

ELT TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE DISCUSSION OF CULTURALLY  
SENSITIVE TOPICS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

by

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## **Abstract**

This study examines secondary school teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics in three private schools that are located in the Emirate of Ajman, the Emirate of Dubai and the Emirate of Sharjah, all located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It looks at 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 path. Besides, it questions whether there are consequences on the students' cognitive skills when teachers cover taboo topics in classrooms. Data were gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the three private school teachers, analysis of some of the teachers' open ended answers, and interviews with a senior Ministry of Education (MoE) teacher trainer and a female English teacher who works at one of the schools. Findings indicated general positive teachers' attitudes towards the strong connection between language and culture. Results also show the reasons behind teachers' decisions of covering or ignoring sensitive topics. They also revealed that some teachers might avoid covering culturally sensitive topics to be on the safe side; that is in order not to jeopardize their career paths. Results also revealed that teaching the culture of the language and covering its sensitive topics have positive impacts on the student's cognitive skills. This study concludes with some pedagogical recommendations and suggestions for further research.

**Search Terms:** ELT teachers' perspectives, culture and language, culturally sensitive topics, taboos, high school students, United Arab Emirates.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

As a school teacher of Grade two students at an international school in Sharjah, I was once in a staff meeting when the Head Teacher of English said that teachers should take away the sentence ‘What can taste good on a sandwich?’ from the textbook and from the PowerPoint presentation projected to Grade two students (see Samples 1 and 2, Appendix B). When I asked about the reason behind this action, the Head Teacher said that we should not talk about "this" because parents would complain that these issues are culturally inappropriate to the local culture and religion. I was not very convinced of the rationale; thus, although I was asked to ignore explaining the word ‘ham’ when I taught the lesson, I explained to my students that pig is an animal and ham is the meat of that animal. Interestingly, few students said, ‘teacher, we should not talk about pigs or watch anything related to that’. A few days later, a parent came and complained about having the sentence, ‘What can taste good on a sandwich?’ in the English textbook, but she did not complain about my explanation. Similarly, my 10<sup>th</sup>-grade brother, who studies at the same school where I teach, a British-based-curriculum private school in Sharjah, informed me that the English teacher had to cover a picture of a saint wearing a cross in the English textbook (see Sample 3, Appendix B). Then, I was wondering why would or would not teachers do that? Are not these students mature enough to understand various cultures and religions? Do we educators have the right to restrict or select the type of information that should be conveyed to our students? Is that possible in an era of information and technology where, with one click, an individual can have access to enormous sources of sensitive information? From the above-mentioned situations, several interesting questions on cultural sensitivity and the discussion of taboo topics came to my mind. Therefore, I chose this specific topic of research to find answers to my questions.

In the course of a person’s life and upbringing, parents, surrounding family members, schools and the society at large inculcate in us values such as love and respect. We grow up; for instance, enjoying 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; e.g., 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, religion stands out (Cannadine cited in Jandt, 2016). Several topics, concepts and/or practices spread a reputation for being ‘culturally sensitive’ going against religious teachings. Simply put, 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 meat, boyfriend/ girlfriend, dating, drugs, and other related issues (Gobert, 2015).

In today's world, the use of English in the UAE as a language of communication has been increasing. After the oil discovery in the 1950s, there was a high influx of immigrants with more than 200 nationalities into the region seeking labor opportunities (MERI report, 2015). Education was one of the main fields that had been rapidly filled with foreign labor as the country needed qualified human resources to grow and develop. These multiple ethnicities needed to communicate and therefore English became the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in most public and private universities and schools. English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals from different English speaking countries came to work in these institutions. Hence, a multicultural environment was created in educational settings mainly between students and their ELT teachers ("United Arab Emirates", 2017). Immigrants make up about 85% of the UAE's total population ("United Arab Emirates", 2017). This is where some of the problems stem from; educators come from their countries carrying their cultural beliefs, values, attitudes and identity, often not sufficiently trained to cover intercultural topics. Hence, they may discuss certain topics that are considered sensitive in the UAE while the same topics are quite appropriate in their home countries. As a result, they discuss these topics freely not bearing in mind the local students' cultural sensitivity. With the above-mentioned factors, the presence of educators with their different cultures along with the multiple ethnicities present in the UAE made the classroom culturally diverse. Moreover, as several schools use international textbooks and with globalization and internationalization of the curriculum in the UAE such as British, American, and Australian, English textbooks and other teaching support material carried along concepts and themes that could be perceived as "awkward" or "strange" or "culturally shocking" to some teachers, students, and parents (Hinkel, 1999).

ELT teachers who deal with reading or writing textbooks in English generally face some issues when it comes to their own culture and the culture of their students. For one teacher, discussing such topics such as politics, sex, relationships and religions is not an issue as s/he is used to discussing these same topics freely in his/her home country (Evans et al. 2000). On the other hand, other teachers might be culturally competent and tend to avoid texts that cover these issues. However, as some of the textbooks used in teaching

English in the Arab world are designed or taught by native speakers of English, they may contain some culturally ('risky') sensitive topics/themes that may not be in line with the local cultural patterns. Nevertheless, for several reasons, these 'risky' topics could be avoided especially in the Middle East as, according to some practitioners, they could be a major factor in terminating teachers' professional career (Evans et al. 2000). Although the Ministry of Education (MoE) does not say it clearly that teachers are not allowed to cover sensitive topics, some teachers lost their jobs because they covered these topics in class. According to a MoE senior teacher trainer (a voluntary interviewee),

Curriculum specialists and teachers have been instructed to refrain from using inappropriate content. I have not personally seen a document that explicitly outlines what is construed as inappropriate but in my training I was told to pay attention to politically insensitive or inaccurate materials, e.g., Israel is inappropriate Palestine is appropriate. Persian Gulf is wrong, Arabian Gulf is correct. The overarching rule is Islamic values should be promoted not compromised. Topics relevant to sex, romance, dating and drinking should be avoided. Photographs should be decent. There was a form, however, that we used when we evaluated textbooks. It allowed the curriculum specialist to report textbooks as either in compliance with or against UAE rules and regulations. I can't share that form with you for obvious reasons.

In addition, some practitioners believe that these topics are not of interest to students and that is why they should not be taught (Van Hook, 2002). On the other hand, some teachers believe that culturally laden texts cannot be totally excluded or ignored in English Language Teaching since learners should be made aware of the culture of the language they are learning (personal communication, October 2016, also mentioned in Risager, 2007). Yet, when interviewing a 16- year- old Arab female student studying at a private school in the Emirate of Sharjah and asking whether it would be appropriate for her to discuss culturally sensitive topics, she strongly disagreed with discussing these issues and said, "How can I talk about these issues in front of males in my classroom?" (Personal communication, February 2016). This response led to asking her if she would discuss these topics with other people and interestingly she mentioned that she could discuss sensitive topics freely with her female friends. Another Arab female student who studies in a mixed college mentioned that it is fine for her to discuss these issues as she is studying literature and goes into discussing culturally sensitive topics with her male

teacher and male colleagues (personal communication, February 2016). Although students' perspectives are not pertinent to the scope of this study, their few testimonies reveal a certain acceptance of the discussion of "taboo" subjects in class. Limiting the topics taught to students may weaken their communicative competence, deprive them of developing critical thinking skills, and decrease their motivation and knowledge to talk/write about topics that tend to contradict with their beliefs or cultures. That said, students may not want their teachers to ignore such topics as some of them may have an interest in knowing about these issues in more details. Other students may be too conservative and hope that teachers skip any issue that is sensitive to the local culture. In order to find out what best serves students' communicative and cognitive needs, this research aims to examine teachers' perspectives on teaching these topics in three private secondary schools and tries to find out whether these topics are covered explicitly or implicitly or totally ignored (Richards, 2001). Moreover, this study sheds light on the importance of 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.

What raised interest in the topic of discussing culturally sensitive topics is the fact that as a teacher who is still at the beginning of her journey, I would like to know what is best for my students and what helps them to be competent users of language. Furthermore, my research findings will be of great help to ELT teachers, as they become much more informed of the dynamics of this debate with the hope of becoming interculturally more competent.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter covers seven sections: definitions of culture, language and culture, language and intercultural communication, linguistic and cultural differences between teachers and students and the teaching materials, taboo in language teaching, and background on multiculturalism and educational systems in the UAE. According to Burns (2010), “literature molds other researchers' research towards received ideas, theories and approaches” (p. 39).

### **2.1. Culture: Definitions and Facets**

Different scholars defined culture in numerous ways. Simply put, culture is a lifestyle: what you eat, what you wear, what language you speak, what you learn, which God you worship, all are parts of culture. According to Triandis (1994), “Culture is a shared meaning system found among those who speak a particular language, dialect, during a specific historic period” (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & McDaniel, 2015, p.34). In very simple terms, culture can be defined as “perceptions concerning our system of values, our ways of thinking, our beliefs, and our psychological orientations” (Samovar et al., 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). Therefore, how individuals’ attitudes in a certain society affect their behavior depends on their culture. According to Raddawi (2015), “Culture can be understood as a nation and/or ethnicity or can be faith based or gender based or even discourse based (community speeches and styles)” (p.2). This suggests that people’s identity, their gender, and their beliefs affect their understanding of culture and their attitudes towards other cultures. Despite several attempts and efforts to define the concept ‘culture’, scholars have not come up with a well-defined meaning yet (Tang, 2006). This suggests that culture is a “very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life” (Seelye, 1993, p. 15). Therefore, the broad definition leaves language teachers to determine aspects of culture that should be taught to students. Thus, culture includes different components: some of them are emphasized in language classrooms while others are not.

Furthermore, there are dynamic processes that culture goes through over time. Simply put, all cultures could be changed and modified over time through developments in media, technology, politics, and religious mindsets. McDaniel (2012), for instance, reports that culture undergoes constant changes: "[it] is not static, it is a dynamic process [that is] indefinitely renewable" (McDaniel, 2012, p.49). For instance, a job that was not suitable for women two decades ago because of culture constraints could be open for 21<sup>st</sup> century women. Furthermore, Yamazaki (2000) states, "Culture is by no means a fixed entity, but a set of dynamic processes of generation and transformation (p. 119). These dynamic processes ease the society's acceptance of new concepts and ideas that were unacceptable in their grandparents' times. Hence, culture is not a finished product: it keeps modifying and changing. Hall (1990) notes, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, they have histories; [however,] they undergo constant transformation" (p. 225, as cited in McDaniel, 2012). This justifies why we constantly find ourselves different from our grandparents and even our parents in the way they think and view matters in life. We argue with our parents or grandparents about issues that we think are normal to do; however, they tend to think that they are unacceptable by our society members whose behavior is conditioned by beliefs, religions, policies, all aspects of culture.

Cultural changes happen because of various reasons. Globalization is the major aspect that affects individuals' culture and beliefs. "Globalization can be a profoundly enriching process, opening minds to new ideas and experiences, and strengthening the finest values of humanity" (McDaniel, 2012, p. 51). The more globalized our society gets, the more different and new ideas we get exposed to. People from different cultures who travel to different countries, media that presents all cultures and beliefs that could be new to us, and marriages that happen between individuals from different cultures, all these affect our views of issues in life. The contact and communication between people who came from different cultures are reasons of the dynamic processes of cultural changes.

Although cultures change over time, some cultures (some society members as well) are too conservative; thus, they try to resist cultural changes. Some cultures show resistance or disagreement of cultural changes by constructing laws to preserve their traditions (Lizardo, 2007). For instance, as English became an international language that is used by different nations from all over the world, some languages ended up borrowing and using English words when using their own language.

Therefore, in order to protect their culture and language, the French government, for instance, has outlawed the use of English words, such as ‘sandwich’ and ‘job’ that have equivalents in French in media. All commercials should use French, unless there is no matching word, only then English words can be borrowed (“Loi Toubon Law”, 2017).

## **2.2. Language and Culture**

After several debates on the effects of different teaching approaches and the transitions from one to another, it was concluded that it is important to teach a second or foreign language using culture-based content (e.g., Brown, 2001; Kramsch, 1998; Kuang, 2007; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2005; Schulz, 2007; Tang, 2006 amongst others). In the following paragraphs, the major aspects of these approaches will be presented. It has become known that to be a successful user of the target language, learners should know its culture and social rules (Alptekin, 2002). Furthermore, language allows its learners to go beyond linguistics. Literature of a language reflects its people’s values and traditions which are transmitted to learners. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) mention that ‘the study of an additional language ... [is] a way of coming to understand another culture and its people’ (p.1). Therefore, one goal of language teaching or learning is to understand the fundamental aspects of its culture.

As culture is one of the components of a language, the latter cannot be taught without discussing its culture. Liddicoat & Scarino (2013) note that students should know how to use the language in socio-cultural contexts; therefore, the culture of the target language should be taught. Meanwhile, Risager (2007) mentioned that learners will be in a situation in which they speak with native speakers and they have to be able to deal with real life situations. This is also supported by Stoller (2006) who believes that if classroom activities are not related to real life situations, this does not help students in learning or using L2 in real life. In these situations, knowing the culture of native speakers is as important as knowing the grammar and lexis of the language. According to Stoller (2006), since language emerges from societal interactions, L2 learners cannot truly learn the language without acquiring knowledge about its culture and its native speakers.

In addition, it is difficult to teach a language without touching upon its culture, as culture is part of the language taught. House (2007) states, “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.

Furthermore, integrating culture in teaching language affects the cognitive development of students. According to Piaget's (1936), the theory of cognitive development clarifies how a child constructs a mental model of the world. He was an opponent of the idea that intelligence is a fixed trait and viewed cognitive development as a process which occurs due to biological maturation and interaction with the environment. Therefore, interaction and communication develop children's cognitive development. In the same view, Vygotsky (1962) states that cognition, even in isolation, is sociocultural. In other words, even if children do not communicate with the outside world, their cognition is affected by their values, beliefs and tools of intellectual adaptation that are transmitted from their own culture. In the cases of young learners, as they are great explorers, they are active in learning and discovering new principles. By experiencing social interactions and communicating with others, a cognitive growth takes place.

### **2.3. Language and Intercultural Communication**

Teaching language without the focus on its culture is difficult to happen. This is not the case with English only, but also with teaching languages in general. According to Risager (2007), “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) mentions, "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. Each language reflects the culture of a certain group and their ideas that affect speakers' thinking, ideologies and worldview (House, 2007). Some researchers believe that culture is an essential component in language teaching; Kramsch (1993) elaborates that “language teaching consists of teaching the four skills plus culture” (p. 8). Therefore, culture is seen as one of the core skills of language that should be taught and transmitted to students. It is also clear that people



communicate by using shared cultural features that differ from one language to the other. 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, culture cannot be separated from language.

Intercultural communication refers to “interactions among people of diverse cultures” (Jandt, 2013, p. 35). 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, that is quite aware of the language’s ideology and cultural features.

Furthermore, Hua (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). Therefore, in order to have positive interactions with people from different ethnic and cultural background, one needs to be culturally competent.

Similarly, Raddawi (2015) defines intercultural communication as “the sharing or exchange of messages between people of different cultural and/or social backgrounds... through verbal or nonverbal forms of communication” (p. 1). Successful communicators should be able to understand and respect each other cultures and ideologies when exchanging messages. More specifically, they should hold enough cultural background that helps them communicate without misunderstanding. It is essential that teachers and students know the culture of language they teach and learn. The majority of employees and workers have to deal and communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. As mentioned by Raddawi (2015), in teamwork, business meetings and discussions, some employees have to travel abroad to complete their work and others have a business and other branches of their offices in other countries. Hence “one should not overlook the need to learn IC [intercultural communication] [as it] helps communication between people from different national cultures” (Raddawi, 2015, p.1). Whether these workers/ employees are educators, doctors, business people or engineers, they need intercultural communication skills to communicate effectively with others.

In addition, the relationship between language and culture is not only important in the field of language teaching, but also it is important in different disciplines, primarily anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology and communication (Jackson, 2013). This suggests that even psychologists need to know the culture of language when dealing with their patients to be able to communicate and deal with them effectively. Bennett (cited in Jackson, 2013) identifies some of the dimensions of this correlation between language and intercultural communication mainly through perception, interpretation, and attribution (psychology, linguistics, and communication) verbal and nonverbal communication (linguistics and communication fields) and through cultural adaptation and identity (in psycholinguistics). Therefore, the way we understand things and the way we communicate verbally and nonverbally are affected by the way we accept and perceive other cultures of the people that are around us. Furthermore, Hall in his book *The Silent Language* (1959) explains that learning the language (grammar, vocabulary and spelling) of the target country is not sufficient drawing attention to the influence of culture on communication. Hence Hall's and other scholars' approaches to language and culture paved the way for the emergence of interdisciplinary fields such as Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1999; Trudgill, 2003), pragmatics and intercultural communication (Yule, 1996) and the study of language in context (Hua, 2011), discourse analysis, pragmatic competence, inter-language pragmatics, and cross-cultural pragmatics. Therefore, it is necessary to teach educators and students to be competent interculturally.

#### **2.4. Linguistic and Cultural Differences between Teachers and Students and the Teaching Materials**

Textbooks are usually used as the main resource in educational institutions whether at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels. These textbooks may contain culturally inappropriate topics or pictures that are against the majority students' values, religions, and beliefs (Hinkel, 1999). Moreover, such textbooks are mainly produced for learners of English as a first language: they might present culturally inappropriate pictures, texts, ideas or topics. Therefore, such textbooks may not address second language learners' needs as textbooks' 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 second or foreign language

learners, students' ideologies and values might be affected as they discover new ideologies which sometimes are far away from their own (Hinkel, 1999).

Conversely, some educational institutions contextualize the content of the textbooks to avoid any difference (clash) with their local culture. For example, book designers contextualize the topics and illustrations in textbooks to conform to the students' culture (see Samples 11 and 12, Appendix B). Some of these institutions use textbooks that are designed by their teachers, and these textbooks mirror students' culture, background, values, and beliefs instead of presenting the culture of the language of native speakers (Hinkel, 1999). For instance, in a swimming context, instead of showing a girl in her swimming suit, she is presented wearing the traditional clothes of the UAE, *Abaya*, a dress that covers the whole body. The former being the outfit of the English culture and the latter being the one of the local culture. However, it is essential that educational materials used in class include the important components of the language, such as its culture and at the same time suitable for learners' level and corresponding to objectives and learning outcomes set in the syllabus of the course. 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 institutions themselves (Hinkel, 1999). All of them have decisions on the materials that are covered in class. According to Motha (2014), teachers' identities affect their teaching and the students' learning as well. This is also supported by Foerster Luu (2013) who writes, "Who you are is as important as who you teach" (as cited in Motha, 2014, p.13). Debates exist around what content should be incorporated when teaching English as a second or foreign language are quite common. Since the mid-1970s, significant changes have happened in the field of EFL teaching (Byram, 1991). The mid 1970s witnessed a reform of teaching methodologies; for instance, the Grammar Translation Method and Audio-lingual, since it became vital that language should be learned and spoken and not only studied (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Language learning in today's world is heavily influenced by globalization and internationalization (Risager, 2007). According to (Risager, 2007), "all language studies [...] are social and cultural practices embedded in comprehensive and potentially global processes" (p. 1).

Conversely, Gobert (2015) mentions that as students study the language through the detailed culture of its speakers, this creates a distance between the learners' cultural background and the culture of the target language. She adds, "This distance may alienate the student so much that learning the target language may be severely impeded" (Gobert, 2015, p. 111). Therefore, she suggests, teachers should not focus on details, such as what food should be eaten with red wine rather than teaching about alcohol in general (Gobert, 2015). Teachers' cultural competency could remedy this dilemma as what to teach and the knowledge of how to embrace their students' cultural needs and adjust the teaching materials and discussion topics accordingly (Hinkel, 1999).

## **2.5. Taboo in Language Teaching**

The word taboo is derived from the word "tabu" which means "to forbid" in the Tongan language (Gobert, 2015), holds a "comprehensive meaning that includes actions which cannot be done, objects which cannot be touched, or words that cannot be said (Allan and Burridge 2006, as cited in Gobert, 2015). As it is mentioned in the Encyclopedia by Gale (2015), it is a "social prohibition or restriction sanctioned by suprasocietal (innate) means or a socially sanctioned injunction alleged to have the force of such a prohibition". Taboo language is a language that is avoided as it is claimed to be embarrassing, inappropriate or offensive (Crystal, 2003). Taboos are not stable constructs for they tend to change. A concept or a language that has been defined as taboo earlier could change over time according to people's perception of what is considered as 'taboo' in a certain period of time since culture changes too. In addition, taboos differ from one culture to the other; as such, they are culture specific. A topic that could be discussed in America or Australia could be inappropriate or forbidden to be discussed in the Arab world (Gobert, 2015). The following section highlights different studies which looked at the appropriateness of using taboo language in different contexts.

Louise Haynes (2000) investigates the question of whether ESL teachers should discuss 'taboo' topics such as AIDS in their classrooms or not and explores the reason behind their practices. The study surveyed and interviewed 69 English as a Second Language (ESL) university teachers. He found out that Japanese students did not mind discussing topics, such as AIDS with their teachers; however, some teachers

faced several challenges, as covering such topics could be a problem for them as they might offend someone in class. Thus, Haynes (2000) suggests that teachers should be trained to teach the language integrated with its culture to be able to discuss the uncomfortable topics in classrooms. Teachers are advised to practice discussing sensitive topics to help students achieve the cultural competence they need.

A similar study by Timina and Butler (2011) examines the topics that make Taiwanese students uncomfortable to discuss in the classroom. To know students' perspectives on the discussion of culturally sensitive topics, 70 students (58 females and 12 males) who are majoring in English language were surveyed. Timina and Butler (2011) report 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, childless and adoptive families..." (p. 5). The students in this study mentioned that such topics are not usually discussed in their native language; thus, it is hard to discuss them in the second/ foreign language even if it is part of the language culture. According to the same students, these topics are culturally inappropriate to discuss. Interestingly, Timina and Butler's study (2011) does not advise English teachers to avoid teaching culturally sensitive topics. It rather suggests ways to reduce students' uncomfortable feeling when discussing these topics. One of the strategies is discussing sensitive topics in a small group of students who know and trust each other. Furthermore, it is important to "provide students with information about what other people think on the subject" (p. 10). In addition, never ask students to express their attitudes towards taboos in public. It is also essential to give students a chance to 'build pre-class knowledge for a given topic' because they feel motivated when they are confident about their ideas (p. 10).

## **Background**

### **2.6. Multiculturalism and Diversity in the United Arab Emirates**

After the oil boom and with the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971, the country became a modernized and empowered federal nation (Wagie & Warren, 2006). Today, more than 85% of its population are expatriates who work in different professional settings such as medicine, education, business, and most economic sectors in general (Wagie & Warren, 2006). The country hosts more than

200 nationalities (Randall & Samimi, 2010). Such multinational mosaic requires certain cultural and linguistic adaptation needs. In addition, it required more focus on education. As His Highness, the late father and ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan once said, “The real asset of any advanced nation is its people, especially the educated ones, and the prosperity and success of the people are measured by the standard of their education” (“Shaikh Zayed in quotes”, 2005, para. 18).

## **2.7. 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 the same uniformed exams at the same time. Such schools study all subjects in the students’ first learned language, i.e., Modern Standard Arabic. Only English, as a subject, is taught in English although in some schools, Emirati or Modern Standard Arabic is used to explain and clarify new concepts and difficult vocabulary words. According to the Embassy of Abu Dhabi, “the medium of instruction in the public school is Arabic and English as a Second Language is emphasized” (“Education in UAE,” 2011, para. 2). The majority of students in public schools are Emiratis; however, there are some Arab expatriates, but all students are Arabic speakers (“Education in UAE,” 2011). Second, there are also private international schools, such as American, Australian, British, Russian, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Filipino, French schools, etc. Although the mentioned schools implement different curricula, use different textbooks with students and follow different educational systems, all programs follow certain rules and regulations that are dictated by the MoE in the UAE. As an Arab citizen who has been living in the UAE for more than 20 years, being fully educated in the UAE schools and working in the UAE schools for almost four years, I have been experiencing and learning as a student and as a teacher about the culture of the UAE, its geographic location, its important historical dates and its various national and religious ceremonies. As a student, all classes from KG to grade twelve had to celebrate important ceremonies such as the UAE National Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December. As a teacher, moreover, I am aware that the UAE MoE constantly updates administrators, principals and teachers of all the trends in the education system and curriculum that should be transmitted to students. Interestingly, all students and

teachers in all schools, public and private, must sing the UAE National Anthem in the morning for the memorial of the Union of the seven emirates in 1971. For example, all schools should teach their students the culture of the UAE and its people.

Furthermore, Arabic should be taught to all students whether they are native speakers or non-native speakers of the language (as a first, second or a third language). The education system in the UAE is divided into four stages; Kindergarten (4-5 years old), Elementary (6-11 years old), Intermediate (12-14 years old) and Secondary (15- 18 years) ("Education in UAE," 2011). The school Great Point Average (GPA) achieved in the final secondary year is what decides the students' future later. In other words, the grade qualifies students to join a particular major at a university in the UAE. For instance, certain majors such as medicine and engineering require higher GPA than other majors.

## **2.8. Significance of the Study**

To the best of my knowledge, no similar case studies have been conducted in private schools in the UAE to this date. To fill the research gap, this study examines teachers' perspectives towards discussing culturally sensitive topics in the UAE schools.

## **2.9. Research Question(s)**

The below research questions are proposed:

- 1) What are English teachers' perspectives towards discussing culturally sensitive topics?
- 2) What are the implications of discussing culturally sensitive topics on the teachers' career paths?
- 3) What are the impacts of teaching or not teaching these taboo topics on the learners' cognitive knowledge and communicative competence?

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

Informed by an interpretive research approach, this exploratory study took place in three private secondary schools: one school is located in the Emirate of Sharjah, the second school is located in the Emirate of Dubai and the third is based in the Emirate of Ajman. Furthermore, secondary schools English textbooks were looked at to trace the ‘culturally irrelevant topics’. In this study, different procedures were taken for the results to be reliable. The first measure was data triangulation. Burns (2010) notes that it is essential to use different methods in gathering information to avoid false results and personal judgments. To solve this issue, the data for this study was collected using three different sources: three schools in three different emirates.

#### **3.1. Participants**

Thirty English teachers from three different private schools were surveyed: ten teachers from each school (Ajman, 10; Sharjah, 10; Dubai, 10). All teachers from the three schools teach English to grades 10, 11, and 12 students. Furthermore, a female private school teacher and a MoE senior teacher trainer were interviewed.<sup>1</sup>

Results show that 67.7% of participants were female teachers while only 32.3% were males (see Table 1). In general, it was clear that the majority of school teachers were females. Participants were from different nationalities: Africa, America, Canada, Caucasians, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines and Tunisia. The majority of them, however, speak Arabic as their first language. Teachers’ age ranged from 21 to more than 50.

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<sup>1</sup> 20 participants were supposed initially to be surveyed from each school; however, some teachers refused to be part of the survey as they felt it might affect their career path. In other schools, the number of teachers who teach secondary classes was not enough.



Table 1:

*Demographic Information of Teachers' Respondents*

Biographical information	Participants	Percentage respondents
Gender	Female	67.7 %
	Male	32.3 %
Age	21 - 29 years old	50%
	30 – 39 years old	10 %
	40 – 49 years old	6.7 %
	50+ years old	6.7 %
First language	Arabic	60 %
	English	16.7 %
	Urdu	10 %
	Tagallo	6.7 %
	French	6.7 %

To get deeper insights into teachers' perspectives, three participants volunteered to be interviewed. These participants work at different places. The first interviewee is an Arab female teacher who has 4 years of experience in teaching English at private schools and language institutes in the three emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi. The second participant is a MoE senior teacher trainer who trains public schools teachers. He has around 30 years of experience in teaching English and training English teachers in the UAE, Canada, and Iran, his home country.

### **3.2. Instruments**

In order to answer the research questions, this investigation is based on mixed research methods. Data was gathered using quantitative and qualitative approaches.

#### **3.2.1. Questionnaire.**

Quantitative data was culled by means of anonymous questionnaires to know whether or not teachers cover culturally sensitive topics mentioned in the English-language textbooks which they use. According to Metler (2009), "Surveys and

questionnaires permit the teacher-researcher to gather a lot of, as well as a variety of information relatively quickly” (p. 117). The questionnaire was anonymous to assure accuracy and honesty in the responses given (Brown, 2001). The questionnaire items were designed in light of the research questions and the literature review.

The perceptions of few English language teachers from two public schools were surveyed to find out about the impact of school environment on the materials covered in class. These are the rules and restrictions regarding what teachers can or cannot say or cover in class. For instance, some schools teach everything in the book whether it is culturally in/sensitive while other schools skip some sections although both schools use the same textbooks and follow the same curriculum. In addition, in order to compare teachers’ values, beliefs and practices of discussing culturally sensitive topics, some of the teachers are native speakers of the language and others are non-native speakers from different ethnicities and religions.

Survey questions included different areas. The first section asked about participants’ personal information: gender, age, ethnicity, first language, and their qualifications. The second section asked about experience, situations and perspectives towards teaching English. This section covered topics such as, ethnicity of students, relation between culture and language, textbooks materials, teachers’ practices in classrooms and school policies and regulations. Many open-ended questions were also added in order to individualize some responses as they worked as mini-interview questions.

### **3.2.2. Interviews.**

As mentioned in Brown (2001), questionnaires have low return rate and usually have incomplete answers. In order to overcome this problem, three ELT teachers from different schools were interviewed to add more credibility to the study. According to Brown (2001), interviews have “high return rate, fewer incomplete answers, can involve realia, relatively flexible and personal” (p. 75). As Mertler (2009) states, “interviews permit the teacher-researcher to probe further and ask for clarification in a participant’s response to a given question” (p.111). Thus, interviews give a researcher an advantage over questionnaires as they can get more details on unclear and vague answers and to get in depth with reasons of responding with such answers. Furthermore, with interviews, other observations can be made, such as analyzing body language and facial expression

(Brown, 2001). Moreover, perceptions of English language head teachers and supervisors working in Sharjah Educational Zone were interviewed for triangulation purposes (Brown, 2001; Mertler, 2009).

### **3.3. Data Collection**

This research involved human subjects, as the participants in the study are teachers working in the two private schools chosen for this study and the public schools used for comparison. Richards (2003) asserts that there is a better chance to minimize the harm to participants and the researcher when moral issues are managed carefully. Participants' identity and privacy were kept anonymous which is reflected in the data collection procedure. Therefore, before embarking on the data collection, permissions from the Institution Review Board (IRB) of the American University of Sharjah were obtained. This procedure of reviewing questionnaires, which is required by several universities, is "helpful in determining the levels of risk and how you might be able to adjust your study to reduce the potential risk and still clearly answer your research questions" (Schreiber & Asner, 2011, p.99). Data was collected in December 2016 in about two-week time.

#### **3.3.1. Demographic Data.**

Surveys were disseminated face to face to five randomly chosen educators for piloting purposes. This was to determine and test teachers' understanding of the survey items. Dornyei (2003) shows that piloting is essential as it provides researchers with the required information in order for them to tune and edit the questions. Interestingly, Sudman and Bradburn (1983) state "if you do not have the resources to pilot-test your questionnaire, don't do the study" (p. 283). Based on the teachers' responses and feedback on the piloted version of the questionnaire, some questions were revised and fine-tuned. After designing the final version of the survey, the researcher visited the three schools where the study was conducted and handed the questionnaire to the teachers. To get reliable and accurate feedback, teachers who participated in the piloted procedure were excluded and were not asked to complete the final version of the survey. Participants were not asked to sign a consent form as their identity and privacy were kept anonymous in the study.

### **3.3.2. Interviews.**

After collecting the questionnaires from the teachers, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with one teacher and a senior MoE teacher trainer. Those interviews were carried out to gather in-depth background information about the teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics and the constraints teachers find when covering such topics in the UAE schools.

Appointments for those interviews were made by calling the teachers. All the interviewees were asked to indicate their readiness and approval to participate in the interviews by having to sign an interview consent form. Although participants were informed that the recordings would be kept confidential, not be used for any purpose other than the current study, and that pseudonyms would be used to refer to them in this thesis, only one interview was audio recorded and transcribed as the other participant refused to have her interview recorded. However, the researcher was taking notes while the interviewees were talking. They were also made aware that they had full freedom to retain the recording in case they changed their mind or decided to withdraw from the study.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter reports on the findings of investigating teachers' attitudes and perspectives on the discussion of culturally sensitive topics in three private schools in the UAE based on the three research questions presented in Chapter 2. It also highlights the implications of such practices on teachers' career path. Furthermore, it covers the impact of discussing sensitive topics on the cognitive development of students.

To get more credibility of what is common in the country, it was better to collect data from three different emirates. These results were achieved by combing the perspectives of all teachers from the three schools in three different emirates: Sharjah, Dubai and Ajman, three adjacent emirates. As no significant differences were found in their responses, no specific points were pointed out regarding each school.

### 4.1. Teachers' Perspectives towards Discussing Culturally Sensitive Topics

In order to understand teachers' ideas and beliefs of what culture is, they were asked to provide a definition of culture from their own perspectives. Teachers' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed by breaking their definitions into key words, which were counted according to their appearances in the survey. Table 2 shows the words which are ranked from the most appeared word to the least.

Table 2:

#### *Defining Key Words of Culture*

Key words	Number of Appearance
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

According to teachers' responses, customs, traditions and beliefs are the factors that shape someone's culture most. When asked to define 'culture', Youssef, the interviewed MoE teacher trainer, said:

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.

This is also supported by Samovar et al. (2015) who define culture as values, ways of thinking, and beliefs. Spencer-Oatey (2008) also defines it as values, beliefs, approaches, behavior, tradition, rules and regulations. As different teachers had different ideas about the definition of culture, this foreshadows that their responses to the other questions in the survey would vary as well.

Furthermore, teachers were asked if there is a relationship between language and its culture (see Chart 1, Appendix F). Interestingly, 96.8 % of them agreed that there is a strong relationship between language and culture; whereas, only 3.2 % disagreed with this idea. One of the participants explained that "language is a mean to express culture" while another participant stated that "culture and language represent the identity of a nation."

Youssef, the MoE teacher trainer, 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.

According to House (2007), culture is part of language; therefore, language learners can misunderstand a language if they have no reference to its culture.

In response to the question whether language can/cannot be taught without touching upon culture, 6.5% of the participants believe that language can be taught without culture; whereas, 93.5% state that culture cannot be separated from language teaching (Chart 2, Appendix F).

Teachers' elaborations on the question whether language and culture can be separated in language teaching are that "culture influence 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."

Analysis of questions 1 and 2 indicates that around 96.8% of teachers believe that culture and language are related; nonetheless, some of them are able to teach the language without discussing its cultural aspects. One of the teachers who believe that language can be taught without culture commented, "... however, students who receive cultural education integrated with language will get better educational quality than the ones who do not." More specifically, they will have better chances in the future to be efficient communicators (Risager, 1991; Stoller, 2006). In this sense, better educational quality means that students will become more aware of culture and its relationship to language. Therefore, they will have great opportunities to efficiently communicate with native speakers of the language with less chances of misunderstanding or miscommunicating. According to Damen (1987), "Success in learning a second or even a third language is partially related to the acquisition of the cultural baggage that is carried along with any linguistics system" (p. 4). Therefore, it is essential that teachers cover all aspects of language to provide students with a better quality language teaching. This suggests that discussing culture is beneficial for students' future. Among surveyed teachers, 93.5 % state that it is impossible to extract culture, knowing that culture as defined by the participants refers to everything that makes someone's ideas unique from someone else's from a different society. Culture is someone's traditions, customs, beliefs, thoughts, ideas and ways of thinking. Similarly, according to Kramsch (1993), culture is one of the core skills of language that cannot be separated. In addition, Kramsch (1993) points out that teachers do not only focus on language when they teach, but they also explain meanings of concepts. However, interpreting meanings needs integration of other aspects such as culture, which is necessary to understand and use a language. Jandt

(2013) also argues that communication with language cannot happen and succeed without the understanding of its culture. This suggests that language teaching cannot happen without understanding the culture and teaching it to students to be competent communicators and this is supported by the majority of teachers in this study.

Furthermore, teachers 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 curriculum map and the lessons in the textbook to assure that textbooks do not tackle any sensitive topics. Other teachers said that they design their own books that are contextualized to relate the topics to students' cultures and backgrounds. According to Hinkel (1999), some institutions design their own books to mirror students' values and beliefs rather than presenting native speakers' culture that might be too distant from their own. Furthermore, the MoE teacher trainer stated,

We never encounter any sensitive topic, but if we do, we remove it completely after consulting others whether such topic is sensitive or not. In the public sector, 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.

It is worth noting here that public schools use contextualized books that are specifically designed for second language speakers of English and to be used in the UAE context. However, according to Youssef, the committee members have to go over the "*soft copies*" of 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. We had to zoom in the tiny picture to actually see it."

Although most participants said that they review the syllabus and the lessons in the textbook, 16.1% of them pointed out that they always encounter sensitive topics, 64.5% said they occasionally while only 19.4% said that they never encounter such topics (Chart 3, Appendix F). Some participants in the same school said that they encounter sensitive topics while others mentioned that they never come across them in textbooks. Although most teachers mentioned that they review the chosen



selections and materials before teaching students, some topics/ texts seem to creep in. Therefore, there comes a time in which teachers and students face culturally sensitive topics whether it is intended or a coincidence (see Samples 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, &10, Appendix B).

The question that might arise from these distinctions in teachers' responses is that what topics are considered sensitive and which topics can be discussed? Teachers' comments justify the fact 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 an issue to others. According to Youssef, MoE senior teacher trainer, "For some teachers, such topics might be discussed normally in their home countries where they are considered insensitive". In addition, to know what actions teachers take when they encounter culturally sensitive topics in textbooks, they were asked whether they teach or skip them in class (Chart 4, Appendix F).

Of major interest here was the percentage of participants who skip teaching culturally sensitive topics. Although 93.5 % of them mentioned previously that language cannot be separated from culture, 48.4 % of teachers skip teaching the topics; whereas, 51.6 % do not. In order to have more insights into the reasons of their responses, teachers provided further explanations. One of the teachers commented, "I teach these topics, but I never go into details to avoid further explanation and parents' complaints". A different teacher said, "Students won't benefit anything from discussing foreign cultures".

To analyze teachers' responses and the reasons behind the different comments, two variables were compared. It is clear from the survey analysis that there is a correlation between age-ranges, years of experience in the Gulf and teachers' coverage of sensitive topics as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3:

*Age and Coverage of Sensitive Topics*

Age ranges	I explain them (%)	I skip them (%)
21- 29	72.7	27.3
30- 39	40	60
40- 49	33.3	66.7

From teachers' responses (Table 3), it can be inferred that the younger the teachers are, the more tendency they cover culturally sensitive topics. The percentages of coverage of these topics seem to decrease with older teachers. Results show that 72.7 % of teachers who are between 21- 29 years old explain culturally sensitive topics while 27.3 % 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 with their teachers in schools. According to Yamazaki (2000), culture is not fixed; it goes through several transformations because of the different generations and the globalization. Hall (2009) also notes that culture undergoes different transformation for several reasons. Therefore, what might be sensitive to our grandparents could be commonly discussed with today's generation. This might be an explanation of the observed differences of teachers' opinions that are from different generations.

Meanwhile, teachers' responses to the same question and their years of experience in the Gulf region reveal that the more experience teachers have in the Gulf region, the fewer tendencies they cover sensitive topics in class (see Table 4 below).

Table 4:

*Years of Experience and Coverage of Sensitive Topics*

<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>I explain them</b>	<b>I skip them</b>
<b>0- 3</b>	60	40
<b>4- 8</b>	53.3	46. 7
<b>9- 15</b>	33.3	66.7
<b>More than 15 years</b>	10	90

Table 4 shows that 60% of teachers who have between 0- 3 years of experience tend to explain culturally sensitive topics, while 40 % skip teaching them. On the other hand, this percentage decreases in the responses of 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. Other explanations could be

that some know specific methods to discuss such topics without facing troubles with schools' administration, students or students' parents.

In order to know the teachers' attitudes towards discussing culturally sensitive topics in class and their own ranking of sensitive topics, different questions were proposed in the survey. One of the survey questions asked teachers to write and rank the most five culturally sensitive topics in the region.

Results show that 'sex' with 47.4% is the most ranked sensitive topic. Teachers' responses include: sex education, sex orientation and out-marriage love; all of these sub-topics are categorized under 'sex' (Chart 5, Appendix F). Furthermore, 'religion' is the second ranked sensitive topic (42.1% responses) while 'politics' (10.5 % responses) is the least ranked topic. Nonetheless, the MoE teacher trainer ranked 'religion' as the first option as he believes that 'sex' comes under religious values and beliefs. According to Gobert (2015), sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork meat, boyfriend/girlfriend and dating, drugs, and other related issues are common sensitive topics in the Arab world. Most of the topics mentioned above are part of religion, such as pork meat, teen suicide, dating, sex, and drugs. This could be the reason behind the high ranking of religion as a sensitive topic.

As results show, ethnicity was one of the sensitive topics proposed, which is actually part of politics. Several teachers mentioned other topics that they consider sensitive, such as family affairs, gay rights, and racism. Some of the proposed topics are 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 who mentioned that he/she avoids discussing political issues mentioned that they discuss topics related to refugees with their students. Teachers' responses also indicate other topics, such as relationships, gay rights, which are part of sex orientation and birth control.

On a different note, participants were asked to identify three culturally sensitive topics that they may discuss with their students and mention another 3 topics that they never discuss with them. Table 5 below presents the findings.

Table 5:

*Culturally Sensitive Topics that Teachers Might/Never Discuss in Class*

Topics that teachers <b>NEVER</b> discuss	Number of participants	Topics that teachers <b>MIGHT</b> discuss	Number of participants
Sex (sex education, homosexuality)	15	Discrimination	4
Religion	11	Traditions	3
Gay rights	2	None	3
Politics	6	Race	3
Transgender issues	2	Refugees	2
Social relations	2	Customs	2
Nationalities, abortion	1	Word expression	2
		Segregation, politics, social class, social habits, relationships, identity, media coverage, roles of family members	1 each

All teachers reported that they never discuss religion or sex while only one teacher mentioned that she/he 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. According to the MoE teacher trainer, "Teachers' beliefs strongly affect what they seem to cover in class and what they skip."

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) state that "The theories of language that a teacher holds affect the process and practice of language teaching and what is understood as process in language development" (p. 12). This suggests that the way teachers think affect their teaching. Furthermore, Motha (2014) explains that teachers' identities affect the way they teach and affect what their students learn.

Teachers were asked in one of the survey questions about the effects of discussing culturally sensitive topics in classrooms. Survey results show that 38.7 % mentioned that it affects the reputation of the school, 32.3 % of teachers believe that such discussions affect the culture of student only, while 16.1% mentioned that it affects the identity of students (Chart 12, Appendix F). This suggests that the majority of teachers believe that the reputation of school is being affected by discussing or otherwise taboo topics. This could be explained that discussing culturally sensitive topics holds a negative connotation, as it is different from students' cultures. Other teachers believe that discussing taboo topics would be affecting the students negatively as they discover new ideologies that might be different from their own (Hinkel, 1999). However, I believe that when teachers explain such topics, it does not mean that they or their students should adopt taboo topics and make them part of their culture. Conversely, students and teachers are meant to respect and tolerate other cultures.

#### **4.2. Implications of Discussing Culturally Sensitive Topics on Teachers' Career Paths**

Among the factors that affect teachers' discussion of taboo topics, institutional constraints were the most noticeable. In December 2016, all school teachers, administrators and staff in the UAE had to sign a contract of *Tolerance Document for Employees in Education System to denounce Discrimination and Hate* (Appendix E). In the document, it is somehow implied that teachers should not discuss politics in class but no clear statement was provided (key words are highlighted). As an English teacher in one of the schools in the study, I had to sign the Tolerance Document. In the meeting when the school principal had to explain the document to school staff and teachers, she explicitly mentioned that teachers are not allowed to discuss politics or religion with their students or their other colleagues. The principal also mentioned that by discussing such issues, "This does not only affect you as a teacher, but it affects our school's reputation as well".

To know whether there are institutional restrictions on teaching/discussing culturally sensitive topics, teachers were asked if they faced any restriction when they discussed such topics. Although 51% mentioned in previous questions that they explain sensitive topics, 54.8 % of participants said that they never faced any institutional restrictions while 45.2 % agreed that they were asked not to cover certain

topics (Chart 6, Appendix F). One of the teachers mentioned that in meetings, coordinators advise them on what topics to go over in details and which topics to avoid in order not to face any issue. 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. In other words, filtering occurs at various stages and the supervisor comes at the very last before self-censorship takes place. Thus, this suggests how important it is to decide on which topics can/not be covered in the schools included in this study. Furthermore, 22.6% of teachers mentioned that there is a total agreement between them and school administrators on the discussion of taboo topics, 22.6% said there is average agreement and 54.8% said that there is none (Chart 9, Appendix F).

Furthermore, one of the survey questions asks whether teachers have been in a situation in which they covered a sensitive issue and the school administration warned them. Results show that 12.9 % of participants said that they were approached by principals or language coordinators who asked them not to cover such topics (Chart 7, Appendix F). 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.” Another teacher, who mentioned that she did not receive a warning, added, “The language coordinator sets a meeting before covering a specific topic and tells us what to cover and what to skip.” Youssef from MoE said, “This did not happen to me; however, I know some teachers who faced problems because they discussed cultural topics in class.”

Results show that teachers face different situations when covering or skipping cultural topics. Some of them encounter problems while others are not approached or warned by administrators. 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 they should be aware of their students’ needs. This means that teachers are not supposed to cover cultural aspects explicitly; however, they should be able to address such topics in a way that makes students comfortable and that does not offend anyone’s 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 and how to teach them in a way that does not put teachers in trouble. In fact, results show that 58.1 % received training or guidance on how to tackle such issues while

41.9 did not (Chart 8, Appendix F). One of the teachers said, “We were asked to skip any topic that might cause troubles with parents.” 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.” Moreover, the MoE teacher trainer said, “I never trained teachers to tackle such issues.” He added, “There are no clear guidelines or written documents on which topics can be covered in class and which ones should be avoided.”

It is clear that most teachers did not receive formal training or guidance on how to cover culturally sensitive topics in a way that makes them and their students comfortable. Furthermore, there are no explicit rules as to the possibility of discussing these topics whereby the administrators convey most of the constraints to respective teachers verbally. According to Zarate (1986, as cited by Liddicoat 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. Therefore, teachers should be culturally competent to be able to deal effectively with students who come from different cultural backgrounds. Indeed, teachers experience several situations and gain experience in cross-cultural communication daily; nevertheless, “it is not enough to just know about different patterns of social response (Damen, 1987, p.5). Furthermore, if teachers are not culturally well prepared and trained, they will not be able to transmit or reflect any cultural aspect to students. In a study by Timina and Butler (2011), Taiwanese students did not feel comfortable when teachers discussed culturally sensitive topics. Thus, teachers should be guided through intercultural communication courses and trained on how to discuss such topics without causing any cultural clash in class.

#### **4.3. The Impacts of Discussing Culturally Sensitive Topics on Students’ Cognitive Development**

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 taboo topics. A closer analysis of the data reveals that 80.7% of teachers say that teaching these topics have positive impacts on students’ cognitive development while 19.3 % believe that it is not useful to tackle taboo topics in class (Chart 10, Appendix F).

Teachers' comments were as follows: "Discussing culturally sensitive topics broaden the students' perspectives", "They can better understand each other", "It helps them develop intellectually", "Broad culture horizon will lead to tolerance", "It is better to be aware of culturally sensitive topics from school rather than other sources", "It opens their minds to different aspects of life, we do not need to be over protective." and "It is useful to explain what is related to the curriculum only, not more or less". The MoE teacher trainer added, "It is useful to discuss culturally sensitive topics as these students will be culturally competent. They will develop intellectually as well." On the other hand, other opposing views mentioned, "It has negative effects on the society", "What they do not know will not harm them", "This leads to unnecessary arguments", "They come from different cultures and these topics may not be discussed at home; therefore, it causes problems in class."

The 19.3 % of participants who report that discussing culture would affect the students' cognitive development negatively believe that discussing these topics may lead to unnecessary arguments among students or between students and the teacher which may lead to some cultural clashes. This idea of discussing topics that could be different or clash with students' beliefs is supported by Gobert (2015) who states that discussing topics that are not related 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 topic rather than explaining the general idea. Hinkel (1999) also mentions that teachers should be able to address culturally sensitive topics in a simple way according to the students' needs. It is essential that students become aware of the culture of the language they learn to be competent communicators. Jandt (2013) believes that communication cannot happen if participants are not aware of each other's cultures. Furthermore, Risager (2007) states that discussing and teaching culture to students gives them a chance to be multilingually and multiculturally aware individuals. Therefore, they will be able to better communicate with people who come from diverse cultures and will avoid miscommunication (Jandt, 2013).

As some teachers mentioned that they avoid the discussion of culturally sensitive topics because students do not feel uncomfortable while discussing topics that they do not discuss at their home, it was essential to ask teachers whether there could reach an agreement with their students. In this regard, survey results show that 32.3% of teachers reach total agreement on the discussion of culturally sensitive topics with their students and 25.8% show average agreement (Chart 11, Appendix F).



This may suggest that some students do not mind the discussion of taboo topics in class, which leads to avoidance of parents' reactions and complaints. In other words, if high school students do not feel offended or irritated from discussing these topics, it means that their teachers cover them well. Conversely, according to the survey results, less than half, 41.9 %, of the students show resistance when discussing culturally sensitive topics. This may be because these students are not open to such discussions in their families or that teachers do not tackle taboo issues in a way that make students listen and focus on the benefits. Some students feel uncomfortable discussing taboo topics as they do not discuss them in their native language (Timina and Butler, 2011). Further studies on students' perceptions and attitudes towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics could be conducted for further details.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This chapter recapitulates the major findings of the study. Some implications that are based on the findings are suggested for teachers, educators, and policy makers. This is followed by the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

### **5.1. Summary of Findings**

This study has investigated 30 ELT teachers' attitudes towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics in three different American curriculum private schools located in three adjacent emirates in the United Arab Emirates.

The first section of this study examined teachers' perspectives on teaching taboos in class. The study findings indicate some positive attitudes and few negative ones of teachers towards teaching and integrating culture in classrooms. The majority of teachers believe that language and culture cannot be separated and that teaching the culture of language is important for students to develop socially and to have efficient communication from people who hold different cultural backgrounds (Jandt, 2013). The same teachers believe that culture is one of the core skills of language. This is similar to what was mentioned by Kramsh (1993) that language contains five skills in which culture is included.

Interestingly, teachers were in wide agreement that culturally sensitive topics should be discussed in class. Few teachers said that they cover such topics in class but they consider students' cultural background; therefore, they cover what is needed for students' bright future. In other words, they discuss the cultural aspects of English in general without going into details that might alienate the students from the target language. Few teachers disagreed with the idea of discussing taboos in class as they believed they are unnecessary and students will not need them later in their lives. Timina and Butler (2011) explain that some teachers do not feel the need to discuss culturally sensitive topics as they are not part of the students' culture. One of the key findings of the study is that the 72.7 % of the young teachers cover culturally sensitive topics while this tendency seems to decline with older teachers. The reason behind this is the dynamic process of taboo language that might transform from a generation to the other (Yamazaki, 2000; Hall, 1990; McDaniel, 2012).

The second section of the study showed that covering culturally sensitive topics might affect teachers' career paths. Thus, 48.4 % of educators chose not to touch upon them to avoid parents' and administrators' complaints (Zarate 1986, as cited by Liddicoat 2013). However, 51.6 % of teachers mentioned that they cover these topics without fearing to be terminated or approached by administrators as they make sure not to offend others and they avoid culture 'clash' with students.

In this study, it is important to mention that teachers' ranking of sensitive topics ranged from religion, sex, and politics to other topics (similar to Timina and Butler, 2011; Evans et al. 2000). Having different opinions on the ranking of culturally sensitive topics suggests that there is no clear idea on what is considered a sensitive topic and what is not in the region. Therefore, it was suggested by teachers that policy makers make clear to them what topics are considered culturally sensitive. By doing so, teachers' career path would not be threatened, as they would be aware of the guidelines they should follow (Zarate 1986, as cited by Liddicoat & Scarino 2013).

The last section of the study examined the effects of discussing culturally sensitive topics on the cognitive development of students. It is reported that by discussing culturally sensitive topics, students will have better chances to talk about such topics when travelling abroad, engaged in discussions with people from diverse backgrounds, and correctly understand their meanings when they encounter them in social media platforms, or foreign films that they may watch (Stroller, 2006; Risager, 1991). Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) stress on the importance of teaching students the different usages of language, such as in socio- cultural contexts. Findings also revealed that discussing culture in class is useful for students to gain cultural competency which leads them to respect and tolerate other cultures.

## **5.2. Implications of the Study**

This study highlights some implications that should be considered. As study shows, teachers avoid discussing culturally sensitive topics to avoid problems or because they believe that they are not beneficial for the students' future. Therefore, teachers should be culturally competent in order to be able to discuss taboo topics comfortably with students by showing tolerance and respect to all cultures. Culturally competent individuals are able to understand, respect and tolerate other cultures. Thus, teachers

who are culturally competent can establish effective intercultural communication with their students and overcome any cultural clash that might hinder or affect the learning process (Risager, 2007)

Furthermore, students should be informed that discussing such topics does not mean that they should confine to the ideas being discussed; however, they should know, respect and tolerate other people's cultures so as to communicate effectively with diverse individuals. I believe that newly recruited teachers, regardless of their nationalities or cultural background, should not be allowed into classrooms before they are given inductions to the local culture, its contents, taboos and sensitive topics and the like. In such inductions, they should be presented with real and practical examples of such topics, given guidance on how to tackle them, which ones to skip and how much coverage should be delivered to students depending on their age level. Educators should be equipped with necessary tools to handle culturally sensitive topics in their classrooms. Such a practice would, if not totally erase any cultural conflicts, reduce students', parents' schools' and other stakeholders' complains concerning new teachers' insensitivity to the specifics of the local culture. Therefore, there will be total agreement between school teachers and administrators on the topics that should be covered in class.

### **5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

It is acknowledged that the current study has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. Due to time constraints, this study investigated the perceptions of a small number of teachers on the discussion of culturally sensitive topics. Future 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 thesis. Furthermore, the interviewees who volunteered to participate were only three which is a major limitation in this study.

Future researchers may also consider how the teachers' and the students' gender impacts the coverage or avoidance of such topics. Further studies could examine students' attitudes as well. They could study students' feelings when discussing taboo topics. Researchers might also survey university students' perspectives, especially the ones who study abroad, in order to know if discussing or not discussing sensitive topics affect their progress in universities. Future studies may

also look at the frequency of female and male students of using culturally sensitive topics at home and school.

In this study, the number of female participants 67.7 % was higher than the males 32.3 %; therefore, it was difficult to study the differences in responses and perspectives between both genders. Future researchers may study if females and males hold the same perspectives when discussing taboo topics. Differences between teachers who work at schools in different emirates could be explored as well to know whether teachers' perspectives who work in more cosmopolitan emirates such as Dubai differ from teachers who work in more conservative emirates such as Ras Al Khaimah. Another interesting field of study is looking and analyzing some of the textbooks used in classrooms in the UAE. More specifically, looking at teachers' edition would be interesting to check and analyze how culturally sensitive topics are addressed and how textbooks' designers advise educators to handle them in class.

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### **IRB Application Form**

- 1. Date of application:** September 2016
- 2. Title of research project:** *ELT Teachers' Perspectives on the Discussion of Culturally Sensitive Topics in the UAE*
- 3. Name, department, email address and telephone number of principal investigator:**  
Omnia Tharwat EL Sakran, [g00038440@alumni.aus.edu](mailto:g00038440@alumni.aus.edu) , +(971) 56 345 56 43
- 4. Co-Investigator(s): name(s), affiliation (e.g. student, staff) email and telephone contacts:**  
Dr. Rana Raddawi, [rraddawi@aus.edu](mailto:rraddawi@aus.edu), +(971) 6 515 2753
- 5. Type of application (see guidelines)**  
☒ **New**    ☐ **Renewal**    ☐ **Modification** (answer #6 only, then attach appropriate materials)
- 6. Modification (if applicable):** \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. Source of research funding :** None
- 8. Abstract:**

Debates in the language-teaching field exist around what contents should be incorporated when teaching English as a second or foreign language, and whether teachers should incorporate culture when teaching a language. This study investigates English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers' perspectives on the discussion on culturally sensitive topics. It will take place in two private schools located in Sharjah and Dubai. It will survey 20 teachers' perspectives, males and females who teach English in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in each school. The results from the first school will be compared with other teachers' views on the same issues from another secondary school in the same region in Sharjah. Surveys and interviews will be anonymous in order to protect participants and add credibility to the study. The study will shed light on the importance of cultural competence and intercultural communication between ELT educators and students and the context they are in to overcome any potential cultural conflict that could hinder the teaching and learning process.



## **9. Participant selection:**

Participants of the study will be 40 female and male school teachers teaching English to secondary school classes (grades 10, 11 & 12). To know about students' perspectives, a representative sample of 20 female and male students will be used for this study. The perceptions of few English language teachers from two public schools will be surveyed to find out about the impact of the work environment rules and restrictions regarding what teachers can or cannot say or cover in class. In addition, in order to compare teachers' values, beliefs and practices of discussing culturally sensitive topics, some of the teachers will be native speakers of the language and others will be non- native speakers.

## **10. Research procedures: (Appendix A)**

Quantitative data will be culled by means of anonymous questionnaires to know whether or not teachers cover culturally sensitive topics mentioned in the English language textbooks that they teach. The questionnaire will be anonymous to assure accuracy and honesty in the responses given.

The survey questionnaires will be provided to the participants by the researcher. In either case, they cannot be identified. The survey takes approximately 10 minutes to complete.

## **11. Compensation and costs:**

The participants will not be compensated for completing the survey. The study itself is not funded.

## **12. Risks to participants:**

Participants will not face any risks by completing the survey questionnaire, as it will be anonymous.

## **13. Benefits:**

This area of research would be of concern to all ELT teachers especially in the Middle East who might be facing the same critical issues in their respective classrooms. It will also be a great help to ELT teachers, as they need to know what is acceptable and what is not to teach in the UAE.

## **14. Obtaining informed consent:**

This study presents no risks or harm to participants and therefore it does not require an informed consent. In other words, there is no

question that refers to the identity of the teacher or the institution they work in. Furthermore, Participants will not face any risks by completing the survey questionnaire, as it will be anonymous.

#### **15. Confidentiality of data:**

The survey is anonymous and does not touch upon the participants' personal information. It only asks for the participants' age, gender, ethnicity and years of teaching experience. Participants will be asked for their names. The participants will be referred to collectively as percentages, e.g. 10 % of the participants... etc.

#### **16. Public release of data:**

1. The data of this study will not be released or published unless a permission from participants is obtained.

[If your research includes an analysis of already existing data (secondary data), also answer the following:]

**[If the research includes analysis of existing/secondary data, answer the following:]**

#### **17. Description and source of secondary data:**

**18. Public data:** [If secondary data are publicly available without restriction state that. If not, describe access restrictions and any confidentiality agreements required by the data provider.]

**19. Personal identifiers in secondary data:** [Are there any? Do the data contain elements that might permit deductive disclosure of identify? Does a name/ID linking file exist? If so, who has access to it?]

### **Signatures**

#### **Investigators**

*Signature*

*Date*

Principal Investigator \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Co-Investigator(s) \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Routing**

Department Chair \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Dean \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Vice Provost for Research &  
Graduate Studies \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Note:**

No research may be done before IRB approval has been obtained.

**Submission**

***Checklist (clickable in Word format): items to include with application:***

- ☐ Copy of research protocol, grant application or thesis proposal
- ☐ AUS IRB Consent Form
- ☐ Survey Forms [if applicable]
- ☐ IRB Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent form [if applicable]
- ☐ Recruitment materials, fact sheets or other materials to be distributed to participants
- ☐ Focus group or interview guide [if applicable]
- ☐ [Other as appropriate]

Send hard copy to:  
M108, First Floor, Main Building

Or

Scan and send soft copy of this form to: [research@aus.edu](mailto:research@aus.edu)

***Queries:***

Office of Research & Graduate Studies  
M108, First Floor, Main Building (next to Dining Hall)  
Tel: 515 2208

## Appendix B: Samples of Culturally Sensitive Topics


### Sample 1: Ham

**Spelling**  
Words with Short *a* and Long *a*: Word Meaning

cape	bake	mad	bag	rake
ate	back	cap	<u>ham</u>	made

**Questions**  
Write a spelling word to answer each question.

1. What can you use to make a pile of leaves? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What can taste good on a sandwich? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What can you put on your head? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What can you put your lunch in? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What word means not happy? \_\_\_\_\_



**Sentences to Complete**  
Write a spelling word to complete each sentence.

6. I \_\_\_\_\_ an apple for lunch.
7. Dad \_\_\_\_\_ a fire at camp.
8. We drove \_\_\_\_\_ home after the show.
9. Kate wore a black \_\_\_\_\_ on her back.
10. I can \_\_\_\_\_ the bread in the oven.

Source: Treasure Spelling Book. Published by Macmillan/ McGraw- Hill.

- A **question** is a sentence that asks something.  
It ends with a question mark.
- A **statement** is a sentence that tells something.  
It ends with a period.
- Begin each statement and question with a capital letter.

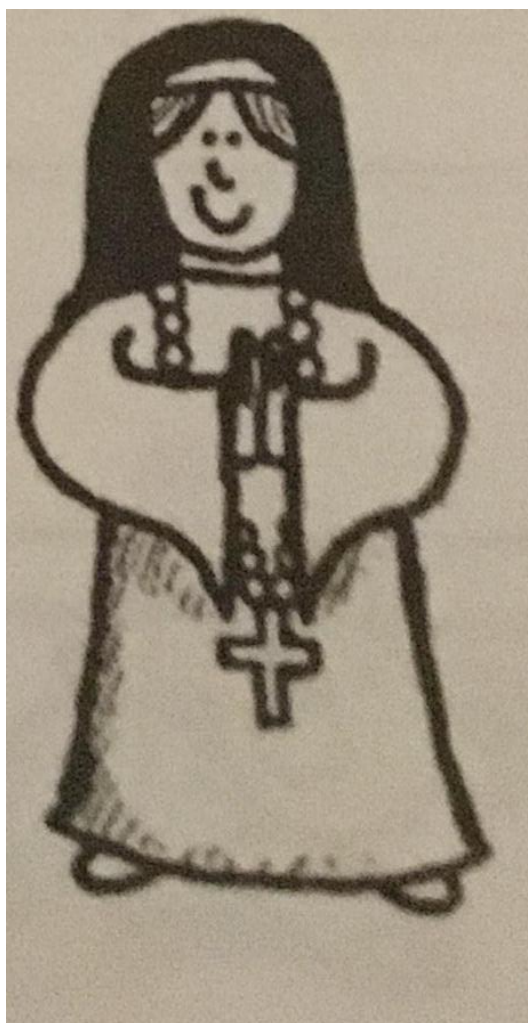
Do you have a pencil?      I have paper.

**Read the sentences. Circle each question and underline each statement.**

1. Do you have homework?
2. I have lots of homework.
3. What do you have to do?
4. I have to read a story.
5. The story is about a pig.
6. Does Frank have homework?
7. Frank has to write a story.
8. What kind of story will he write?
9. Will he write a funny story?
10. No, he will write a scary one.



Sample 3: A saint wearing a cross



Source: Customized Language Skills Book



## Sample 4: (Pigs)

### Before Reading

#### Jabberwocky

Poem by Lewis Carroll

#### Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out

Poem by Shel Silverstein

#### Two Limericks

Poems by Edward Lear

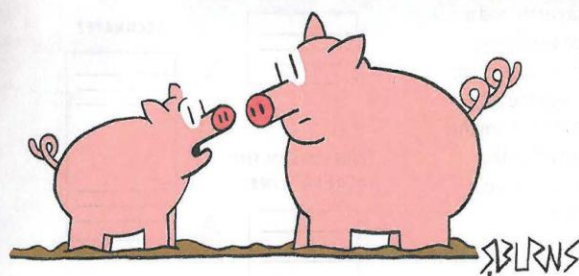
## When does NONSENSE make sense?

### COMMON CORE

**RL.3** Analyze how particular elements interact. **RL.4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds on a specific verse or stanza of a poem. **RL.5** Analyze how a poem's form or structure contributes to its meaning.

Is there a strong feeling that you just can't put into words or a hilarious sight that is impossible to describe? What if you could invent a new word that would capture the idea exactly? A nonsense word, like some of those used in the poems that follow, might be just what you need.

**BRAINSTORM** With a partner, think of something you've never been able to describe clearly. It might be the bouncy movement a squirrel uses when it hops along a fence or the emotion you feel when a bully gets suspended. Invent a nonsense word that captures the idea perfectly, and then write a sentence that uses that word. Share your sentence with the rest of the class, and see if others can guess what it means.



"Ommymay, why do we alktay so unnyfay?"

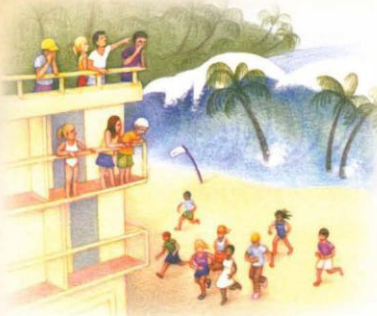
604

© Shannon Burns/www.CartoonStock.com

Source: Holt McDougal Literature. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Sample 5: (Religion and traditions: a girl in a swimming suit)

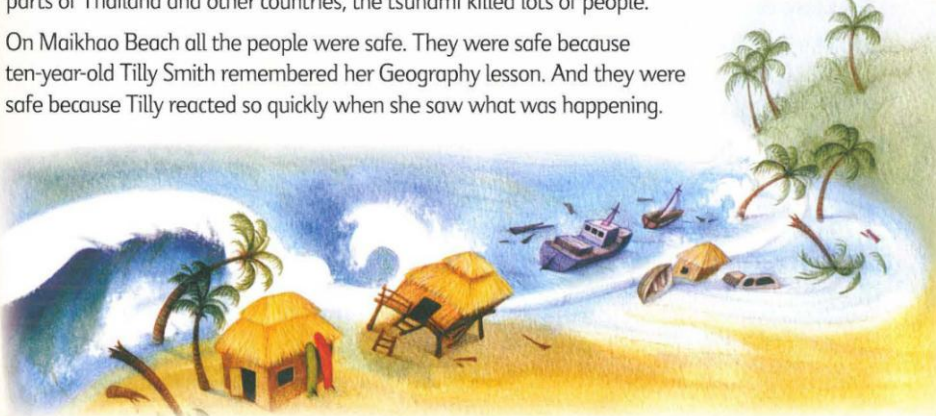
3



'Mummy, we must get off the beach now! I think there's going to be a tsunami!' Tilly shouted. At first, her parents didn't understand. 'Mum! Dad! A big wave! It's dangerous! Let's run!' Tilly shouted. When people heard that, they started to shout, 'Off the beach. Run! A dangerous wave is coming!' Tilly and her parents ran away from the beach. They ran back to the hotel and went up to higher floors. All the other people ran away from the beach too. They followed Tilly and her family.

Then the water came back. It was very high and fast and there was a lot of noise. The water broke trees, huts and small houses. In many parts of Thailand and other countries, the tsunami killed lots of people.

On Maikhao Beach all the people were safe. They were safe because ten-year-old Tilly Smith remembered her Geography lesson. And they were safe because Tilly reacted so quickly when she saw what was happening.



3

Think!

**Work in pairs. How many different endings can you find for these sentences?**

- 1 Tilly was happy in Thailand because ...
- 2 Tilly was on the beach. She looked around and saw ...
- 3 When Tilly saw that the water rushed out, she ...
- 4 The other people ...
- 5 Tilly saved many lives because ...

**4 Work in pairs. Choose a role: the reporter or Tilly. Plan and act out an interview.**

Where were you ... ?

Who did you go with?

What were you doing when ... ?

How did you know ... ?

What did you do?

Where did you go when the big wave ... ?

Reading skills

41

Source: Super Minds. Cambridge University Press (2012).

56



Sample 6: (Politics: “in Israel” was shaded black)



Illustration by Jérôme Lagarrigue.

# Sit-Ins

Margaret Walker

*Greensboro, North Carolina, in the Spring of 1960*

- You were our first brave ones to defy their dissonance of hate  
With your silence  
With your willingness to suffer  
Without violence  
5 Those first bright young to fling your names across pages  
Of new southern history  
With courage and faith, convictions, and intelligence **B**  
The first to blaze a flaming path for justice  
And awaken consciences  
10 Of these stony ones.

*Come, Lord Jesus, Bold Young Galilean<sup>1</sup>  
Sit Beside this Counter, Lord, with Me!* **C**

1. **Galilean** (gāl'ä-lä'än): According to the Bible, Jesus lived near the Sea of Galilee, in Israel.

## ▲ Analyze Visuals

What can you **infer** about why the woman and child might be walking away from the counter?

## **B** REPETITION

Reread lines 1–7. What does the repetition help you to understand about the people Walker is describing?

## **C** HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What historical details does Walker cite in the poem?

I WANT TO WRITE / SIT-INS 859

Cross out "in Israel".

## Sample 7: (music and dancing: removed topic from curriculum)

**Skills**

**1** Listen and choose the correct words.



**1** Buick / Chevy / Cadillac



**2** Jive skirt / Swing skirt / Boogie skirt



**3** Jukebox / Jivebox / Music box

**2** Listen again and answer the questions.

- When was the Cadillac Series 62 built?
- How long was it?
- What influenced the fashion of the fifties?
- What did a lot of parents think of swing skirts?
- How many records did a jukebox hold?
- How did you work a jukebox?

**3** Talk about what you like best: the Cadillac, the swing skirt or the jukebox. Why?

I like the jukebox because ...

**Skills**

**1** Look at the pictures and answer the questions.

- What is the girl with the guitar doing?
- What do the boy and the other girls think of her?

**2** Read, listen and check your answers.

**WANTED**  
ELECTRIC GUITARIST  
FOR THE  
**METAL KINGS**  
WE'RE GOING TO BE BIG!  
PHONE MISHA ON 0555 434

The poster was Misha's dream come true. She phoned and arranged to meet Mike. She was nervous as she walked into the room because the band looked like real rock stars. 'I'm looking for Mike,' said Misha. 'I've come to join his band.' 'I'm Mike,' said a man. 'Let's hear you play,' Misha started to play, but after 20 seconds Mike asked her to stop. 'You play well,' he said, 'but you're not loud enough. We're playing for Don Parsons next week. I don't think you'll help us get a contract with him.' Misha left. She was sad.

The poster was Misha's dream come true. She arranged to meet Katia that afternoon. When she arrived, she was nervous. 'I'm looking for Katia,' Misha said, 'I'd like to join her band.' 'Oh,' said the girl, 'I'm Katia. Sing me a song.' After 10 seconds Katia didn't want to hear any more. 'You sing well,' she said, 'but you don't look right. We're singing for Don Parsons next week. I don't think you'll help us get a contract with him.'

Two weeks later, Misha was playing her guitar in the town centre. She enjoyed playing for the shoppers. She looked up and noticed a well-dressed man watching her. When she finished, he came up and introduced himself. 'I'm Don Parsons,' he said. 'I'm a record producer. I think you could be a star.' Misha couldn't believe it. 'But, I'm too quiet to be a star.' 'No you're not,' Don said. 'Lots of bands think that if they make a loud noise they're good. I saw The Metal Kings last week – they were loud, but they weren't good.' Misha still couldn't believe it. 'But I don't look like a star.' 'You look perfect and you can sing,' Don said. 'I saw Girlz last week – they looked good, but they couldn't sing.' 'But, but, but ...,' said Misha. 'But ... nothing! You've got it all,' said Don. 'If you want to be a star, I can help you make it happen.'

**3** Match the sentence halves to make the summary.

1 First Misha sees an advert for	a a guitarist.
2 They are looking for	b a singer.
3 Mike thinks she	c doesn't look right.
4 Next Misha sees an advert for	d while she is playing the guitar.
5 They are looking for	e is too quiet.
6 The girls think she	f is perfect!
7 Misha meets Don Parsons	g The Metal Kings.
8 Don Parsons thinks Misha	h a band called Girlz.

40 Listening and speaking

Value: not giving up: reading 41



Sample 8: (Relationships)

# UNIT

4

## Who's that boy?



**In this unit**

**You learn**

- *have got*
- the article *a/an*
- parts of the body
- countries and nationalities

**and then you can**

- talk about nationality
- describe people
- talk about possessions

35

1
**Listen and read.**

**Kate** I've got some news.

**Nadia** Oh? What?

**Kate** There's a new boy in my brother's class!

**Nadia** Oh really?

**Kate** Yeah, he's French, I think. Or Spanish, perhaps – I'm not sure. His name's Alain.

**Nadia** Alain? Well, he's probably French. It's a French name. Is he good-looking?

**Kate** Yeah – he's tall, and he's got fair hair and blue eyes. And he's 14.

**Nadia** Nice! Has he got an accent?

**Kate** Yes, he has. It's great. I think foreign accents are really cool!

**Nadia** Me too! Oh look! Is that him?

**Kate** Yes, it is – and he's with Jennifer Parks!

**Nadia** Never mind, Kate. Let's go to *Jerry's* for an ice cream. They've got great ice cream there!


**Kate** Yeah, good idea. But I haven't got any money!

**Nadia** That's OK, Kate. The ice creams are on me!

50
UNIT 4

Source: More! Level 1 (Book by Gunter Gerngross and Herbert Puchta, 2008)




Time to present

## A Wanted Poster

**1** CD 3  
14 Look at the poster and listen to the presentation. Make a note of three differences you hear.

### WANTED

### BETTY THE COYOTE



21 years old. 1.78 metres tall. Dark brown hair. Round face. Green eyes. Small nose. Bad teeth. Sometimes wears a red scarf and a black belt made of leather. Carries two pistols in brown holsters. Bring Betty the Coyote to any sheriff in Arizona. 500 dollars are waiting for you.

**Think about it**

- Work with a friend. Think of a name for the person on your Wanted Poster.
- Draw a picture of the person. Think about what the person looks like and what clothes he or she wears.
- Draw a picture of the person on a big piece of paper. Colour it in.
- Make notes about the person, where he or she is from, his or her clothes, other things he or she has got (horse? pistols?).
- Think of how much the sheriff will pay for the person on your Wanted Poster.

**Prepare it**

- On a piece of paper, write the text for your poster with your partner.
- Show it to your teacher to help you with the language.
- Write the text on your poster.

**Present it**

- When you present your poster to the class, do not just read out the text. Say a little bit more.
  - This is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Be careful!
  - There's a reward of \_\_\_\_\_.

**Tips for presenters**

When you give a presentation, you should speak a little bit louder than normal. Make sure everybody in your class can hear and understand what you are saying.

**68** Communication

Sample 10: Relationships and kisses

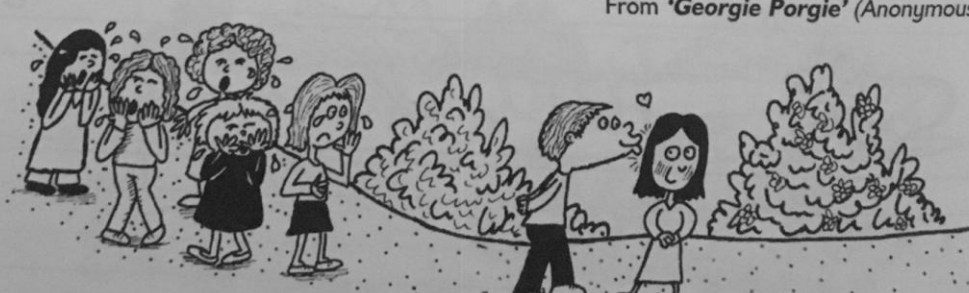
unit **12** **Extension Resource** **Yellow Level** Nelson Handwriting

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Trace and write the poem.

Georgie Porgie,  
pudding and pie,  
Kissed the girls  
and made them cry.

From 'Georgie Porgie' (Anonymous)



Practising joining from the letter o.

Source: Nelson Handwriting Book (Grade 2)



Sample 11: Contextualization (names)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Grammar  
Plural Pronouns

- A **plural noun** names more than one person, place, or thing.
- Pronouns **we**, **you**, and **they** can take the place of a plural noun or more than one noun or pronoun.

Rattlesnakes are dangerous.      They are dangerous.  
Emma and I saw a rattlesnake.      We saw a rattlesnake.

Circle the correct pronoun in ( ) to complete each sentence.

1. Jamal and Nora are going to catch the snakes. We're glad (you, she) are here, Jamal and Nora!
2. Now (we, I) are safe!
3. Did you hear the wolves? (We, They) are howling.
4. Wolves don't eat people, so (we, she) are not in danger.
5. Mom and I hope to see wolf pups. (They, He) are so cute!
6. Have (you, she) ever seen a wolf pup?
7. How big does (it, they) grow?
8. (I, We) are having so much fun in the desert.

Source: Customized Grammar Book

## Sample 12: Contextualization (religion)


Date \_\_\_\_\_


Quotation Marks


- Quotation Marks set off the exact words of a speaker.
- Use quotation marks ( " " ) at the beginning and end of what a person says.

Ali said, "Let's go and pray in a masjid."

Put the speech into the sentences with the quotation marks.

 My friend is sick and she is in the hospital.

 Let's visit and get her some flowers.

 MashaAllah, visiting sick people is Sunnah.

Source: Customized Grammar Book

## Appendix C: 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 school. It explores their attitudes towards discussing culturally sensitive topics with students during class. I 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 in a Master Degree thesis; thus for strictly academic purposes. 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 c) 30-39 d) 40- 49 e) 50+
- 3) Ethnicity (cultural background, e.g. Lebanese, African American...etc.):  
.....
- 4) What is your first language?  
a) Arabic b) English c) Other: (specify).....
- 5) Qualification: a) A bachelor in ..... B. Master Degree in .....  
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





**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

Other action: (specify): .....

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

a) Yes

b) No

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

a) Total

b) average

c) none

**18) How much is there agreement on taboo 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 taboo 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 (circle 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 D: 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 affect the materials covered in class?**
- 6) Have you trained teachers on how to discuss culturally sensitive topics with students?**
- 7) Do you think it is useful for students to discuss culturally sensitive topics?**

**1. How do you define culture?**

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.

**2. Can language and culture be separated? Why or why not?**

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!

Language helps culture to survive especially across generations. Although we can try and err to understand social norms, we can possibly learn a lot more when we observe, speak or read about cultures.

**3. Are there any clear or written guidelines on teaching culturally sensitive topics?**

Curriculum specialists and teachers have been instructed to refrain from using inappropriate content. I have not personally seen a document that explicitly outlines what is construed as inappropriate but in my training I was told to pay attention to politically insensitive or inaccurate materials, e.g., Israel is inappropriate Palestine is appropriate. Persian Gulf is wrong, Arabian Gulf is correct. The overarching rule is Islamic values should be promoted not compromised. Topics relevant to sex, romance, dating and drinking should be avoided. Photographs should be decent. ...

There was a form, however, that we used when we evaluated textbooks. It allowed the curriculum specialist to report textbooks as either in compliance with or against UAE rules and regulations. I can't share that form with you for obvious reasons.

**4. How often do you encounter culturally sensitive topics?**

We never encounter any sensitive topic, but if we do, we remove it completely after consulting others whether such topic is sensitive or not. In the public sector, 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.

**5. What do you think affect the materials covered in class?**

Teachers' beliefs strongly affect what they seem to cover in class and what they skip.

**6. Have you trained teachers on how to discuss culturally sensitive topics with students?**

I never trained teachers to tackle such issues.

**7. Do you think it is useful for students to discuss culturally sensitive topics?**

It is useful to discuss culturally sensitive topics as these students will be culturally competent. They will develop intellectually as well."

## Appendix E: 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:



## Appendix F: Charts

Chart 1: Relation between culture and language

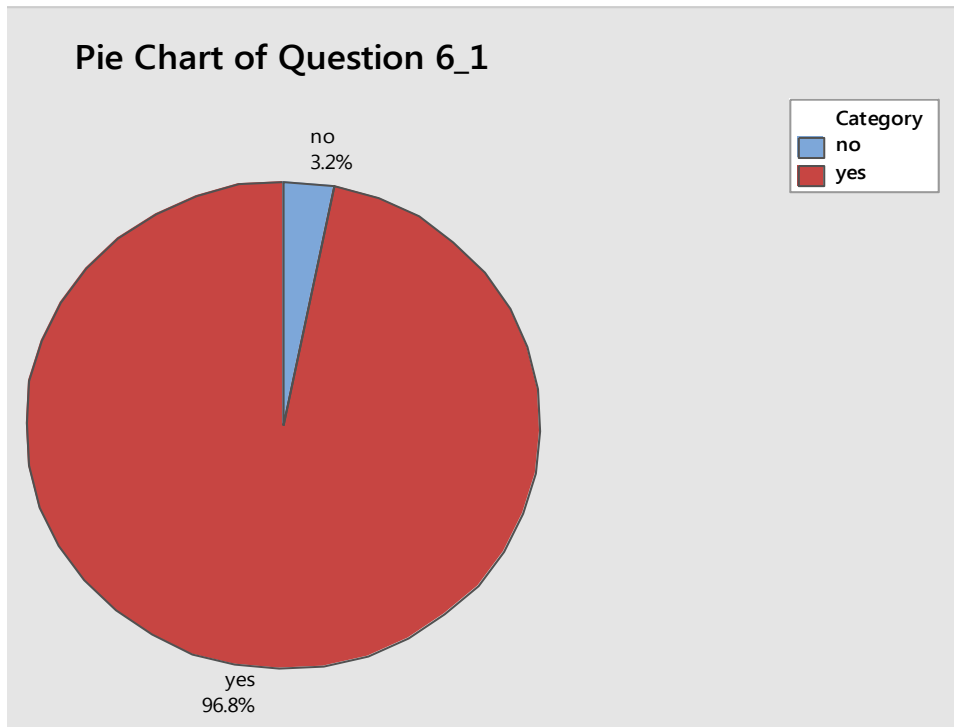


Chart 2: Can language be taught without culture?

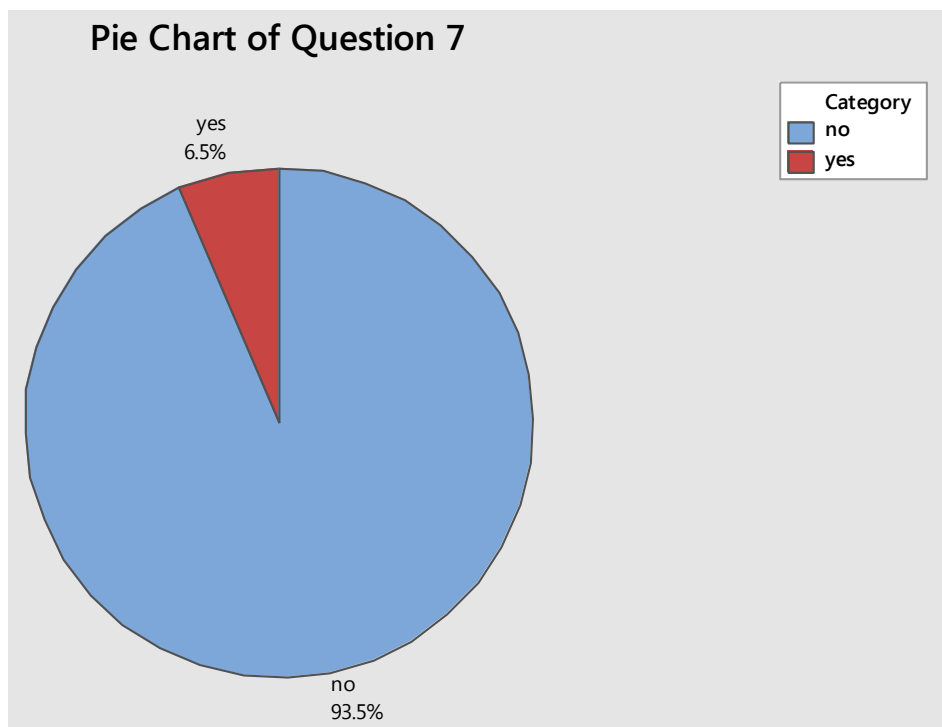


Chart 3: How often do you encounter sensitive topics?

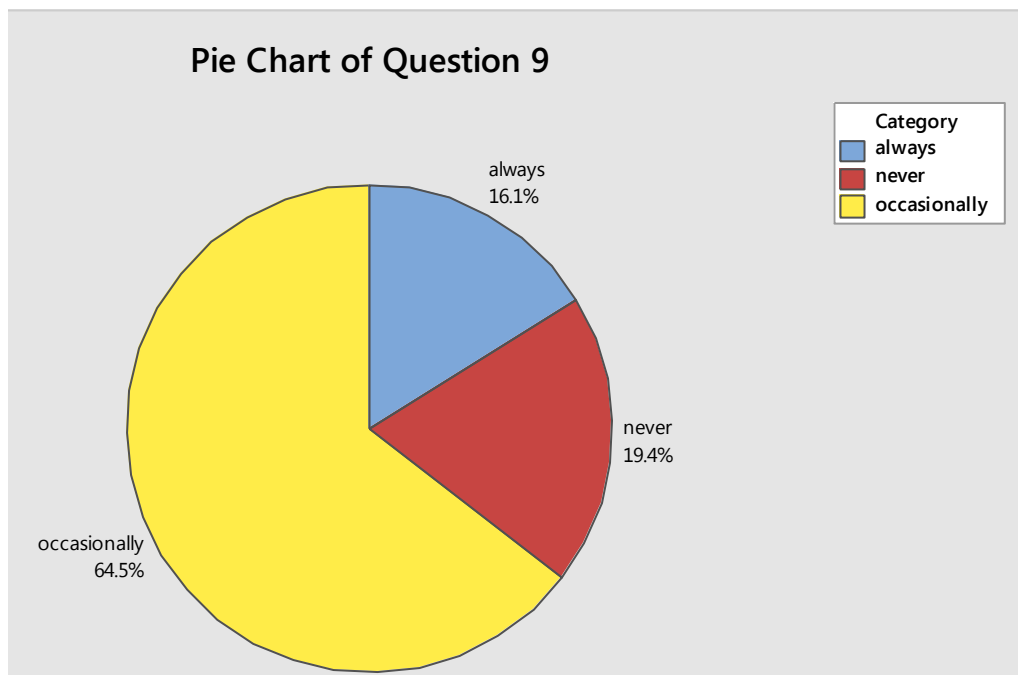


Chart 4: what do you do when you encounter them?

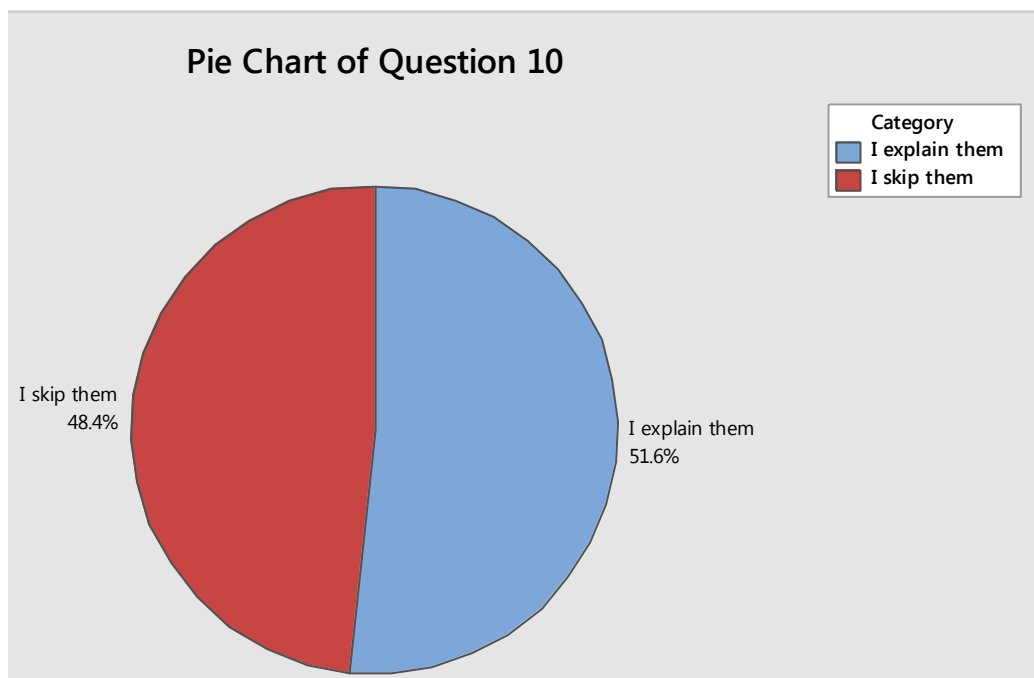


Chart 5: Ranking of culturally sensitive topics

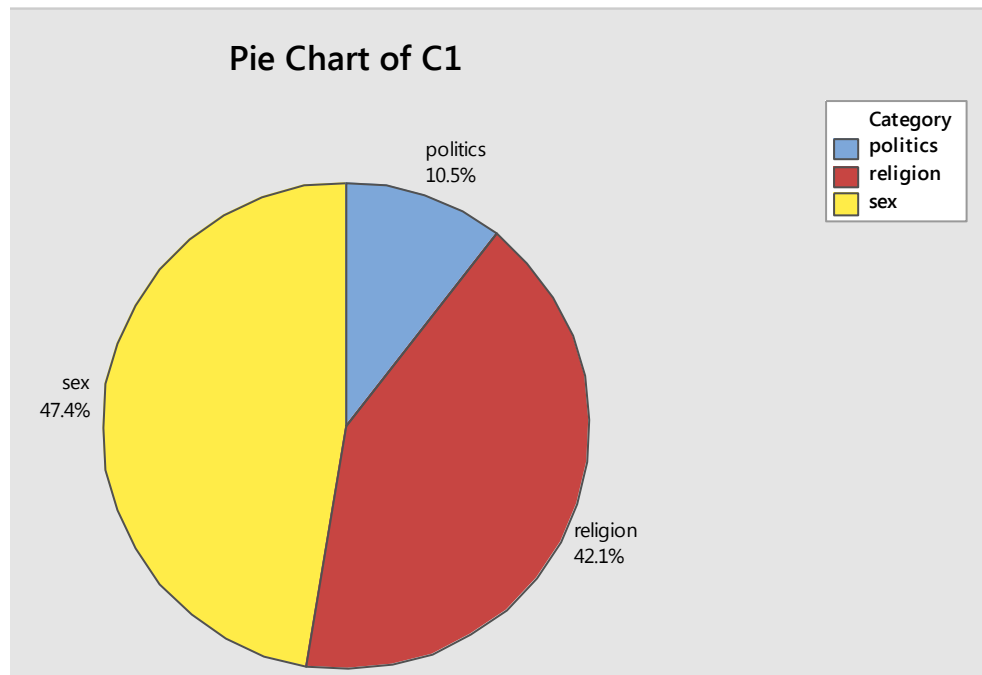


Chart 6: Facing institutional restrictions

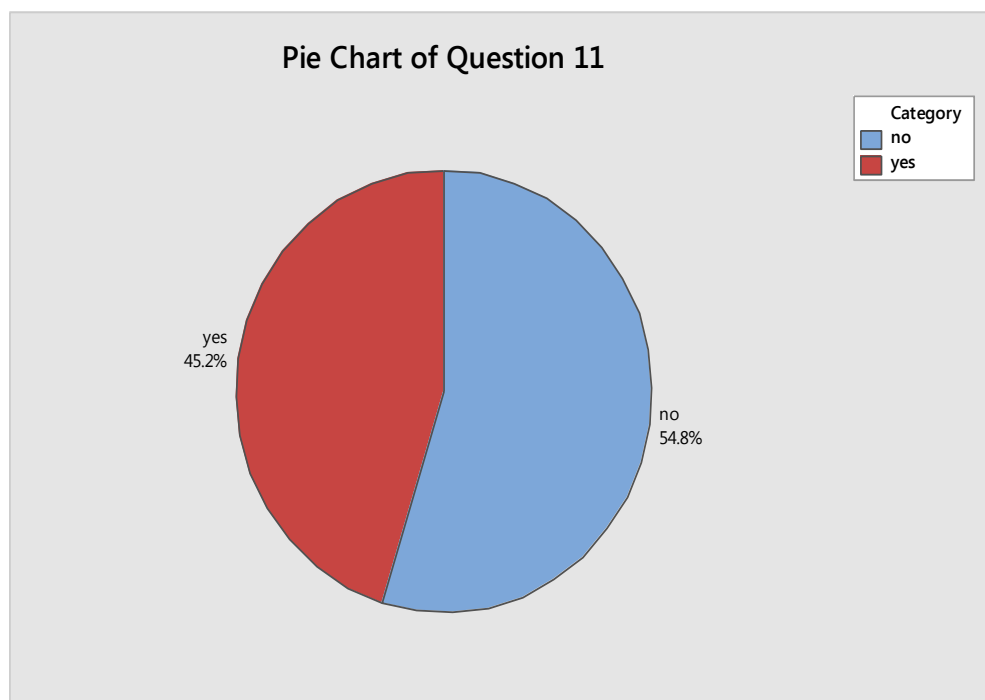


Chart 7: Teachers who were warned against covering a sensitive topic

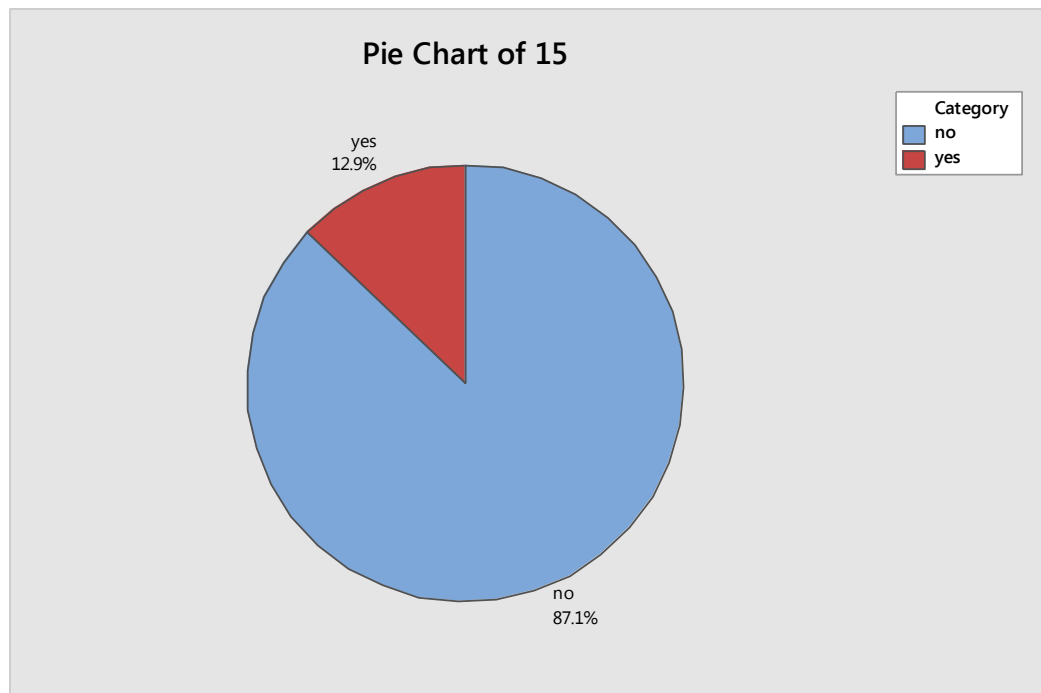


Chart 8: Teachers who received training or guidance

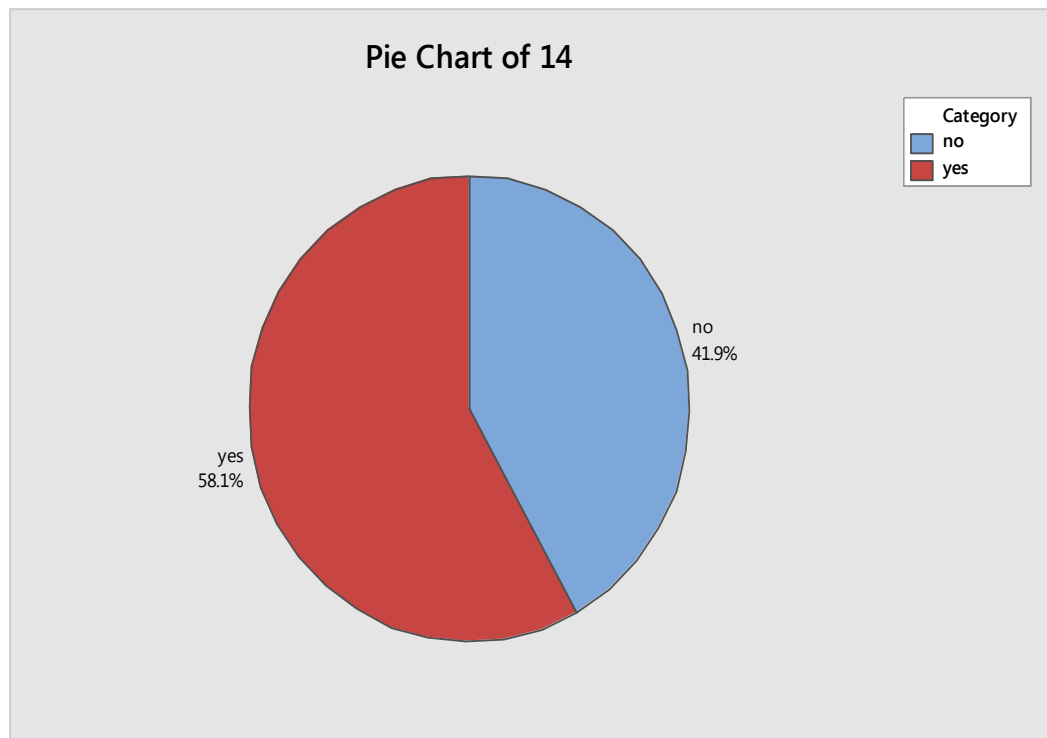


Chart 9: Agreement between teachers and schools

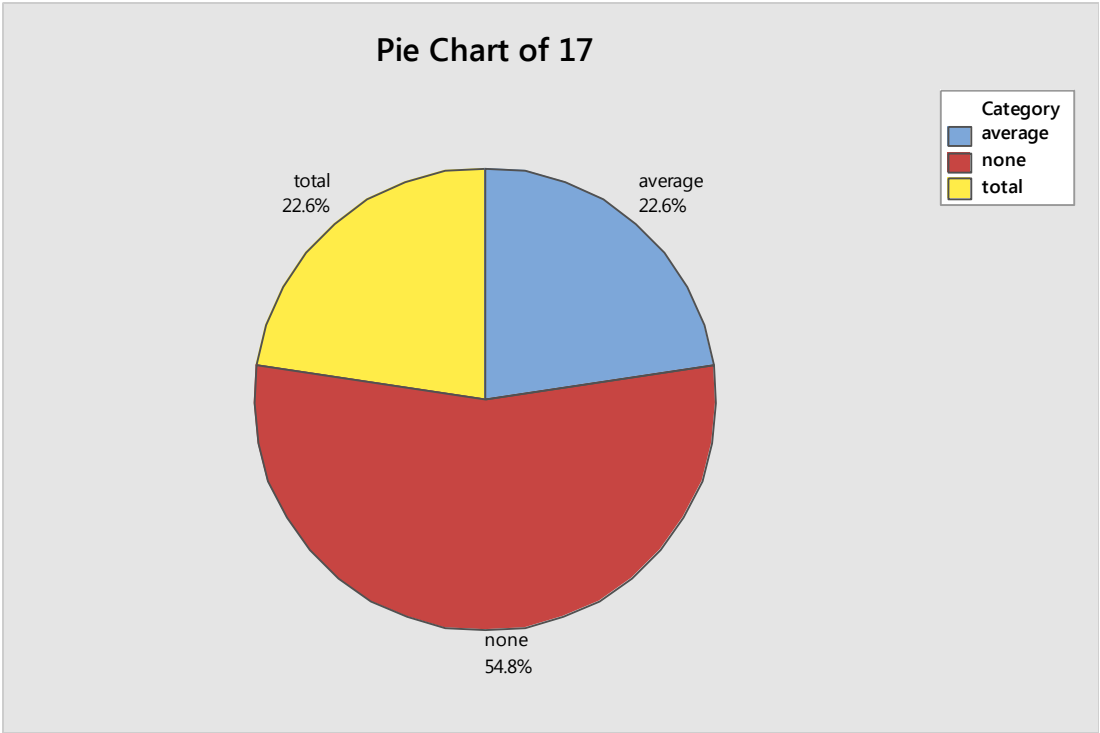


Chart 10: Usefulness of covering culture sensitive topics

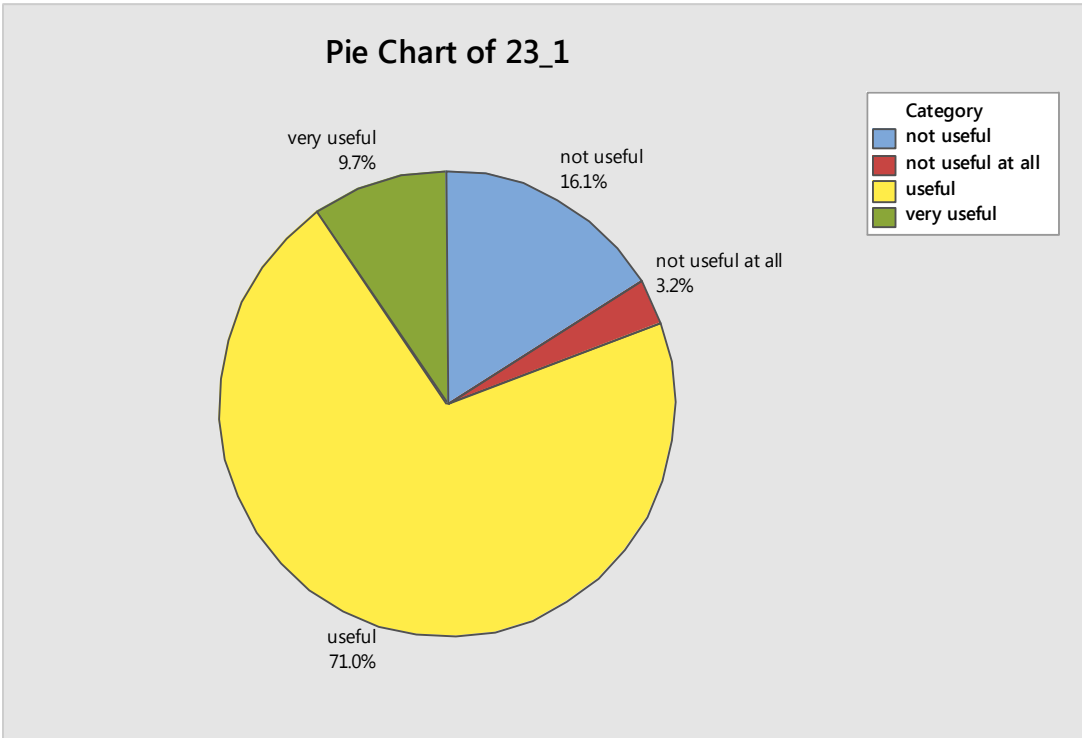


Chart 11: Agreement between teachers and students

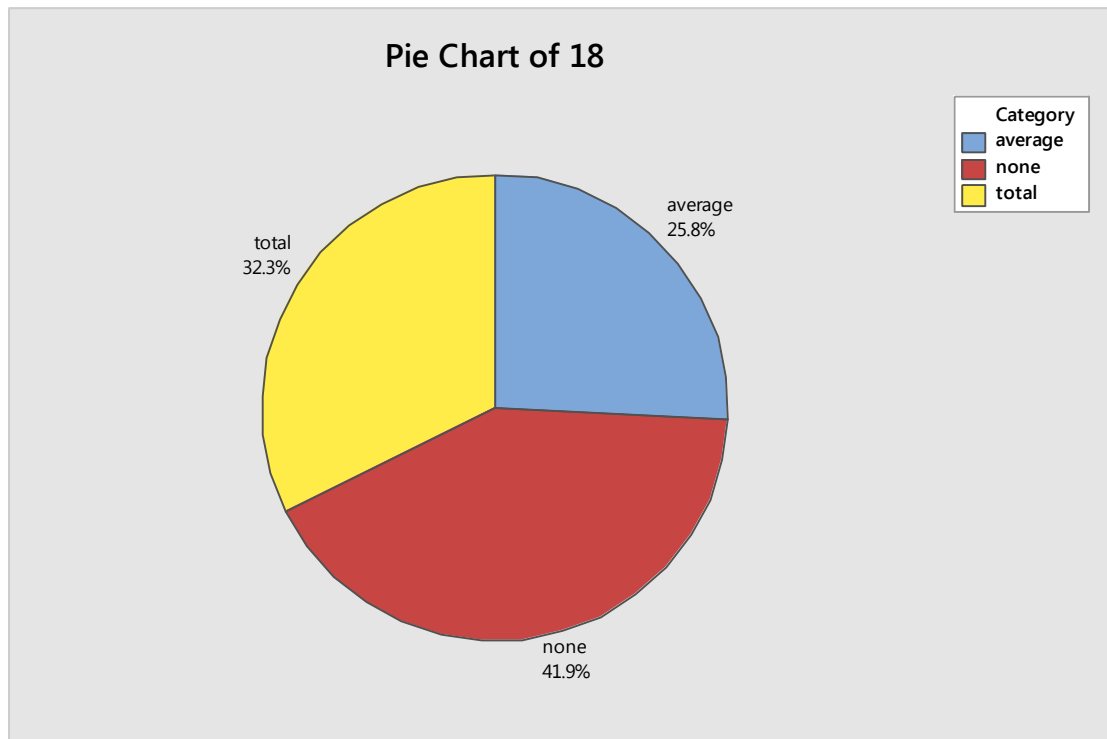
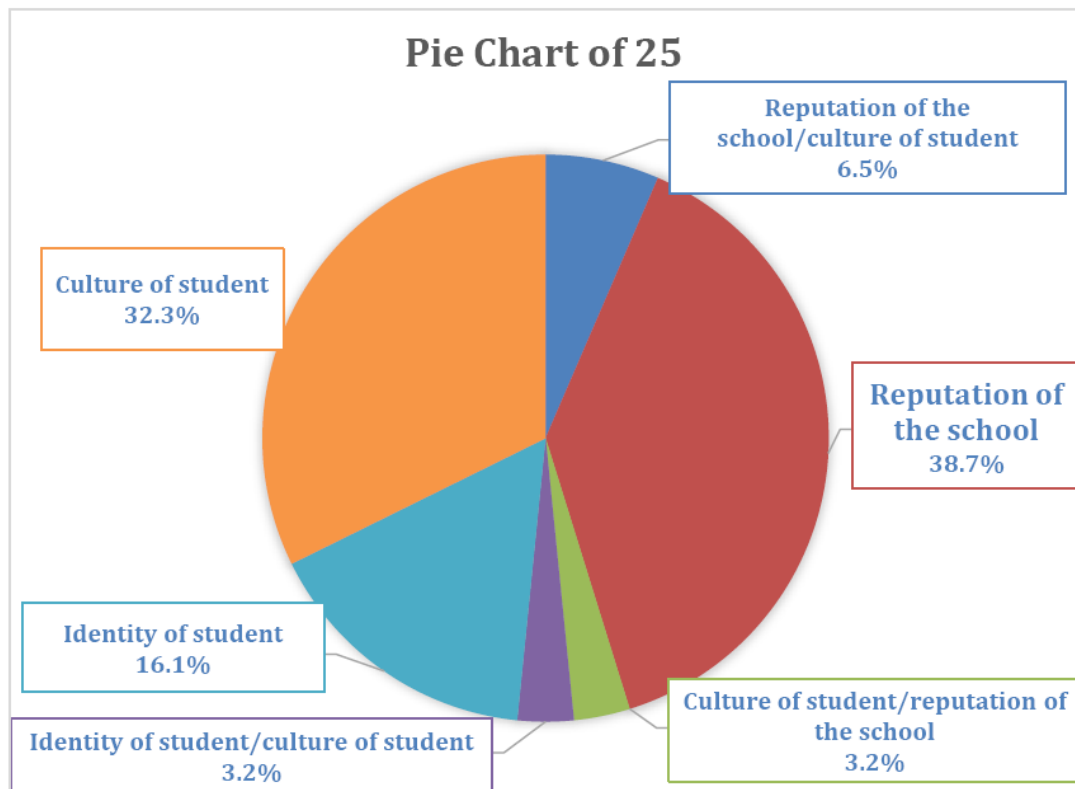


Chart 12: Effects of the discussion of culturally sensitive topics on students



## **Vita**

Omnia Tharwat El-Sakran was born in 1992, in Egypt. She traveled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) when she was three years old, and she has been living there for almost 20 years. She received all her education in private schools in the UAE. In 2009, El-Sakran joined the American University of Sharjah (AUS) to start her journey with the Bachelor Degree. She graduated in 2013. She majored in English Language and Literature, and she minored in Translation.

In 2014, El-Sakran started her professional career at a private school in Sharjah, UAE. While doing so, she received the Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) from the British Council. Immediately after finishing the CELTA course, she started her second journey at the AUS and joined the MA TESOL program. During these years, she changed her place of work twice to work at different schools in Sharjah and Dubai.