

# English Teachers' Perceptions towards using the English Cultural Elements in English Language Classes in Northern Iraq: Duhok Province as a Sample

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**Abstract:** *This paper aimed to show that culture holds an important place in foreign language education. In the academic year (2004 – 2005), Iraq as an Arabian country, witnessed some changes in English language teaching and the English language program was replaced by a new one entitled Sunrise program which is based on communicative approach, therefore, it is important to find out to what extent the recommended teaching curriculum is being adhered to, whether the teachers are aware of cultural awareness, whether their points of view are positive or negative towards teaching culture in foreign language classes. Whether the Iraqi teachers of English are adequately trained and qualified for the teaching of culture or cultural elements in teaching English as foreign or second language or not.*

**Keywords:** Teachers' perceptions, cultural elements, English language classes

## 1. Introduction

It has been widely recognized in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. This was the major innovation of 'communicative language teaching'. At the same time, the 'communicative approach' introduced changes in methods of teaching, the materials used, and the description of what is to be learnt and assessment of learning. On the other hand, The Council of Europe's 'Common European Framework of Reference' together with these innovations also emphasizes the importance of 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', and 'existential competence' in foreign language teaching. These references highlight the importance of 'Intercultural Dimension' on the hope that "language learners who thus become 'intercultural speakers' will be successful not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures" (Byram, 2002:4)

Because culture is important in foreign language teaching (e.g. Ortuno, 1991; Dufva, 1994 ; Martinez-Gibson; 1998; Kramsch, 1998; Alptekin, 2002; Lazar, 2003a and 2003b; Yassine, 2006 ; Calvo Cortes 2007 Mai Hoa 2007; Barany , 2011 among others), it is important to explain what it means. We see it as a concept that needs to be delimited because it has been interpreted differently by different people. It is often seen as a matter of only information conveyed by the language, not as an aspect of language itself. For instance, Researchers such as Kramsch et al (1998:3) highlight the importance of culture as a component feature to be integrated with language teaching practice. With reference to culture various definitions have been made by several scholars. While Goodenough, cited by Wadhaugh (1992:216) suggests that: "a society's culture

consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for anyone of themselves". Rose (2004) cited in (Yassine 2006:31) sees culture as "a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs and a shared history or set of experiences". What one can infer from those definitions is that for Kramsch and Goodenough culture is "acceptable interaction within the group it defines" and for Rose it is "what makes this group" (Yassine 2006: 31). In Rose's (2004) terms, culture is a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs and a shared history or set of experiences.

On the other hand, We believe that one of the main and most important responsibilities and objectives of FL teaching in schools and language teaching institutions is to establish an awareness of the values and significance of cultural practices in both learners' own culture and the target language culture; they should be able to live with their own culture and the target culture (Barany 2011: 160). At this point, we emphasize what Robotjazi (2008: 252 as cited by Barany 2011:160) postulates stating: "what in effect proves critically needed and crucial is that in any way possible, whether registered techniques or even innovative of the teachers themselves, the teachers and learners shall try to attain competence in intercultural communication through a language and its relationship to the cultural practices and identities interlocutors bring to an interaction." The foreign language teachers must have intercultural background that enables them to help students in the process acquiring the competence to critique (Longo, 2008:13 as cited in Barany, 2011:160). It is also the task of foreign language teachers to make a foreign language teaching meet the needs of social and economic development in developing students' intercultural communicative awareness especially in English because it has become the global language.

## 2. Literature Survey

Thanasoulas, 2001. (The Importance of Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom). In this study Thanasoulas hoped to contrive and clarify most of the issues and set out to investigate and has helped to a better understanding of culture and its importance in foreign language classroom. The main premises of this study are the following:

- 1) The effective communication is more than a matter of language proficiency and that, a part from enhancing and enriching communicative competence, cultural competence can also lead to empathy and respect toward different cultures as well as promote objectivity and cultural perspicacity.
- 2) We cannot go about teaching a foreign language without at least offering some insights into its speakers' culture. By the same token, we cannot go about fostering "communicative competence" without taking into account the different views and perspectives of people in different cultures which may enhance or even inhabit communication.

Additionally, he added that the teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction. As a result, people from different cultures weave their lives into an international fabric that is beginning to fray at the edges by virtue of communication and propaganda. On a practical note, Thanasoulas mentioned that culture teaching should allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and how these manifest themselves or are couched in linguistic categories and forms. More specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture. By the way of conclusion, Thanasoulas strongly confirmed the place of culture and the importance of culture while teaching foreign language in classroom by referring to what have been stated before by some researchers like Bayram and Morgan (1994), and Kramsch (1993) as follow:

'Foreign teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures' (Byram and Morgan, 1994:73). In the same sense, Kramsch (1993) stated 'we can actually become observers and participants at the same time, registering what is transpiring in every culture and trying to find out the 'third place', a third niche, from which to divine pernicious dichotomies and bridge cultural gaps' (234).

Saluveer, 2004. (Teaching culture in English classes). The study focused on the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom conducted in Estonian secondary schools in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. The study aims:

- 1) To give an overview of how the teaching of culture is viewed in literature on foreign language education and bring together the most important ideas of and suggestion of teaching culture.
- 2) To examine the place of culture teaching and learning in

the curriculum of English course book in Estonian secondary schools and discover teachers' and students' attitudes of the teaching of culture.

In order to get a broader view, Saluveer did an empirical study on both teachers and students to collect much information and opinions of various aspects of teaching and learning culture were studied. The results from teachers answers show that 50 (82%) teachers used the sources were realia and 44 (72%) teachers were used cultural studies textbooks. 42 teachers (69%) maintained that they used newspapers and 41 (67%) used videos.

In sum, the researcher, Saluveer, states that in order to teach culture systematically, teachers should set clear and achievable. She adds that the main aim of teaching culture, as recognized by most scholars today, is to develop students' intercultural understanding and help them with intercultural communication. For the latter, learners need cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and a set of skills, which constitute the learner's intercultural competence.

Taki, 2008. (The Cultural Learning Needs for Iraqi Students of English), the dissertation is dealing with the problems that face English language teachers, the problems of choosing the right concept of culture while teaching language in the classroom. Taki in her study mentioned that it is important to teach the culture because it is improving the learner's aptitude about the people who use this language and the way they live including values, body language and habits. During the surveying, she received about fifty copies of the questionnaire and the results of her dissertation indicated that 82% of those who surveyed wish to learn and understand the new aspect of the target culture, 94% believed that communication is not speaking only this means that grammar and vocabulary are not enough to interact with people and 68% of the Iraqi surveyed people thought that English body language is different. Taki concluded the study by stating that teaching culture cannot be separated from teaching language, and the right culture to teach to Iraqis, is a mix of English speaking cultures and particularly of the British and the American cultures for the learners to communicate with English speakers, at the same time, she discovered that language teaching methodologies in Iraq have some faults and lacks that can be repaired.

Deneme, Ada and Uzun, 2011. (Teaching a Foreign Language and Foreign Culture to Young Learners). This study is both qualitative and quantitative conducted on 100 participants in Turkey. The study investigates how Turkish children can be introduced to foreign culture in and out the schools. The research aim to determine the foreign culture knowledge of Turkish primary school students and how they acquire the cultural elements which are used in English course books. The finding results reveal that happy Birthday, Jingle Bells, Valentine's Day, Christmas and Easter were the most commonly known songs and important days among the participants. Pizza and hamburger were the most recognized food among them. The Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower and The Statue of Liberty were the most known famous buildings by the participants. Through surveying, the researchers found that the children learnt this cultural information mostly from television, their parents or siblings and from computers. In the

conclusion the researchers, Deneme, Ada and Uzun, state that the children are exposed to the first culture from their family and suggest that cultural knowledge can be transmitted to children continuously, depending on their cognitive capacities. They also add that public schools' cultural education cannot be sufficient in terms of language teaching and comparing to private schools it has been found that there are few or no cultural themes in the course book of the public schools. And finally they suggest and recommend that cultural elements should be included in the curriculum of public schools. In the conclusion the researchers, Deneme, Ada and Uzun, state that the children are exposed to the first culture from their family and suggest that cultural knowledge can be transmitted to children continuously, depending on their cognitive capacities. They also add that public schools' cultural education cannot be sufficient in terms of language teaching and comparing to private schools it has been found that there are few or no cultural themes in the course book of the public schools. And finally they suggest and recommend that cultural elements should be included in the curriculum of public schools.

#### Hypothesis of the study

- 1) The new English language textbooks (Sunrise series) that are taught at schools of Iraq do not contain enough cultural elements to the extent that they promote cultural competence in learners as a component of communicative competence that develops their language skills and competence.
- 2) Teachers of English language at Iraqi schools do not have enough training and knowledge of the importance of culture in FLT. Accordingly, they themselves lack cultural awareness; they don't have adequate socio-cultural knowledge of TL community.
- 3) Integration of Cultural elements is important in foreign language teaching programs because it helps develop language skills and communicative competence.

**Methodology** A questionnaire is designed as a procedure to elicit information about 60 of English teachers' points of view towards the new course book (Sunrise) and its teaching English cultural elements among 25 schools in Duhok Province, North of Iraq.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### *Results of the Research Question 1: What does culture mean to you as a teacher of English?*

However, when the teachers at schools in northern Iraq were asked to specify what is meant by the concept of culture, nearly half of the total number of the teachers provided their answers that culture means literature, fine arts, and everyday life such as eating, habits, customs and clothes among other things, and some teachers provided their answers that culture means only literature and fine arts while some others pointed that culture means only everyday life without literature and fine arts. This means that there is no specific meaning of the concept of culture and the teachers provided different answers due to its broad concept of the term, therefore, as Seely (1993) claims that for many teachers culture mean fine arts, history, and geography was not true by the teachers who responded to

the question about culture. We see it as a concept that needs to be delimited because it has been interpreted differently by different people. It is often seen as a matter of only information conveyed by the language, not as an aspect of language itself (Seely, 1993:15). For instance, Kramsch conceives culture as "a membership in a discourse community that shares a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and action" (Kramsch, 1998: 127).

#### *Results of the Research Question 2: Are you aware of the importance of culture in foreign language teaching?*

The first aim of this paper is to find out whether the Iraqi teachers of English at schools are aware of the English cultural elements of the new course book (Sunrise) according to the teacher's book. Most of the teachers 37 (62%) were of the opinion that they were aware of the importance of culture in foreign language teaching, whereas 16 (27%) of them were not aware of that, and only 7 (11%) didn't know the answer, but as many researchers mentioned; that language teaching is not only for acquiring knowledge and developing skills in the grammar and vocabulary of a language, but it must be used in appropriate ways both socially and culturally, so the task of the teachers in classes is a supportive one, they must supply their students with the means to understand their own culture and link it that to the world around and this would be done by including terms and topics like equality, racism, human rights etc. in order to help their students talk and understand about various cultures. Tavares and Cvalcanti claim that we agree that the aim of teaching culture is 'to increase the students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures' (Tavares & Cvalcanti, 1996:19).

#### *Results of the Research Question 3: Do you teach the culture (s) of English-speaking countries in teaching English as a foreign language for your students?*

The findings revealed that 41 (68%) of the informants were taught the cultures of other countries while they taught their students English language in classes as a foreign language and 14 (23%) they didn't teach the culture (s) of English-speaking countries in teaching English as a foreign language for their students. 5 (9%) of them didn't know the answer whether they taught their student or they didn't teach the culture (s) of English-speaking countries in teaching English as a foreign language for their students. According to a researcher's opinion, since the classroom teachers are the 'delivery systems' for a curriculum, along with whatever texts are used. Multicultural educational content is necessary in all schools curriculum because students even in the most culturally isolated rural and small-town settings do learn opinions, beliefs about ethnic, cultural, and religious groups other than their own.

#### *Results of the Research Question 4: Do you suggest that it is important to focus on integrating the teaching of culture with teaching of foreign languages in classes?*

Regarding to the question that was asked to the Iraqi of English language teachers about the importance of integrating the teaching of culture with the teaching of language in classes, what the researcher found is that nearly around 55 among 60 teachers agreed that it's important to integrate the culture while teaching foreign languages in classes and



cannot be separated from the language itself, as far as what it's found in the research and the field study that there was no use of teaching one culture in the classroom because learner's aims differ from one another and also they might differ from their personal plans for the future. As a researcher, in my opinion the English language teachers should have some background knowledge about different cultures like British and American cultures as they are considered the most common cultures in the world and mix them in one class at the time in order to help the learners to imagine and recognize the differences between cultures from different countries.

*Results of the Research Question 5: In your point of view as a teacher, do the courses (textbooks) you use at school offer enough materials for learning and discussing cultural issues?*

The teacher's opinions about the cultural content of the textbook (Sunrise program), they used at school varied at a great deal. There might be several reasons for the several of opinions. First of all, they may be not aware of the cultural issues, therefore, Iraqi society is a closed society and has no knowledge about the outside world, it is very important to make them aware of the other cultures and accept and teach them how to react in new cultures and to make them ready for any change in values and beliefs and let them accept and respect the fact that there are other habits and other traditions and one has to behave according to them when he/she exists in this culture. Second, the assessment of cultural learning is extremely difficult. Byram claims that even the authors of common European Framework propose a number of levels for defining linguistic competence, whereas they do not make proposals for levels of the assessment of socio-cultural competence (Byram, 2000:8). On the same token, Brown claims that it is hardly possible to find materials which would interest everyone, the emphasis should be put on doing interesting things with the materials. He concludes that the "materials should be chosen, not so much on the basis of their own interest, but for what they can be used to do" (Brown, 2000:83).

*Results of the Research Question 6: Have you taken any training or workshop in teaching methods where culture is mentioned to be important in foreign language teaching and learning?*

The second aim of the paper is to find out whether the Iraqi teachers of English are adequately trained and qualified for the teaching of culture or cultural elements in teaching English as a foreign or second language. Data analysis findings depicted that 42 (70%) of the teachers hadn't taken any training courses this means that Iraqi teachers of English language are in need of some training courses or workshops in teaching methods where culture should mention to be important in FLT and learning. There are two main reasons for teachers to be qualified trainers from the practical points of view, firstly is the responding to change, as we know that English language and ELT industry are global. So, on the one hand, the demands and requirements of students change due to demands from employment or new qualification requirements, and the demands on teachers in the classroom change on the other hand. Secondly; training can motivate teachers and shows an investment. Training treats teachers to be professionals

with a desire to learn more about what they do and raise their levels of consciousness. Training cultured teachers obviously involves equipping them with various objects of culture and different types of knowledge essential to their cultural training. These objects of culture will relate, first, to various subject areas: languages, science and technology, the arts, the social sciences and personal development. They will also relate to pedagogical and didactic knowledge, such as approaches, methods, means and techniques linked to teaching/learning, to evaluation and to class management, as pointed out by Lussato and Messadié that culture makes us more intelligent by complexification; it helps us see better, comprehend nuances, and better diagnose reality; it is a sort of matrix for understanding the world, oneself, and others. In addition, culture gives us extra possibilities for inventing solutions; it gives teachers new tools that allow them to intervene more effectively (Lussato&Messadié, 1986: 23).

*Results of the Research Question 7: What aspects of culture do you think are most important and interesting for students to learn culture?*

Throughout the questionnaire list, the researcher of the paper tried to ask the Iraqi teachers of English language to choose the cultural aspects which are the most important and interesting for the students to learn about culture because there might be some differences according to the teacher and his/ her personal experiences. What it found from their answers was that more than half of the entire number of the participants agreed that all the cultural aspects that mentioned such as (music, customs and festivals, food, family life, history, geography, patterns of politeness, law, literature, art, education and schools), are important and interesting for the learners to be known in order to be familiar with the new culture, the new country, and the new people. But the Iraqi teachers are in need to know what each aspect of culture means and how each aspect of culture affects every day life, for example they need to know about customs and festivals, food, the weather and the date of various events from different countries, in the Sunrise 12 for example nothing is mentioned or discussed about food, music, customs, patterns of politeness and law and the teachers are depended on the textbook (Sunrise) as a main source for explaining the cultural aspects in classroom, but because the lack of knowledge about each aspect of culture, the teachers of foreign languages will face the difficulties with his/her learners, the most important point is that when teachers try to explain and enter the new culture he or she should realize the differences of that new culture and should try to get the new different aspects that are interesting for the students to learn about. Another important point is that Iraqi teachers are in need to teach about other cultures of different countries and are in need to teach and motivate them about the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for this kind of knowledge in order to get various aspects of different cultures.

*Results of the Research Question 8: Do you think that students would be more interested if they learn the language with having some background knowledge about the culture of the people speaking that language?*

It is clear from the revealed results above that all the participants of English language teachers agreed that students would be more interested if they learn the language with having some background information and knowledge about

the culture of the people speaking that language. In foreign language teaching a cross-cultural approach seeks ways to understand the other on the other side of the border by learning his/her national language; in this regard, the relationship of language and culture in language study is one of the most hotly debated issues at the present time (Kramsch, 1998:81). Many researchers (e.g. Ortuno, 1991; Brogger, 1992; Dufva, 1994; Calvo Cortes, 2007; Al-Barany, 2001 among others) recognize the fact that communication is an interrelationship between a language and its people and if cultural aspects are not taught as a part of communicative competence, comprehensive and successful communication cannot properly take place. They also assert that culture has to be integrated into the teaching of all language skills in such a way that enables learners to speak and to write in a culturally appropriate ways. So, it is not possible to teach a foreign language effectively and successfully unless we offer inside and understanding into the speakers' culture of that language.

We can neither develop communicative competence, intercultural awareness nor intercultural communicative competence in a foreign language's learners without taking into consideration the different views and attitudes of people in different cultures which may increase the success of communication or even hinder it. Furthermore, we have to be aware of the fact that teaching a language regardless of teaching the culture in which it functions, "we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning" (Poltizer, 1959:100-101 cited in Thanasoulas, 2002:9).

*Results of the Research Question 9: Do you think it is also important to include cultural topics about the learners' native language culture in foreign language teaching and learning?*

56 (93%) of the participants agreed that the learners would be more interested if the English curricula include cultural topics about their native language culture in FLT classes. This means that it is important to take the learners native language culture into consideration when teaching culture with language. For example in Sunrise 12 textbook, nothing is mentioned about the differences between Iraqi culture and language is taught without any cultural image to clear the differences for the learners. It is also important to choose the right culture that the learner wants to know about as he/she is learning this language, for example, British culture differs from American culture although both of them speak the same language. As we are dealing with people who live in the Iraqi culture, one can see that the cultural background plays an important role in figuring people's attitude and perspectives toward their own culture and the other cultures. Nissila thinks that customs and values are the most important areas of culture because they are most closely linked with communication. The other areas depend more in the interest of the speaker. But the problem is that these customs and values differ from one country to another (Nissila, 1994: 18).

*Results of the Research Question 10: Which kind of sources do you use for teaching culture?*

Through the questionnaire the researcher discovered that 53 (89%) of the EFL teachers depend purely on the textbooks

as a source for teaching culture. While only 5 (8%) searched in the internet for facts about real life in English speaking countries and 2(3%) used videotapes for teaching culture but no one among 60 EFL teachers used Newspapers, magazine articles and TV programs as well as no one used real objects for example maps and posters. By examining the subjects' knowledge about culture and the way they have been taught in Iraqi schools, textbooks are not sufficient in teaching cultural aspects and if they are, they have information about only few countries. This means that there is a lack in teaching culture and the learners are in need to discover the other side of the world. None of the 60 teachers was care about the newspapers, and magazine articles, here there might be no English published newspapers and magazine articles available in the Iraqi cities and are certainly in need for further investigation, as well as only few rebuilding schools acquired the electronic supplies like videotapes, TVs and internet network that would encourage and help both the learners and teachers to acquire more information about the other cultures from different countries around the world. Unfortunately, no one also paid attention to use the maps, posters and brochures for teaching culture as a kind of sources, according to my opinion as a thesis writer, the class is supposed to fit these materials supplementary together to complete the whole. In that way, they need to use their language resources to communicate meaningfully and so take part in meaningful communication practice. The students have a piece of information which is part of the total, what they need to do is to walk around to get the necessary information in order to reach the entire information, through which an artificial need on the part of the learners is created to get them to speak. Students feel it as a challenge to participate; thus an unconscious learning and practicing of knowledge occurs which erase out the fears learners have for speaking in the class (Johnson & Morrow, 1981).

*Results of the Research Question 11: Some teachers ignore discussing the cultural issues while teaching English language in classes; what is the reason behind that?*

Around 43 (72%) among 60 teachers claimed that the reason behind that there is not enough time (lack of time) to discuss the cultural issues while teaching English language in classes, one of the main reasons behind that is that may be the teachers mostly concentrate on developing the four skills of language which are speaking, reading, writing, and listening and they preferred that culture should better be taught separately from language courses but culture and language are interwoven and it seems practically impossible to give culture- free language lessons, Chastain (1998: 306-307) stresses that daily cultural topics should be short and concise, while on a weekly basis teachers could deal with topics that require more time (preparing, for example, a culture capsule). Another reason is that some teachers are ignored that because they might be not aware of appropriate techniques (for example, the cultural aside, cultoon, slice-of-life etc.) because only these techniques were included that both teachers and students were thought to be familiar with.

*Results of the Research Question 12: Have you attended a training program or a workshop for high school teachers that are exactly about English language culture(s)?*

Around 45 (75%) among 60 teachers had not attended any

training programs and workshops, this means that Iraqi teachers of English language are in need of developing themselves for a better teaching through training programs and opening workshops. The aim of such training programs and workshops is to turn teachers into explorers of teaching and learning process, particularly important to focus on equipping trainees with the ability to develop their own expertise with experience since the training course employs what is considered to be good language teaching practice. Another aim of training programs and workshops is helping the teachers to establish a set of core techniques and skills with a high surrender that can be employed in a number of classroom situations to achieve a number of objectives depending on the context and the way they are used such as setting up group work or pair work, using teaching aids, attracting and holding students' attention to using reference books, especially dictionaries to help them learn more for themselves in the long term, and to survive in the meantime. So, the role of training programs and workshops has to be designed to redefine the role of teacher and equip him/her with the necessary teaching skills so that he/she can confidently perform in class to bring a healthy change in the attendees, class, the school and ultimately in society.

#### 4. Conclusion

However, the research findings showed that many informants' understanding of the term 'culture' and the relevant language teaching theories is very vague and stated that that cultural learning teaching takes place only in random and unplanned ways. However, it might be significant in that we can see how far or how near they are from a cultural dimension of language teaching since the textbooks prove to be the basic source of introducing culture into Iraqi foreign language classrooms. To successfully complete the teaching of culture in language teaching in Iraqi preparatory schools, classrooms are not without difficulties, as many informants in the survey recognized, the immediate problems are the teachers' qualifications to teach culture while teaching the language, the lack of teaching materials such as (video tapes, TVs, internet, etc.) and the lack of time, etc. All these problems can be partly solved by the research suggestions of the rewriting the textbook for the new dimension of language teaching and filling up the gap between the teachers and learners which should contain even a much larger package of cultural information.

Another crucial problem is that as the textbook doesn't provide enough information about English culture on all the aspects, teachers are mostly dependent on the textbook as a main source but they should use other sources such as newspapers, films, radio programs to realia and also literature aspect that offer numerous opportunities for students to get an insight into the lives of people of the target culture.

#### 5. Future Scopes

- 1) Evaluating the assessment program which is applied in Iraq generally and Kurdistan Region schools particularly with the Sunrise program.
- 2) Evaluating the teachers' trainers in the use of the

teaching of the Sunrise course book.

- 3) Conducting a study to investigate the teachers' awareness of cultural elements in English countries and Communicative Language Teaching Approach.
- 4) An investigation of the teacher's intercultural communicative competence is thought to be of great value for the successful implementation of the program or, as a matter of fact, any ELT program.

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