento de la cultura de su lengua de destino tienen mayores competencias lingüísticas en esa lengua. Se puso a prueba en 17 estudiantes universitarios de varios programas de licenciatura, ninguno de los cuales estaba matriculado en la carrera de inglés. Los participantes completaron dos pruebas diferentes, una sobre la lengua y otra sobre la cultura, y los resultados se han comparado para ver si los participantes con mayores conocimientos de inglés obtienen también mayores calificaciones en su prueba de cultura. Los resultados sugieren que este es el caso de la mayoría de los participantes, por lo que podemos determinar que existe una tendencia a que esto ocurra.

Palabras clave: lengua, cultura, EFL, interculturalidad, competencia intercultural

Resum

La competència intercultural podria definir-se com la capacitat d'interactuar amb èxit amb algú que prové d'un entorn cultural completament diferent. Això es deu a que la llengua forma part de la cultura. L'objectiu d'aquesta tesi es trobar el paper que té la competència intercultural en el procés d'aprenentatge de l'Anglès com a llengua estrangera. La hipòtesi era que les persones amb un major coneixement de la cultura de la seva llengua de destí tenen millors competències lingüístiques en aquella llengua. S'ha posat a prova en 17 estudiants universitaris de varis programes de llicenciatura, cap dels quals estava matriculat en el Grau d'Anglès. Els participants van completar dues proves diferents, una sobre llengua i una sobre cultura i els resultats han estat comparats per veure si els participants amb més coneixements de llengua anglesa obtenen també millors qualificacions en la prova de cultura. Els resultats suggereixen que aquest és el cas en la majoria dels participants, per la qual cosa podem determinar que existeix una tendència a que això ocorri.

Paraules clau: llengua, cultura, EFL, interculturalitat, competència intercultural

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	- 2 -
1.1 Do animals have culture? How does this differ from human culture?	- 4 -
1.2 The relationship between language and culture.	- 6 -
1.3 What is intercultural competence?	- 6 -
1.4 Recent studies on intercultural competence	- 8 -
1.5 How culture can be taught	- 9 -
1.6 Objectives of this study	- 10 -
2. Method.....	- 12 -
2.1. Participants	- 12 -
2.2. Materials	- 14 -
2.3 Procedure.....	- 17 -
3. Results	- 18 -
4. Discussion.....	- 22 -
4.1. Limitations of this study and implications for further research.....	- 24 -
5. Conclusion.....	- 25 -
6. References	- 26 -
Appendix A	- 29 -
Appendix B.....	- 30 -

List of Tables

Table 1. *Participants*- 12 -

Table 2. *Test Score Means*.....- 18 -

Table 3. *Exact scores*.....- 19 -

List of Figures

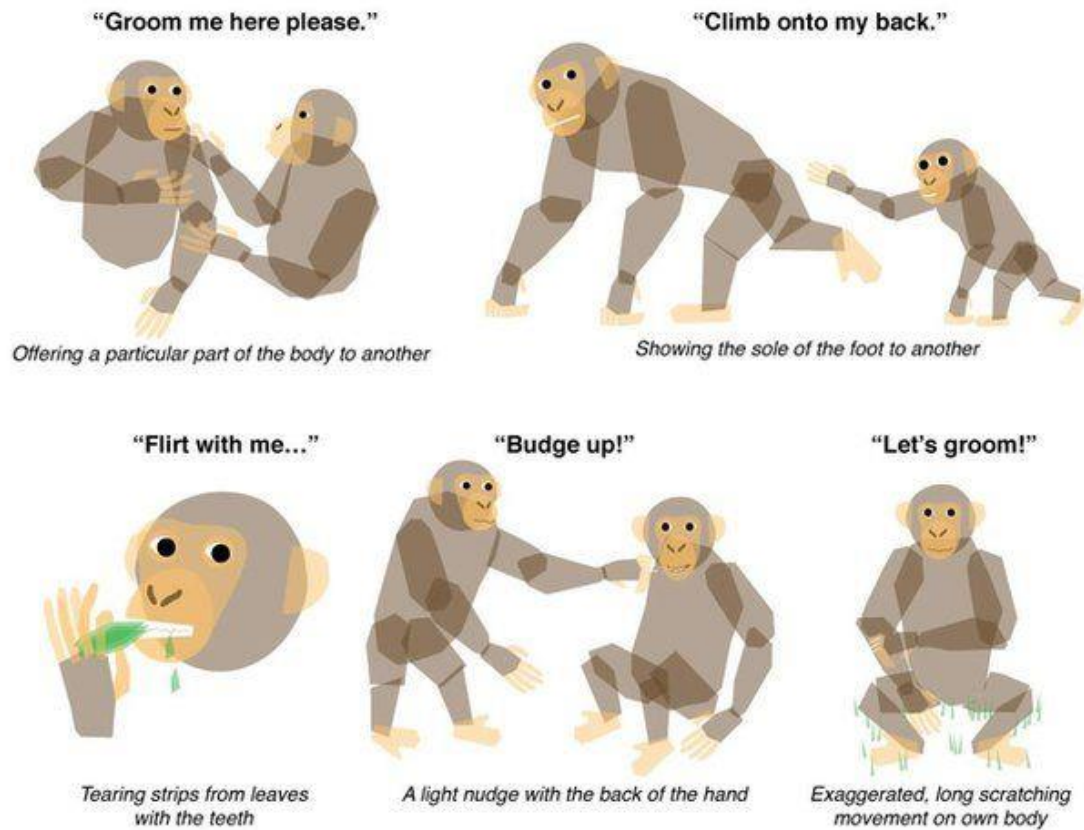
Figure 1 <i>Signals used by chimpanzees</i>	- 3 -
Figure 2 <i>Ant Pheromone Trail</i>	- 4 -
Figure 3. <i>Language Level English Test</i>	- 15 -
Figure 4. <i>Example of the Culture Test</i>	- 16 -
Figure 5. <i>The results of the two tests</i>	- 21 -

1. Introduction

Language is the system that humans use in order to communicate with each other. It is also one of the aspects that makes us humans unique and different from the rest of the animals on the face of the Earth. Throughout history, several linguists have carried out studies on the capacity of animals to learn a language. In the 1960's experiments were conducted using primates. At the beginning researchers attempted to teach primates a spoken language like English, but when they found out that anatomically they are not designed to speak, they began to teach them American Sign Language (ASL). It was in this context that a gorilla named Koko amazed researchers by demonstrating that she did have the ability to learn some ASL signs and to use them correctly in order to communicate and to be understood (Gold & Watson, 2018).

Despite the experiments that were conducted, however, we know that language is a uniquely human characteristic, both the fact of having developed languages and the fact of using them. That is because what was concluded from the studies with primates was that although some of them can be quite clever, it does not seem possible that one of them will ever use language with a level of expertise a human being would. (Yule, 2016)

Animals do communicate with each other despite not having languages, they do this by using diverse types of signals, visual signals like bright colors that some animals have on their skin which can indicate they are poisonous, chemical signals for example the hormones that ants use in order to smell each other and not get lost, tactile signs like the gestures that some primates make with their hands to indicate prey, and auditory signs like the sounds made by birds that live in dense rainforests who continuously produce sounds by singing in order not to get lost (Turner, 2020).



Source: Hobaiter and Byrne: The Meanings of Chimpanzee Gestures, Current Biology (2014)

Figure 1. Signals used by chimpanzees.

Chimpanzees use their hands and fingers in order to point to others and indicate, for example, what part of their body they prefer another chimp to groom, as can be seen in Figure 1 above. They also use signals to flirt with each other, tell others to move over, and to help carry their children. While these signals are used to communicate, the chimpanzees are not using a complete language, because a language is made of words that are combined in patterns that are often new, such as sentences. Chimpanzees are also not able to talk about the past or the future. They can only talk about the present. A language requires verb tenses and being able to make new sentences. Since chimpanzees do not have this ability, they do not have a complete language

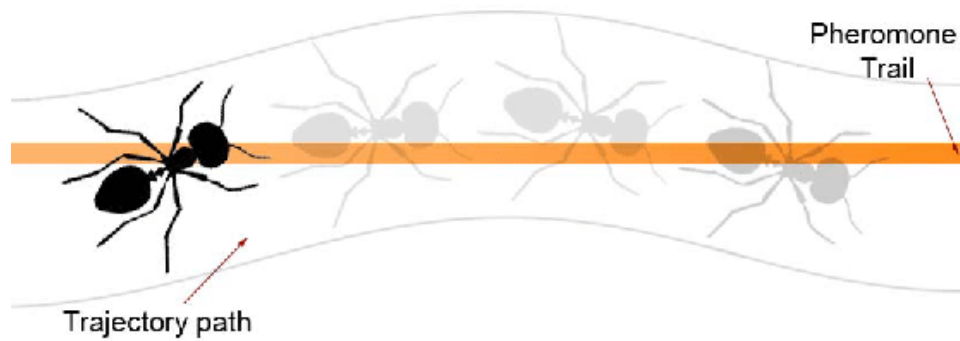


Figure 2. *Ant Pheromone Trail.*

(Retrieved from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308814353>)

As mentioned above, ants use pheromone trails in order to be able to smell each other and not get lost. Since they can smell each other's path it is easy for them to move from any food source back to their nest by following the pheromone trails, as seen in Figure 2 above. The use of pheromones is a form of communication; however, there is also no evidence that ants have a complete language. Like chimpanzees, ants cannot talk about the future, or the past and they cannot recombine words to make sentences.

1.1 Do animals have culture? How does this differ from human culture?

Culture is a broad concept that is hard to define. The characteristics of culture vary in terms of what most of the definitions that authors give to it state. The common characteristic that most definitions have in common is that culture is *a fuzzy concept* in that the definition changes from person to person. The reason for this is that the concept of culture encompasses many particularities. Some authors describe it using terms like 'very familiar for an individual' and 'deeply rooted in everybody' (Heinen, 2021).

A general definition of culture could be: a set of traditions, values, languages, beliefs shared by a group of people who coexist. (Yule, 2016). Language and culture are

closely related and this fact is important in the process of learning English as a second language because it brings culture into an important position.

The term culture is often debated, especially when discussing animals and culture. Culture is thought of as a human characteristic by social anthropologists, but the term is understood differently by biologists, as stated by Laland & Hoppitt (2003) below.

“At one pole of the spectrum, many social anthropologists conceive of culture as so deeply shrouded in language, politics, morality and institutions, that it would be grossly devalued were it attributed to dolphins or apes. At the other extreme, biologists Charles Lumsden and Edward Wilson concluded that in excess of 10,000 species, including some bacteria, manifest some form of extra-genetic inheritance sufficient to be deemed cultural. Thus, central to the issue of whether animals exhibit culture is the problem of whether it is possible to come up with a non-arbitrary definition of culture; one that will prove useful to a substantive proportion of interested researchers.” (Laland & Hoppitt, 2003, p5).

This thesis is using the definition of culture used by social anthropologists that culture is part of language, tradition, and values. Galef (1992) has found that some animals, specifically primates, have traditions that they follow. However, there is a difference between culture and tradition. Even though these primates showed evidence of tradition and habitual actions, they are missing the politics, complex language, institutions, and morality stated by Leland and Hoppitt (2003) above.

1.2 The relationship between language and culture.

Language and culture seem to coexist in perfect symbiosis as if they were an indivisible unit. The relationship between them is quite transcendent in the teaching of second languages, culture is a special tool because of all that is contained in it.

Most authors claim that there is an important relationship between the two of them Kramersch (2014) for example says that ‘Although there is no one-to-one relationship between anyone’s language and his or her cultural identity, language is the most sensitive indicator of the relationship between an individual and a given social group’ (p.77).

However, if a language is erased and the language dies, the history of the culture related to that language dies with it (Lindgren, 1984). There is evidence to erase cultures by erasing the language from Canadian Residential Schools, as stated by Bishop Vital Grandin in 1975, “When they graduate from our institutions, the children have lost everything Native except their blood” (Retrieved from: https://www.reddit.com/r/Winnipeg/comments/8a6w6o/til_bishop_grandin_aka_saint_vital_was_an_earlier/). Language death is not just linguistic, but it is also related to society and politics. If a language that is more socially powerful invades a region and takes over, the cultural identity of the speakers of the dying language is lost (Tsitsipis, 1983).

1.3 What is intercultural competence?

Intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to successfully communicate and get along with a person from a foreign culture. It englobes not only the ability to speak the language of the target culture, or at least to some extent, but also the capacity to understand different values, gestures, perhaps rules of politeness. (Deardorff, 2011).

The close relationship between culture and language has some important factors that make this relationship useful in foreign language education. In other words, intercultural competence is necessary in order for the language learners to successfully use the language.

In an EFL classroom, Language and culture together constitute the core of teaching a language to non-native speakers. Emphasis is placed on culture as it makes it possible to teach and also to learn a foreign language in a more complete way.

Intercultural Competence is important in foreign language education. When teaching English as a second language it is important to also have the students learn some culture. The main reason why culture is so important in the process of learning a second language is that without understanding the culture that is involved in the language, you would not be able to fully understand the language. We have already stated that language is part of culture. The members of a certain group of people, with a culture in common, also have a language in common in order to communicate with each other, as is stated below.

“Intercultural communicating means communicating among people come from many and various cultures face to face. For foreign language educators, to develop the learner’s intercultural communication competence is to know how to teach foreign culture. Culture teaching in foreign language teaching is a question countered by language teachers throughout all universities and colleges in the world” (Sun, 2013, p.173).

In this extract Sun describes what intercultural communication consists of and points out the importance, of developing cultural awareness in the EFL classroom.

Likewise, Byram claims that the development of cultural awareness for the purpose of learning a foreign language is beneficial not only because it helps the learner understand the culture of the target language, but also because at the same time it helps learners to get a better grasp of the essence of their own culture (Byram, 1997).

Both Sun and Byram agree that culture teaching and developing cultural awareness in order to reach intercultural competence is an important aspect of EFL teaching and offers several benefits for learners.

1.4 Recent studies on intercultural competence

Goodwin-Jones (2013) used a telecollaboration study that involved introducing culture and he found that when student see both the functional and the socio-cultural components of a language, this is vital in understanding how to effectively communicate in that language.

“Bringing students to see the functional and socio-cultural components of language is both crucial for effective communication and fundamental to effective language learning in the future. As language teachers, we tend to focus, quite understandably, on the specific language we are teaching. In today’s world, however, the ability to learn other languages as the need arises, as well as to cope in new multilingual environments, are of great importance both from personal and professional perspectives” (p .9).

According to Dai (2011) it is important for teachers of EFL to teach their students using materials rich in cultural contents as this method of teaching offers many benefits.

Learning culture improves the students' understanding of the target language and it cultivates their cultural awareness.

If the cultural content that is taught in an EFL classroom is interesting with content that covers topics such as, but not limited to ethics, custom, food, geography, social norms, traditional dress, the students will become more motivated and their desire to keep improving their English language skills will increase.

“An effective method and practical technique of teaching culture is very important in language teaching, so every teacher should realize its importance and necessity, and find some practical techniques to carry out culture teaching in language teaching.” (Dai, 2011, p5).

A factor that facilitates the development of intercultural competence is ‘integrative motivation’ that is to say, when the motivation of the learner to learn a foreign language is born from their desire to be able to communicate with people who are speakers of the target language. Integrative motivation implies that the learner will have developed their cultural interest beforehand thus, it plays a significant role in culture teaching. (Khasinah, 2014)

1.5 How culture can be taught

There are many different approaches to teaching culture in an EFL classroom that have been used. Abdurrahman (2020) says that it is a good idea to introduce vocabulary related to culture once the student’s own culture has been taught at an early stage of education using activities related to culture for instance dances, perhaps learning about traditional dress or listening to traditional music and learning about the meaning behind it, or

practicing national sports. Once students pass this stage, they have acquired the concept of culture and they know it is “inherited and learned”. After this, EFL learners are ready to start learning about culture.

He also says that “From the first day, teachers are expected to bring into the class posters, pictures, maps, and other things in order to help students develop ‘a mental image’ of the target culture” (Abdurrahman 2020 p.2). This is because the first step in learning the foreign culture is often visual. So it can be useful to use visual aids that are pleasing to the eye and that quickly catch the learner's attention.

The first step to take before beginning to teach culture to students is to make sure the learner is acquainted with their own culture. Following this, once learners have developed an awareness of their own culture and are able to recognize the value it has to them they can begin learning about culture.

Exposure is a method of culture teaching through which students are able to experience foreign culture and compare it to their own, this way they are encouraged to notice and respect the differences between their own culture and the culture of the target language (Abdurrahman, 2020). It is also useful to introduce vocabulary so that learners become familiar with the terms that are related to it before starting to learn about other cultural aspects that are more complex.

1.6 Objectives of this study

The main research question of the thesis is: Do people with a higher knowledge about culture of their target language have higher foreign language skills in that language?

With all of this I will go further into my thesis. To explore the possibility that there is a relationship between language and culture that is essential and beyond what students may perceive. I want to compare the scores of a group of university students that have studied English as a foreign language from the first year of primary school and secondary school and are currently studying degrees that have English as foreign language as a subject of the degree.

2. Method

For this study, an experimental design was used. The experimental design is further detailed in the sections below.

For the data collection, a group of participants will take two tests and the two grades obtained by each will determine a spot in a graph. The analysis consists of observing the graphs and looking for a general trend.

2.1. Participants

The participants include 17 university students that are not studying the English degree but are taking English as a subject in their degree. Their native languages are Catalan, Spanish, or both and I expect their English level to be B2 or higher. In my opinion, it is possible that some of the participants obtain higher grades in their culture test regardless of their English language skills if they have visited various English-speaking countries.

Table 1. *Participants*

Participant	L1	Studying an L2 other than English
1	Catalan/Spanish	No
2	Catalan/Spanish	No
3	Catalan/Spanish	No
4	Catalan/Spanish	No

5	Catalan/Spanish	German
6	Catalan/Spanish	No
7	Catalan/Spanish	No
8	Catalan/Spanish	No
9	Catalan/Spanish	No
10	Catalan/Spanish	No
11	Spanish	No
12	Spanish	No
13	Catalan/Spanish	German
14	Spanish	No
15	Catalan/Spanish	No
16	Catalan/Spanish	No
17	Catalan/Spanish	No

2.2. Materials

The materials that were used were a language test and a culture test. The language test was an English level test, which can be found at <https://www.languagelevel.com/english/>

The language test consisted of a questionnaire of approximately 20 multiple-choice questions, which varied according to the answers given by the participants. If the participant who was taking the test was capable of answering many questions correctly, the questions would become harder, and appropriate for a more advanced level, and in case of the participant answering incorrectly in a consistent manner, the questions changed and other easier ones appeared. When the participants completed the test, their test score would indicate their level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) from a range of A1 to C2. An example of how the test appears can be seen in Figure 3 below.

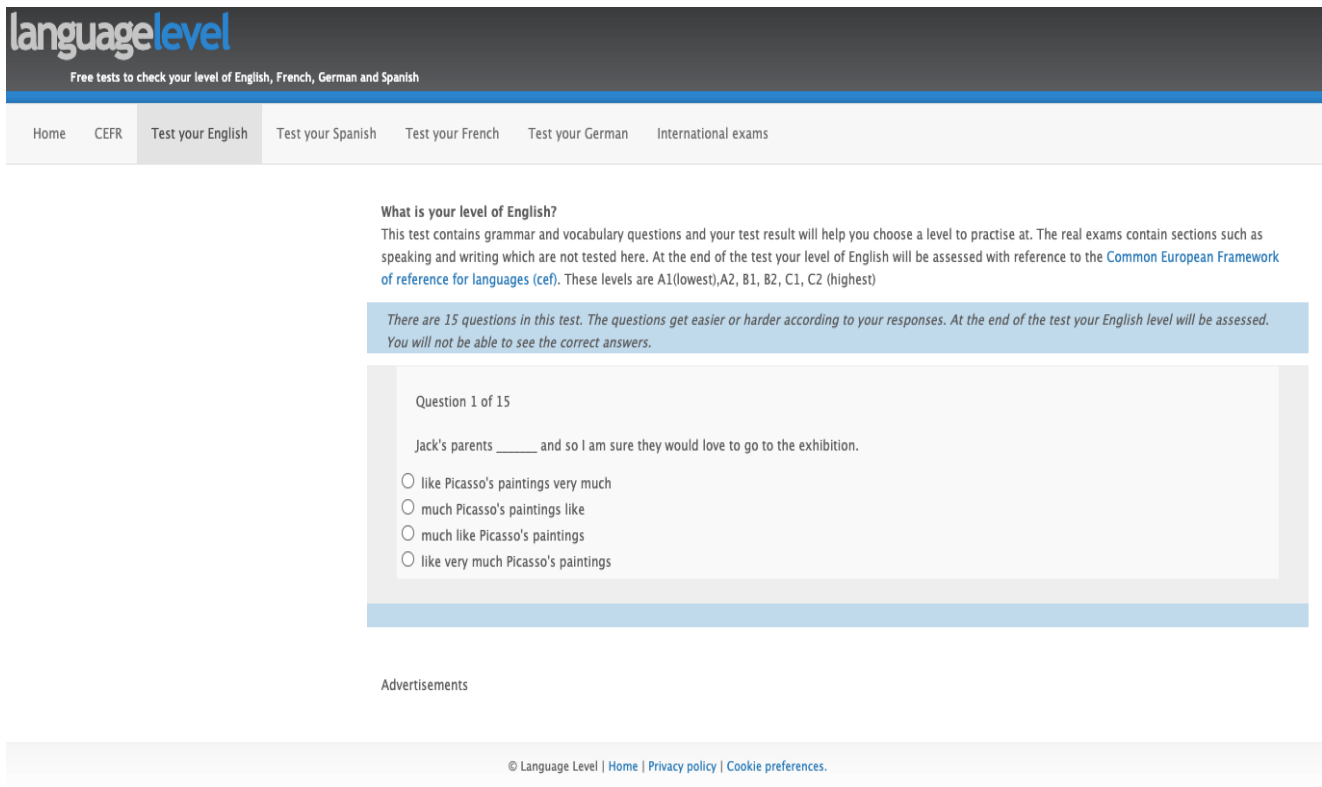


Figure 3. *Language Level English Test*

The culture test was a test on the culture of the United Kingdom, which was a trivia and facts quiz, as seen in Figure 4 below. It can be found at <https://www.proprofs.com/quiz-school/story.php?title=english-quiz-7-graderomana> In the case of the culture test, it was a 15-question test, like the language test, it was multiple-choice and the questions did not vary depending on the answers given by the participants as they took the exam. All of the participants completed these tests online and the scores were sent digitally.

 **Culture Of United Kingdom! Trivia Facts Quiz**
 **13 Questions** | By Articwolfie | Last updated: Jun 12, 2020 | Total Attempts: 4533
  Settings
 
[Start →](#)



Questions and Answers

1. What's the largest city in UK?

- A. Glasgow
- B. New York
- C. London
- D. Los Angeles

Figure 4. *Example of the Culture Test*

2.3 Procedure

The procedure consisted of the following steps:

- 1) On the first place I searched online CEFR tests and tried them out. I did the same with online culture tests in order to decide which ones I would choose to test the participants.
- 2) Following this I had each participant complete both tests and submit a screenshot of their results. The scores were placed on a scatter graph and analyzed with descriptive statistics, such as looking at the Means of the scores.

3. Results

The results obtained from the testing are as follows. The culture test shows a Mean score of 58,5% with a low score of 35% and a high score of 96%. In comparison with the culture test, the English language test scores had a mean of B2 with a low of A2 and a high of C1 (see Table 1).

Table 2. *Test Score Means*

Test	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean
Culture	35	96	58,5
Language	A2	C1	B2

As can be seen in Table 3 below, the exact scores of each participants are as follows.

Table 3. *Exact scores*

Participant	Language Test	Culture Test
1	C1	46
2	B2	70
3	B1	54
4	B2	80
5	B2	45
6	A2	73
7	B2	55
8	C1	49
9	C1	68
10	B1	35
11	C1	78
12	B2	96
13	B2	35

14	B2	60
15	B2	47
16	B1	50
17	C1	55

When comparing the two tests, it appears there is a relationship between the two scores, as can be seen in Figure 3 below.

From looking at the graph, it appears that the participants with the higher language scores also have higher culture scores. The one student who scored the lowest on the language test (A2) appears to be an outlier, because this score differs from the trend. In fact, this participant claimed not to know English, but has travelled to England to visit his partner who was studying there. In this case, his travels would help him on the culture test, but his understanding of the culture may also have helped him on the language test because he claimed not to speak the language at all. Only three participants had a higher culture score than participant number 6.

When looking at the other scores, those with a B1 language level all score below 60% on the culture test, where approximately half of those with a B2 or C1 language level have scored higher than 60% on the culture score.

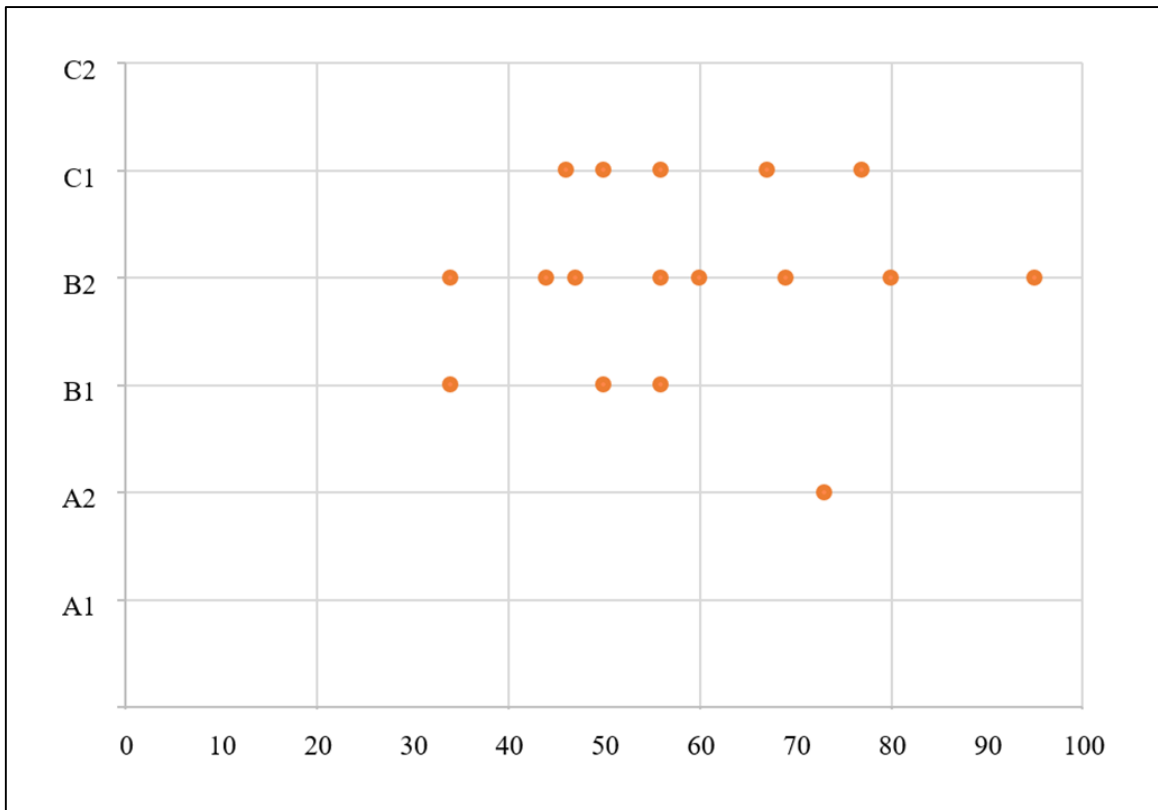


Figure 5. *The results of the two tests*

4. Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine whether people with a higher knowledge about culture of their target language have higher foreign language skills in that language. After analyzing the test scores, it was noted that there appears to be a relationship between the two scores. The graph appears to show positive correlation between the two scores, except for with the outlier, the vast majority of the participants proved the hypothesis. This might be because of the way culture was taught to them in their EFL classroom during primary and secondary school.

If students of English as a Foreign Language are provided with regular insights of cultural aspects of English-speaking countries, as it was the case for most of the participants in this study, cultural competence eventually builds up along with grammatical competence. This is how the results relate to the introduction of this thesis.

Teachers can resort to various techniques to integrate culture teaching in the EFL classroom that have been proven to work well with EFL students. For instance, Abdurrahman (2020) says that one of the first steps a teacher must take in order to teach culture to beginner students is to introduce vocabulary related to culture into the lessons. Once students are familiar with the vocabulary, they will be ready to learn about traditions for example, which will be understood by the students with relative ease if they already have basic knowledge of the culture-related terms that are most commonly used within the culture of the target language.

The most significant aspect that the results of this thesis tell us about intercultural competence is that participants with higher intercultural competence will appear to be more effective in language tests than those without it.

Understanding language is important because a student will not succeed in communicating with native speakers otherwise. Even if they are completely familiar with the culture of a country, not knowing the language will make it very complicated to navigate alone in that country, not to mention how difficult it would be for a participant to pass a language test of a language they cannot speak.

Language and culture are both integrated within each other, and they can operate together as if they were an indivisible unit. The relationship between them is quite transcendent in the teaching of second languages, culture is a special tool because of all that is contained in it.

Animals have a collection of skills and knowledge that animals themselves transmit within their society through the use of signs and signals. However, social anthropologists would not say that animals have culture, because of the relationship between culture and language, politics, and values (Laland & Hoppitt 2003).

The difference between human communication and animal communication is that humans communicate using language primarily, and animals, on the other hand, communicate using a series of diverse methods, many of which humans cannot use. Animals mainly use signs and signals. They don't have the complex grammar and ability to talk about hypotheticals. Although animals can communicate, so far not a single animal has shown to possess the ability to fully master one language. Because of the lack of language, even though animals have traditions, they lack culture.

Humans can communicate and share a culture with a group of members of the community they belong to. They not only share their culture, but also the aspects of culture, such as the values, politics, traditions, and language.

4.1. Limitations of this study and implications for further research

I considered the possibility of the results obtained varying greatly in the event if a different testing method had been used. It is possible that the testing method used was a limitation for the study given the fact that 17 people is a very small sample. Also, if the testing method had been, per say, an oral test where the participants were tested based on their abilities to successfully communicate verbally with a native speaker, the ones that scored better in their culture test could obtain worse results because of their lack of grammatical competence.

Based on these limitations, I would recommend that further research in this area should include a larger sample of participants and, instead of doing the test by computer, the participants could be tested by native speakers in a conversation setting. It would be interesting to notice the difference of what learners can understand when reading and what they can understand by only listening.

5. Conclusion

Teaching language and culture simultaneously can be helpful for students learning a second language. Culture has shown to be crucial in the learning of English as a Foreign Language, as can be seen in this study with the tests that the participants completed.

The initial research question which was: ‘Do people with a higher knowledge about culture of their target language have higher foreign language skills in that language?’ In my opinion, the answer to this question is a partial yes. The reason behind this is that, although most of the participants are expected to meet these predictions at least minimally, every student is different and there are other factors, like effort and commitment that some put into studying, that can influence their overall results.

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Appendix A




The screenshot shows the 'languagelevel' website interface. At the top, the logo 'languagelevel' is displayed in a dark blue header. Below the logo, a navigation bar contains links for 'Home', 'CEFR', 'Test your English' (which is highlighted), 'Test your Spanish', 'Test your French', 'Test your German', and 'International exams'. The main content area is titled 'What is your level of English?' and explains that the test contains grammar and vocabulary questions. It states that the test result will help choose a level to practise at and that the real exams contain sections for speaking and writing. The test is assessed with reference to the Common European Framework of reference for languages (CEFR), with levels A1 (lowest) to C2 (highest). A blue box below this text states: 'There are 15 questions in this test. The questions get easier or harder according to your responses. At the end of the test your English level will be assessed. You will not be able to see the correct answers.' The main question area is titled 'Question 1 of 15' and contains the sentence: 'Jack's parents _____ and so I am sure they would love to go to the exhibition.' Below this sentence are four radio button options: 'like Picasso's paintings very much', 'much Picasso's paintings like', 'much like Picasso's paintings', and 'like very much Picasso's paintings'. Below the question area, there is a section for 'Advertisements'. At the bottom of the page, a footer contains the copyright information: '© Language Level | Home | Privacy policy | Cookie preferences.'


This is a screen shot of the language test that was used to test participants. It can be retrieved at <https://www.languagelevel.com/english/>

Appendix B


 **Culture Of United Kingdom! Trivia Facts Quiz**

 **13 Questions** | By Articwolfie | Last updated: Jun 12, 2020 | Total Attempts: 4533

All questions ▾  Settings

Start →



Questions and Answers

1. What's the largest city in UK?

- A. Glasgow
- B. New York
- C. London
- D. Los Angeles

This is a screen shot of Exam 2, which can be retrieved at:

<https://www.proprofs.com/quiz-school/story.php?title=english-quiz-7-graderomana>