

REVIEW

Intercultural Competence in English Language Teaching: Navigating Cultural Taboos in the Arab Gulf

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of cultural taboos on English Language Teaching (ELT) within the Arab Gulf region, where societal norms and Islamic traditions significantly shape pedagogical approaches. It identifies educators' primary challenges, such as navigating culturally sensitive topics like religion, gender roles, and family dynamics, which impact curriculum design, classroom interactions, and material selection. A recent literature review and thematic analysis reveal strategies for addressing these challenges, including contextualised materials, role-playing, and reflective exercises. These methods indirectly enable teachers to engage with cultural taboos, fostering student participation while respecting local sensitivities. The study emphasises the importance of intercultural competence as a critical skill for educators, equipping them to mediate cultural dynamics and create inclusive learning environments. Findings indicate that culturally responsive teaching facilitates language acquisition and promotes empathy and understanding among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Implications include the need for ongoing professional development for ELT practitioners, focusing on strategies to balance cultural respect with pedagogical objectives. Addressing these issues, the research contributes to advancing culturally competent language education, offering practical solutions for integrating cultural sensitivity into ELT practices in the Gulf region and beyond.

Keywords: Cultural Taboos; English Language Teaching (ELT); Intercultural Competence; Arab Gulf Countries; Pedagogical Strategies; Culturally Responsive Teaching; Inclusive Education

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1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Arab Gulf countries is deeply intertwined with the region's cultural and socio-religious fabric, where traditional values, shaped by Islamic norms, coexist with the demands of globalisation. The area, encompassing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, presents a unique context where local customs and Islamic traditions play a pivotal role in determining acceptable behaviours and discussion topics, and educational practices are often mediated by cultural taboos^[1-3]. These taboos—relating to topics such as religion, gender roles, and family dynamics—pose significant challenges for educators, influencing curriculum design, classroom interactions, and the selection of teaching materials. Consequently, educators in the Gulf must navigate these complexities with a culturally sensitive pedagogical approach that accommodates local values while fostering intercultural competence, particularly when addressing topics related to religion, gender roles, or family dynamics—subjects often regarded as taboo^[4, 5]. Such cultural norms impact the selection of teaching materials, classroom practices, and even teachers' interactions with students, creating challenges for delivering inclusive and effective instruction. For instance, educational materials originating from Western contexts may inadvertently conflict with local values, risking resistance from students and their families^[6].

Intercultural competence, as defined by Byram^[7], involves a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures. In the Gulf context, where collectivist values prioritise social harmony and group cohesion, contrasting with the individualistic ideals often promoted in Western pedagogical paradigms^[8-10] the development of such competence requires educators to be particularly attuned to the cultural underpinnings of their students' worldviews. For example, topics considered neutral or essential in Western educational settings—such as discussions of gender equality or individual freedom—may conflict with local norms, potentially creating discomfort or resistance in the classroom^[6]. Understandably, the role of teachers in this context is particularly complex. They are language instructors and cultural mediators who must balance professional

responsibilities and the expectations of students, parents, and institutions^[11].

Moreover, the Gulf's diverse demographic makeup adds another layer of complexity. Many classrooms feature a mix of expatriate and local students, each bringing their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds to the learning environment. This diversity can enrich classroom discussions or exacerbate cultural tensions if not managed effectively. Expatriate teachers, who often lack familiarity with local customs and sensitivities, face particular challenges in navigating these dynamics, underscoring the importance of professional development programs emphasising cultural awareness^[12].

The globalisation of English as a lingua franca has further heightened the importance of integrating interculturality into EFL teaching in the Gulf. As English becomes a critical tool for international communication, trade, and education, regional governments have increasingly emphasised the need for language proficiency among their citizens^[1]. However, this emphasis on English as a global language must be balanced with respect for local traditions and identities. For instance, educational policies inspired by global trends often advocate for communicative and learner-centred approaches. However, these methods may clash with Gulf societies' hierarchical and teacher-centred norms^[13].

Cultural taboos cannot be overstated in shaping ELT practices. These taboos influence not only what is taught but also how it is taught, requiring educators to adopt innovative strategies that address sensitive topics indirectly. For example, contextualised teaching materials, such as literature or films that align with Gulf cultural norms, have facilitated discussions around challenging subjects without breaching cultural boundaries. Similarly, role-playing exercises and reflective activities provide students with safe spaces to explore intercultural issues while respecting their cultural identities^[14].

This study investigates the intricate interplay between cultural taboos and English language teaching in the Arab Gulf region, focusing on the role of intercultural competence in fostering inclusive and effective educational practices. This research aims to equip educators with the tools and strategies needed to navigate the region's unique cultural dynamics by synthesising insights from recent literature and proposing a framework for culturally responsive pedagogy.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on interculturality in education, offering practical solutions for addressing cultural sensitivities while promoting mutual understanding and global engagement.

2. Literature Review

This chapter explores the existing body of knowledge on cultural taboos in ELT, focusing on their implications for intercultural competence and pedagogical strategies. It examines how cultural taboos, shaped by socio-cultural norms, influence classroom discourse and educational practices globally and within the Arab Gulf. The chapter also reviews theoretical frameworks, such as Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model, alongside practical strategies like contextualised materials and interactive techniques. By synthesising these insights, the review establishes a foundation for the proposed framework, highlighting the critical role of cultural sensitivity in fostering inclusive and effective language learning environments.

2.1. Understanding Cultural Taboos in ELT

Cultural taboos encompass sensitive topics such as sexuality, religion, and politics, which vary significantly across regions. These taboos profoundly impact English language teaching (ELT) by shaping classroom discourse and influencing pedagogical choices. For example, Keller et al.^[15] highlighted that cultural taboos are critical yet challenging to integrate into language teaching due to their socio-cultural significance. Avoiding these topics can limit learners' exposure to intercultural perspectives, as observed by Gobert^[5], who noted that English teachers in the Arab Gulf often refrain from promoting target-language cultural values that may conflict with local traditions.

The dichotomy between collectivism and individualism presents a unique challenge in the Gulf region, where collectivist cultures emphasise group harmony over individual expression^[8]. Such cultural dynamics necessitate nuanced approaches to teaching sensitive topics, where learners' identities and social norms are respected^[16]. Teachers' awareness of these cultural underpinnings is critical for avoiding conflicts and fostering inclusive classroom environments.

2.2. Intercultural Competence in ELT

Intercultural competence is pivotal in addressing cultural taboos within diverse classrooms. Byram's^[7] Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model highlights the importance of awareness, adaptability, and empathy in navigating cultural differences. This framework underpins teachers' ability to mediate classroom interactions sensitively, ensuring cultural norms are respected without compromising pedagogical objectives. Santana and Betancourt^[17] emphasised that intercultural competence allows teachers to foster dialogue around sensitive topics, bridging gaps between learners' cultural backgrounds.

Feedback practices further illustrate the interplay between intercultural competence and pedagogy. Hyland and Hyland^[18] identified culturally informed feedback as essential in addressing sensitive topics, with indirect approaches preferred in collectivist cultures like the Gulf. Similarly, Walsh^[19] observed that teacher talking time (TTT) reflects cultural expectations, where high TTT signifies authority in hierarchical settings but may stifle interactive learning opportunities.

2.3. Strategies for Navigating Cultural Taboos in ELT

Addressing cultural taboos in English Language Teaching (ELT) requires a multifaceted approach that balances sensitivity with pedagogical goals. To navigate these challenges effectively, educators must employ strategies that foster student engagement while respecting cultural boundaries. This section discusses three interconnected strategies: using contextualised materials, employing interactive techniques, and encouraging reflection and feedback. All three contribute to fostering intercultural competence and empathy in diverse classroom settings, particularly in the Arab Gulf region.

One effective approach involves using contextualised materials, such as literature, films, and culturally resonant content, to engage learners indirectly with sensitive topics. By presenting themes through familiar or neutral contexts, educators can encourage students to explore taboos non-confrontationally. For instance, Pedria Velasco^[20] demonstrated how authentic materials rooted in local or relatable

cultural settings enable students to engage with sensitive subjects while feeling connected critically. Similarly, Al-sharhan^[21] emphasised that neutral topics, like environmental issues, can serve as effective entry points for discussion, fostering dialogue without breaching cultural boundaries. These materials bridge the known and the unfamiliar, allowing learners to expand their perspectives while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

Interactive techniques, such as role-playing and case studies, further enhance the ability of students to navigate cultural taboos. These methods create a safe, hypothetical environment where learners can practice responding to sensitive situations, promoting empathy and cultural understanding. Chaya^[14] argued that structured role-playing exercises simulate real-world interactions and provide learners with the tools to approach culturally sensitive scenarios with confidence and respect. For example, a classroom exercise might involve students taking on roles in a scenario that challenges traditional gender roles, allowing them to rehearse appropriate responses and develop a deeper appreciation for differing viewpoints. On the other hand, case studies encourage critical analysis and group discussion, enabling learners to explore solutions to cultural dilemmas collaboratively.

Encouraging reflection and feedback completes the learning cycle by allowing students to process their experiences and develop a more profound understanding of cultural differences. Reflection can take many forms, including private journals or group discussions. Byram^[7] advocated for reflective practices to deepen learners' cultural awareness and acceptance of differing norms. In the Gulf region, where collectivist values emphasise privacy and harmony, private reflection journals are particularly effective, as Spathopoulou and Papakonstantinidis^[22] noted. These journals allow students to explore sensitive topics at their own pace, minimising discomfort while promoting introspection and personal growth. Furthermore, feedback from peers and instructors helps students refine their perspectives and build confidence in addressing cultural complexities.

These strategies—contextualised materials, interactive techniques, and reflective practices—are not isolated approaches but interconnected elements of a holistic framework. Together, they enable educators to navigate cultural taboos in ELT classrooms with sensitivity and effectiveness. By integrating these methods, teachers can create an inclusive

learning environment that fosters intercultural competence and prepares students to navigate diverse cultural landscapes with empathy and understanding.

2.4. The Role of Technology in Addressing Taboos

The integration of technology in ELT offers new avenues for addressing cultural taboos. Digital platforms allow learners to discuss sensitive topics anonymously, reducing social pressure. Rashid et al.^[23] observed that online forums facilitate open dialogue, fostering intercultural competence. However, as Xue^[24] highlighted, educators must remain vigilant about potential miscommunications in virtual settings.

2.5. Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication is critical to language teaching, particularly when addressing taboo language. It complements verbal cues by providing additional layers of meaning and helping educators navigate cultural sensitivities effectively. Studies highlight its role in modelling appropriate responses, bridging cultural gaps, and fostering supportive learning environments^[25, 26]. Interactive strategies, such as role-playing and language games, enhance students' ability to interpret and use non-verbal cues, preparing them for real-world interactions involving sensitive topics^[27–29].

2.6. Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive EFL teaching is an essential approach that acknowledges and incorporates students' diverse cultural backgrounds into the language learning process^[30]. This pedagogical strategy is particularly relevant in the Arab Gulf, where students come from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Culturally responsive teaching enhances language acquisition and fosters a sense of belonging and respect for cultural diversity among learners. Almutairi's^[31] study highlighted that most Kuwaiti EFL teachers prefer to teach international cultures, as they perceive this approach as more beneficial for their students. This preference underscores the need for educators to be aware of and responsive to the cultural contexts of their students, as it can significantly impact their engagement and motivation in learning English.

2.7. Intercultural Competence in the Arab Gulf Context

Intercultural competence in the EFL classroom within the Arab Gulf context requires navigating the intersection of linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors. The globalisation of English has heightened its significance as a lingua franca in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman, fostering its prominence in educational policies aimed at global trade and cultural exchange^[1]. However, these policies face challenges rooted in the socio-cultural dynamics of the region and the diverse backgrounds of teachers and students. For instance, expatriate teachers often lack awareness of the unique sociocultural characteristics of Arab learners, which highlights the need for professional development to bridge this gap^[12]. Additionally, while communicative approaches are widely used, they may clash with local contexts, as some teaching materials and objectives may not align with students' needs^[32].

The role of the Arabic language (L1) in EFL education and the sociocultural factors influencing language learning further complicate the development of intercultural competence. Teachers often use Arabic to facilitate understanding complex linguistic concepts, though balancing its use with English immersion remains challenging^[33]. Moreover, cultural and societal norms, as well as students' motivations and learning strategies, shape EFL learning outcomes^[34]. Strategies such as translation and interactive methodologies have shown promise in addressing these challenges. Translation helps connect Arabic and English, fostering linguistic and cultural understanding^[35], while interactive methods enhance language skills and intercultural communication^[36]. Fostering intercultural competence demands a holistic approach that integrates culturally relevant materials, collaborative efforts among stakeholders, and targeted pedagogical strategies to prepare students for effective global engagement.

The unique socio-cultural dynamics of the Gulf region necessitate tailored approaches to intercultural competence. Al-Sumait et al.^[37] noted that Kuwait's expatriate-majority population underscores the need for frameworks like Byram's^[7] ICC to enhance communication in multicultural classrooms. Similarly, Amin et al.^[38] argued that socio-political events, such as the Qatar blockade, underscore

the significance of cultural sensitivity in fostering unity and understanding among Qatari secondary school students.

Theories such as the W-curve model of intercultural adaptation^[39] provide valuable insights into learners' emotional challenges when engaging with taboo topics. This perspective informs culturally responsive teaching practices, equipping educators to support students' emotional and cultural adaptation.

The literature reviewed underscores the profound impact of cultural taboos on ELT, particularly in multicultural and collectivist contexts like the Arab Gulf. It highlights the necessity of intercultural competence, which equips educators to navigate sensitive topics with empathy and adaptability. Furthermore, the reviewed strategies—from contextualised materials to reflective practices—provide actionable insights for addressing cultural taboos while respecting learners' socio-cultural identities. These findings form the basis of the proposed pedagogical framework, bridging theoretical models and practical approaches to enhance culturally responsive language teaching.

3. Methodology

This literature review with thematic analysis synthesises findings from peer-reviewed journals, case studies, and theoretical frameworks across Scopus and Web of Science databases. The thematic analysis involves coding qualitative data to extract key themes that reflect the central issues, challenges, and strategies discussed in the included studies. The inclusion criteria focused on articles discussing cultural taboos in ELT from 2012 to 2024, prioritising studies that offered practical solutions and frameworks related to the Arab Gulf Countries. Data were thematically analysed to identify common challenges, strategies, and implications for intercultural competence.

3.1. Search Strategy and Selection

Database searches used keywords such as “cultural taboos in ELT,” “intercultural competence,” “teaching sensitive topics,” and “Arab Gulf Countries.” A preliminary screen of titles and abstracts yielded 29 articles, of which 8 met the inclusion criteria (**Table 1**). The selected studies were then reviewed in detail to inform this synthesis.

Table 1. Studies that met the inclusion criteria.

Framework/Study	Focus/Key Findings	Implications
Alhajiri (2023) ^[40]	Examined TESOL methodologies (CLT, TBL, CBI) in Kuwaiti universities, emphasising culturally sensitive adaptations to facilitate discussions on taboo subjects.	Promotes nuanced TESOL approaches that respect local values.
Ahmed (2024) ^[41]	Investigated teachers' perceptions of English language education in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the need to develop learners' intercultural awareness	Emphasises cultural competence for mastering language skills.
Alfahadi (2019) ^[42]	Explored the impact of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 on ELT, encouraging progressive practices and openness to discussing taboo subjects within the curriculum.	Encourages integration of contemporary issues into the curriculum to align with global trends.
Alian & Alhaj (2023) ^[43]	Advocated for using innovative educational technology to enhance English teaching in Saudi Arabia and enable discussions on taboo topics interactively.	Supports the use of interactive technologies for engaging and relevant discussions.
Havril (2015) ^[44]	Highlighted female Saudi university students' common challenges in intercultural competence, such as cultural taboos, which hinder effective communication and understanding in EFL learning.	Proposes the integration of the ICC Spiral Model (Stiftung, 2003 in Havril, 2015) as an ongoing learning spiral in the Saudi Arabian tertiary education.
Kumar et al. (2021) ^[45]	Discussed the use of multimedia tools in Saudi Arabia to enhance engagement and provide diverse perspectives on sensitive issues.	Enhances student engagement and broadens perspectives through multimedia.
Mekheimer & Fageeh (2024) ^[46]	Discussed the instructors' and students' views on intercultural education at a tertiary level in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.	Proposes literature-based teaching as an effective method of introducing the target culture.
Tuzlukova (2023) ^[47]	Suggested that innovative pedagogical practices and technology in Oman create safe environments for engaging with sensitive subjects.	Facilitates inclusive discussions using technology and innovative methods.

3.2. Data Analysis

The selected studies were categorised based on their primary focus: the nature of cultural taboos, the development of intercultural competence, and strategies for addressing taboos. A thematic analysis was conducted on the relevant literature to construct a comprehensive framework for addressing cultural taboos in English language teaching (ELT). Thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, was utilised here to synthesise insights on the challenges, strategies, and pedagogical needs associated with integrating taboo topics in ELT classrooms. This process involved six systematic stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and constructing the framework.

3.3. Thematic Analysis

The analysis began with a careful familiarisation with the selected studies, which included a close reading of each article to identify key issues around cultural taboos, intercultural competence, and effective teaching practices in ELT.

This phase facilitated a general understanding of how cultural taboos impact language teaching and the contexts in which they arise. Key excerpts related to the implications, strategies, and complexities of teaching cultural taboos were highlighted for deeper analysis.

After familiarising with the data, initial coding was performed, breaking down the data into succinct, meaningful labels. Codes were short phrases or words that summarised relevant aspects of each study, such as "Classroom Challenges" for instances where teachers encountered student resistance to taboo discussions, "Intercultural Competence" for literature on the skills necessary to address such topics sensitively, and "Pedagogical Strategies" for references to teaching methods. Other notable codes included "Emotional Sensitivity," "Role-Playing Exercises," and "Teacher Training Needs," each representing specific facets of teaching practices or educator needs.

The initial codes were then organised into broader, recurring themes that encapsulated the main issues surrounding cultural taboos in ELT. For instance, "Classroom Challenges" and "Emotional Sensitivity" were combined under a more comprehensive theme labelled Challenges of Integrating

Taboos, which addressed students' potential discomfort and resistance during taboo-related discussions. Other themes emerged, including The Role of Intercultural Competence in ELT (encompassing the importance of cultural awareness, adaptability, and empathy in handling taboo topics), Effective Pedagogical Strategies (which combined specific teaching techniques such as role-playing, case studies, and authentic materials), and Professional Development Needs (highlighting the necessity of ongoing teacher training in intercultural competence).

Following the theme identification, each theme was reviewed to ensure that it accurately represented the data, and any overlaps or overly broad themes were refined. For instance, the theme of Effective Pedagogical Strategies was expanded into sub-themes to capture distinct approaches: Using Contextualised Materials, Classroom Environment and Dialogue, and Role-Playing and Case Studies. This refinement ensured that each theme was clearly defined, capturing specific aspects of the literature relevant to teaching cultural taboos.

Once finalised, the themes were defined and labelled to capture their essence. This stage clarified the thematic categories into the following sections: Challenges of Integrating Taboos, Intercultural Competence as a Key Teaching Skill, Effective Pedagogical Strategies, and Professional Development Needs. These themes formed the basis of a framework that would guide ELT practitioners in addressing cultural taboos with sensitivity and effectiveness.

The last stage involved translating the themes into a structured, actionable framework for ELT practitioners. Each theme informed a framework segment, offering a practical application derived directly from the thematic analysis. For example, the theme Challenges of Integrating Taboos suggested the need for a respectful classroom environment, guiding practitioners to establish ground rules for respectful dialogue to reduce resistance and encourage open-mindedness. Effective Pedagogical Strategies inspired sections of the framework that recommend introducing taboo topics through contextualised materials, such as literature or media, which allow students to engage with sensitive issues indirectly. Additionally, themes on role-playing and case studies underscored the value of interactive techniques, promoting empathy and cultural understanding by allowing students to navigate sensitive scenarios in a controlled, hypothetical context.

Thus, the thematic analysis provided the framework's foundation, translating critical insights from the literature into actionable guidelines for ELT practitioners. This systematic approach ensured that the framework addressed essential aspects of cultural sensitivity, intercultural competence, and professional development, providing educators with a structured approach to integrating cultural taboos in ELT classrooms.

4. Suggested Framework for Practitioners

The following framework, based on the findings, is designed to guide ELT practitioners in addressing cultural taboos with sensitivity and effectiveness:

4.1. Establishing a Respectful Classroom Environment

Creating a safe space for discussion is essential. Setting ground rules emphasising respect, open-mindedness, and empathy can help foster an inclusive environment where students feel comfortable exploring sensitive topics^[48, 49].

In the Arab Gulf Countries, creating a respectful and supportive environment is particularly important. Students may come from conservative backgrounds, and discussing specific topics openly can be challenging. Emphasising cultural respect and discretion from the outset will help foster a safe space.

Guidelines and Actions:

- **Setting Ground Rules:** English teachers may establish rules to honour regional sensitivities. These rules should start by collectively establishing guidelines and emphasising respect for local norms and the values of all participants. They should also clarify that the classroom is a space for learning rather than judgment.
 - *Example:* Including guidelines like “Be mindful of others’ beliefs” and “Approach discussions with curiosity, not criticism.”
- **Introducing Empathy-Building Exercises:** Teachers may introduce activities that encourage empathy within the context of regional culture. These activities may focus on family values or the importance of tradition, which resonate strongly in Gulf cultures.

- *Example:* Teachers may invite students to discuss a cultural tradition they value and explain why it is crucial. This can open pathways to understanding other cultures in a relatable way.
- Using Culturally Appropriate Language: When discussing potentially sensitive topics, model language that respects cultural boundaries, avoiding terms that may be controversial or explicit.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider avoiding direct discussions of gender roles by framing the topic as “Different perspectives on family roles” and creating a space where students can share their views without feeling pressured.

4.2. Introducing Taboo Topics through Contextualised Materials

Using authentic materials, such as literature, films, news articles, and multimedia^[45] allows educators to introduce taboo topics indirectly. These materials can serve as entry points for discussion, providing students with real-world contexts to explore sensitive issues without confrontation^[14, 46, 50].

Using materials relating to students’ cultural backgrounds can help them approach taboo topics with a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Guidelines and Actions:

- Selecting Culturally Resonant Materials: Teachers may choose stories, articles, or films that are culturally relevant to the Arab Gulf. Ideally, these materials will have themes bridging local and global perspectives on respect, family, and community values.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider selecting literature or stories from Gulf authors that subtly touch on societal issues. Khaled Hosseini’s works explore identity and family in culturally appropriate ways.
- Using Indirect Questions to Foster Reflection: When discussing materials, teachers may use indirect questioning to allow students to explore topics without feeling compelled to disclose personal beliefs.
 - *Example:* After watching a scene related to social expectations, teachers might consider asking, “How might different cultures view this scene?”

rather than probing directly into students’ views.

- Leveraging Current Events Mindfully: Teachers may introduce global topics using multimedia, news sources or documentaries that are friendly to the Gulf region. This can help students see sensitive issues through a broader lens.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider presenting a neutral topic that affects local communities, such as environmental or educational issues. This will allow students to connect with the material without entering controversial areas.

4.3. Role-Playing and Case Studies

Role-playing allows students to navigate cultural taboos by simulating interactions that require cultural sensitivity. Similarly, case studies can introduce hypothetical scenarios involving cultural taboos, allowing students to practise problem-solving and empathy within safe boundaries^[20].

In the Gulf, where the authors teach, openly discussing specific issues may be challenging; structured role-playing and hypothetical case studies offer students a way to engage with sensitive topics in a controlled, indirect manner.

Guidelines and Actions:

- Using Structured Role-Playing within Local Contexts: Teachers may design role-playing scenarios that mirror real-life settings students may encounter, such as a formal workplace scenario where they must navigate polite and respectful communication with culturally diverse colleagues.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider setting up a scenario where students role-play a business meeting in which one culture values formal greetings while another prioritises casual discussion. This could highlight cultural differences without delving into sensitive subjects.
- Using Case Studies Focused on Regional or Universal Values: Teachers may provide case studies that explore universal values such as respect, hospitality, and cooperation and incorporate scenarios relevant to Gulf culture.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider presenting a case study of a miscommunication between expatriates in the region, asking students to discuss

how to address such issues with sensitivity.

- Encouraging Controlled Debates on Neutral Topics: Teachers may encourage students to debate topics that indirectly connect to cultural perspectives but do not confront sensitive issues directly. Technology, work, or education topics can provide a safe space for respectful debate.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider facilitating a debate on the benefits and challenges of remote work, as it can address societal changes without delving into sensitive cultural or personal issues.

4.4. Continuous Reflection and Feedback

Encouraging students to reflect on their experiences and beliefs is essential for developing intercultural competence. Reflection exercises, such as journaling or group discussions, can help students process their reactions to taboo topics and foster a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives^[7].

Encouraging reflection is particularly beneficial in Gulf contexts, where students may benefit from considering their perspectives in light of their cultural values.

Guidelines and Actions:

- Using Reflection Journals for Private Thoughts: Teachers may assign weekly reflections in journals, where students can privately explore their reactions to discussions on cultural topics.
 - *Example:* Teachers might ask students questions like, “How does my culture influence my views on this topic?” or “What did I learn about other perspectives today?”
- Introducing Pair Reflections with Sensitivity: Teachers may pair students to discuss their reflections in a way that respects individual boundaries and comfort levels, emphasising shared values such as respect, community, and hospitality.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider asking pairs to discuss a cultural tradition they respect and find commonalities between their traditions, fostering understanding without delving into personal beliefs.
- Introducing Group Reflections with Regional Relevance: Teachers may use group reflection activities to encourage students to connect topics to values neces-

sary in the Gulf region, such as respect for family and social harmony.

- *Example:* Teachers might consider posting anonymous reflections on a class board with questions like, “What is one value you found interesting today?” to celebrate regional pride and encourage dialogue.

4.5. Continuous Professional Development and Self-Reflection for Teachers

For ELT practitioners in the Gulf, ongoing professional development in intercultural competence and cultural awareness will better equip them to handle sensitive topics tactfully.

Guidelines and Actions:

- Engaging in Cultural Awareness Workshops Specific to Gulf Contexts: Teachers may look for professional development opportunities focusing on Gulf-specific intercultural issues, such as navigating diverse classrooms with a high expatriate presence.
 - *Example:* Teachers might explore workshops that offer teaching tools for multicultural environments, including Gulf-based conferences or online courses focused on culturally sensitive pedagogy.
- Reflecting on Cultural Sensitivity Regularly: After each session, teachers may reflect on which strategies worked well and where adjustments might be needed to align with Gulf students’ cultural expectations.
 - *Example:* After a class discussion, teachers might consider reflecting on emerging cultural sensitivities in a personal journal or teaching diary and decide how to approach similar topics in future lessons.
- Requesting Student Feedback to Guide Adaptations: Teachers may periodically ask for anonymous feedback to gauge students’ comfort with how topics are discussed. Teachers could adjust strategies to better suit Gulf cultural norms.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider using a short, anonymous survey to ask students how comfortable they felt discussing specific topics, which methods they found most helpful, and what adjustments they recommend.

4.6. Understanding and Teaching Body Language

Body language is fundamental to intercultural communication and is especially significant when navigating cultural taboos. Non-verbal cues, including gestures, facial expressions, and physical space, vary widely across cultures and can either enhance understanding or lead to misinterpretation in the classroom. Teachers must guide students in recognising and using culturally appropriate body language to foster effective communication and mutual respect.

Guidelines and Actions:

- **Highlighting cultural variations in body language and their implications for communication:** Teachers should promote awareness of gestures, facial expressions, and postures specific to the Gulf region and other cultural contexts. They could highlight how gestures, postures, and facial expressions vary across cultures and discuss their implications for communication. In addition, teachers may discuss culturally specific gestures, such as the Gulf tradition of placing a hand over the heart as a sign of respect.

They could also analyse videos of intercultural interactions to identify effective and ineffective uses of body language and facilitate group discussions on how non-verbal communication varies in professional and social contexts.

- *Example:* Teachers might consider explaining that direct eye contact conveys confidence in some cultures but may be perceived as disrespectful in

others.

- **Emphasising modelling and practising culturally appropriate nonverbal communication:** Teachers may use Role-Playing activities to practice nonverbal communication. They could create scenarios where students practise interpreting and using culturally sensitive body language.
 - *Example:* Teachers might role-play a job interview, focusing on posture, gestures, and appropriate facial expressions.
- **Encouraging Reflection on Non-Verbal Behaviour:** Teachers may guide students in reflecting on their use of body language to identify potential areas for improvement. They may also assign activities where students observe or assess their body language.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider having students record short presentations and reflect on their gestures and expressions to identify potential misunderstandings.
- **Modelling Appropriate Behaviour:** Teachers should consciously exhibit culturally sensitive body language in class. They could consistently exhibit appropriate non-verbal behaviours in the classroom to serve as a reference for students.
 - *Example:* Teachers might consider using open and inclusive gestures to create a welcoming and respectful environment.

Table 2 below presents the key areas, guidelines, actions, and examples in a structured manner for easy reference.

Table 2. Cultural Taboos in ELT in the Arab Gulf Countries Framework: What EFL practitioners may do.

Key Area	Guidelines	Actions	Examples
Establishing a Respectful Classroom Environment	Set ground rules, foster empathy-building exercises, and use culturally appropriate language.	Include guidelines like ‘Be mindful of others’ beliefs’ and ‘Approach discussions with curiosity.’	Discuss cultural traditions students value to promote understanding.
Introducing Taboo Topics through Contextualised Materials	Select culturally resonant materials, use indirect questions, and leverage current events mindfully.	Choose stories or films that bridge local and global perspectives and ask reflective questions.	Select literature from Gulf authors and introduce neutral global topics like environmental issues.
Role-Playing and Case Studies	Design structured role-playing scenarios and case studies focused on regional or universal values.	Simulate real-life scenarios like workplace interactions and analyse case studies on miscommunications.	Role-play a business meeting with cultural differences or discuss a case of expatriate miscommunication.

Table 2. Cont.

Key Area	Guidelines	Actions	Examples
Continuous Reflection and Feedback	Encourage private and group reflections with regional relevance, fostering intercultural competence.	Assign weekly reflection journals, organise pair discussions, and facilitate anonymous reflections.	Prompt reflections like ‘How does my culture influence my views on this topic?’
Continuous Professional Development and Self-Reflection for Teachers	Engage in cultural awareness workshops, reflect on cultural sensitivity, and request student feedback.	Attend Gulf-specific workshops, maintain a teaching diary, and conduct periodic student surveys.	Seek workshops on culturally sensitive pedagogy and reflect on classroom interactions in a journal.
Understanding and Teaching Non-Verbal Communication	Highlight cultural variations in gestures, facial expressions, and physical space. Teach students to interpret and use non-verbal cues appropriately.	Use role-playing to simulate scenarios involving gestures. Encourage self-assessment of non-verbal behaviour.	Discuss the Arab Gulf tradition of avoiding direct eye contact in hierarchical settings. Role-play professional greetings.

5. Discussion

This study’s findings provide valuable insights into navigating cultural taboos in ELT, particularly in the Arab Gulf region. It highlights the necessity of culturally sensitive pedagogy to foster inclusive and effective learning environments by emphasising strategies such as contextualised materials, interactive techniques, and reflective practices. The findings align with existing research while offering additional perspectives on the practical implementation of these strategies.

As highlighted in this study, the use of contextualised materials reinforces Velasco’s^[20] assertion that culturally resonant content enables learners to explore sensitive topics non-confrontationally. Velasco emphasised the importance of embedding taboos within familiar contexts to reduce discomfort, mirrored in this study’s recommendation to use culturally neutral topics like environmental issues^[21]. This study builds on Velasco’s and Alsharhan’s work by emphasising how such materials can bridge local and global perspectives, helping learners critically engage with topics without feeling alienated.

Interactive techniques, particularly role-playing and case studies, are shown in this study to promote empathy and intercultural understanding. Chaya^[14] noted that role-playing allows learners to rehearse responses to culturally sensitive situations, a finding that is further validated here. The study underscores the practical value of these techniques by demonstrating their capacity to simulate real-world scenarios in a controlled, non-threatening environment. This helps students navigate cultural taboos and equips them with communication skills applicable in diverse contexts. The

integration of case studies further complements Byram’s^[7] emphasis on critical analysis as a pathway to cultural awareness, suggesting that such techniques can foster a deeper engagement with sensitive topics.

The findings also highlight the importance of reflective practices, such as journaling, in helping students process their reactions to sensitive topics. This supports Byram’s^[7] advocacy for reflection as a key component of intercultural competence. Additionally, Spathopoulou and Papakonstantinidis^[22] emphasised the alignment of private reflection with the collectivist values of the Gulf region. The present study builds on their work by illustrating how such practices can provide learners with a safe, introspective space to reconcile personal beliefs with broader cultural norms, enhancing their intercultural sensitivity.

This research underscores the interconnectedness of these strategies compared to prior studies. While individual techniques have been discussed in the literature, the present study demonstrates how they can be combined into a cohesive framework for addressing cultural taboos in ELT. This holistic perspective fills a gap in existing research by showing how contextualised materials, interactive techniques, and reflective practices can complement one another to create a culturally inclusive classroom environment.

Despite these contributions, some discrepancies in the literature warrant further exploration. For example, while Byram^[7] and Chaya^[14] primarily focus on Western contexts, this study emphasises the Gulf region, where collectivist values and traditional norms may necessitate modifications to these strategies. Future research could explore the cultural adaptability of these techniques in other regions and their

long-term impact on learners' intercultural competence.

Looking ahead, these findings emphasise the importance of implementing culturally sensitive strategies in ELT while inviting further inquiry into how these methods can be adapted to other cultural and pedagogical contexts.

6. Conclusions

This study explored the challenges and strategies associated with navigating cultural taboos in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in the Arab Gulf region. Key findings indicate that addressing cultural taboos requires a nuanced approach incorporating contextualised materials, interactive techniques, and reflective practices. These strategies collectively foster intercultural competence, empathy, and practical communication skills among learners while ensuring respect for cultural boundaries.

These findings have significant pedagogical implications. Educators must be equipped with culturally sensitive teaching materials and techniques that promote inclusivity and critical thinking. Training programs for ELT practitioners should emphasise the importance of balancing respect for local cultural norms to foster global perspectives. Additionally, the study underscores the need for ongoing classroom practices that encourage students to engage with sensitive topics through a structured and supportive framework.

Suggestions for future research include exploring the long-term impact of these strategies on learners' intercultural competence and evaluating their applicability in diverse cultural contexts beyond the Arab Gulf region. Further studies could also investigate how digital tools and online platforms can be leveraged to address cultural taboos in virtual or hybrid learning environments. This study has several limitations. First, the scope is primarily focused on the Arab Gulf region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Second, the strategies proposed are based on a synthesis of existing literature rather than empirical classroom data, which could be addressed in future research. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the importance of cultural sensitivity in ELT. It offers practical strategies for educators to navigate this complex yet critical aspect of language teaching.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: F.S. and K.M.P.; Methodology: F.S. and K.M.P.; Investigation: F.S. and K.M.P.; Resources: K.M.P. and F.S.; Writing—original draft preparation: K.M.P. Writing—review and editing: F.S. and K.M.P.; Visualization: F.S.; Supervision: F.S. and K.M.P. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study were derived from a thematic analysis of publicly available literature and do not involve primary data collection. A list of references and articles included in the analysis is available in the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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