



**English language teachers, culture and context:  
exploring expatriate teachers' perspectives and practice in  
regard to their intercultural communication at a university  
in Oman**

By

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## **Abstract**

Teaching abroad entails engaging in a different context, where teachers are expected to interact with various contextual factors that necessitate an understanding of the specific expectations within those cultures. Research in ELT has recognised the significance of context in teaching. However, there is a dearth of studies examining the impact of contextual factors on expatriate EFL teachers in Oman from a critical perspective on intercultural communication (IC). This study involved American and British EFL teachers working in Oman, where the socio-cultural, religious, and political contexts are distinctly different. Employing Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) as its theoretical framework, this qualitative case study aimed to investigate the perspectives and teaching practices of five expatriate EFL teachers (from the US and the UK) regarding socio-cultural contextual factors at the university level. This study aimed to investigate: 1) how these teachers perceived the contextual factors influencing the institutional culture at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), encompassing the culture of the Centre of Preparatory Studies (CPS) and the classroom culture and how they interacted with these factors. It also examined: 2) how their prior knowledge and experience in intercultural communication aided them in navigating the socio-cultural contextual factors specific to this institution. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall discussions. Reflexive thematic analysis, employing both inductive and deductive approaches, was utilised for data analysis. The study findings indicated that the instructional approaches of expatriate educators at the CPS (SQU) were impacted by a range of contextual factors, both on a broader scale (macro) and a more localised level (micro). These influences were evident within the university's cultural milieu, shaped by broader macro forces, including national and international elements, as well as specific micro elements such as religion, politics, classroom dynamics, students' backgrounds, and teachers' backgrounds. Moreover, the results highlighted the substantial impact of socio-cultural, religious, and political factors within Oman on the intercultural interactions of teachers. These influences were observed in various aspects, including adherence to institutional policies, interactions with Omani students, and the selection and adaptation of ELT materials. The study makes significant contributions to the fields of CIC, IC, and within the specific context under investigation. This research presents several recommendations with implications for various stakeholders in ELT, CIC, IC, higher educational institutions including teachers, students, policymakers, and designers and developers of ELT materials.

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## **List of abbreviations**

CAIC: Contextual Approach to Intercultural Communication

CIC: Critical Intercultural Communication

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

IC: Intercultural Communication

ICC: Intercultural Communication Competence

CPS: Centre for Preparatory Studies

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ELT: English Language Teaching

ESL: English as a Second language

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

HE: Higher Education

MoHE: Ministry of Higher Education

NEST: Native English Speaker Teacher

RQ: Research Question

RTA: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SQU: Sultan Qaboos University

SRD: Stimulated Recall Discussion

TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. EFL teachers abroad**

Many nations worldwide now place significant value on the provision of English Language Teaching (ELT) for the way it both contributes to opportunities for employment in the global marketplace and serves as an important means for knowledge transfer and communication on a global scale (Crystal, 2002). In addition, ELT has become a profession not only for native speakers of English coming from the ‘inner circle nations’ where English is spoken as a native language teaching to the ‘outer circle nations’ and ‘expanding circle’ nations where English is spoken as a foreign language (Kachru, 1992) (see Figure3), but also for teachers who are non-native speakers coming from the same outer and expanding circles who now significantly outnumber native-speaking English teachers.

As more educational institutions aim to internationalise their campuses, there is a growing demand for expatriate EFL teachers to teach in these countries. In Oman, expatriate EFL teachers constitute a large element within the country's higher education workforce. However, having a significant number of expatriate teachers from diverse countries instructing Omani students, who typically share more cultural familiarity among themselves than with their teachers, may lead to the potential experience of cultural disparity. This is especially because expatriate teachers' cultural backgrounds, instructional techniques, educational resources, and theories of learning and teaching may be influenced by the epistemological traditions of dominant Western cultures (Diallo, 2012). These teachers travel around teaching English in different countries carrying with them their own backgrounds whether these be cultures, religions, educational backgrounds, ways of thinking and perceptions about the world and its people. The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) brings together individuals from diverse nationalities, ethnicities, and countries, which can often result in cultural differences between teachers and students. This cultural diversity can pose challenges for ELT teachers who may have trouble adjusting to their students’ cultures and may not fully understand their learning practices (Al-Issa, 2005; Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2004). This cultural mismatch could lead to tension in the classroom that hinders learning (Al-Issa, 2005; Kramersch, 1993).

In Oman, where the culture is quite different from that of English-speaking countries such as the US and UK, English-speaking teachers may face difficulties adapting to the new environment.

Even if they possess the necessary teaching qualifications and subject matter expertise, they may encounter challenges with cultural conflicts in the host country, whether related to the country's politics, institutional policies and expectations, or the culture of the students. This can negatively impact upon their teaching effectiveness, particularly if they lack the intercultural communication (IC) skills needed to navigate any cultural divide. Such conflicts may be noticeable to the teachers or they may be unaware that the issues stem from cultural differences. In either case, it is important for teachers to have the skills and knowledge needed to effectively deal with cultural conflicts in the host country and the working environment including the classroom.

Another relevant issue is that these teachers now teach English to students in various contexts where different values are given to culture, religion, and worldviews of which these teachers need to be aware. Since many teachers in higher education are not natives of the host country and a significant part of the course materials is obtained from other countries, issues related to post-colonialism and the possibility of cultural oversimplification or stereotyping arise. It would be worrying if teachers were biased against students or were imposing ideas that go against students' cultural background or upbringing (Knott, 2022).

Preparing, therefore, these teachers to teach English to speakers of other languages worldwide has been a complex and multifarious process/activity (Johnson, 2006). To overcome this issue, a number of researchers (Holliday, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Alptekin, 2002; Kayser, 2003; McKay, 2003; Kabir, 2010; Mathieson, 2012; Mahmoud, 2015) have placed an emphasis on considering the context where English language teaching is taking place. This is because teaching a language raises certain questions of culture which are discussed widely in the literature and are of interest to many researchers from different fields, not only in education. This has exacerbated the complexity of English language teaching (ELT) for it is regularly argued to be associated with other global forces whether they be political, economic, cultural or religious (Phillipson, 1992, 2009; Pennycook, 1994, Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook and Coutand-Marin, 2003; Zughouli, 2003; Mohd-Asraf, 2005; Karmani, 2005a, 2005b; Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Shohamy, 2006; Hopkyns, 2014).

Another matter for debate in the ELT literature is how to consider culture when teaching English as an international language to people from non-English-speaking nations (Byram, 1997; MacKay, 2003). On many occasions, if teachers are to adapt their teaching practices to create a successful environment, they usually depend on their own perceptions about their students' culture (Prowse

& Goddard, 2010). This is something often quite difficult to predict and can be based on generalisations about students. Since the purpose of teaching English is to enable learners to use the language as a tool of communication and as a tool of gaining knowledge from different sources, considering learners' contexts and how the language is taught in that context cannot be ignored.

Literature also emphasises that the ELT environment of the classroom is affected by the surrounding educational and socio-cultural environment (Pennycook, 1989; Kramsch, 1993; Holliday, 1994, 2009, 2010; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Tudor, 2001; Bax, 2003; Leverett, 2006; Kabir, 2011; Al Issa, 2015). Being expatriate teachers working in a country where the cultures, religions, and values of the society may be diverse, needs to be taken into consideration to avoid conflict and misunderstanding between ELT teachers and learners on the one hand, and teachers and the host institutions or the host society on the other hand. Teachers may struggle with understanding these cultures and contextual factors and that might well affect their way of teaching, their relationship with their students and their integration into that working environment. It may also affect their learners' achievements if teachers cannot understand their students and their cultural needs (Ford and Trotman, 2001). This area needs to be explored locally and globally, as each educational and cultural context is a specific case and has its own characteristics and specifically local issues.

Teaching EFL in the Middle East - and the Gulf region in particular - has its own issues that have been discussed in the EFL literature (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2004; Weber, 2011; Elyas, 2011; Troudi & Al Hafidh; 2017; Ahmad, 2023). This is because the nations in this region have certain cultural and religious issues in common with some variations that distinguish it from other parts of the world. On the other hand, the Middle East more generally is not culturally homogeneous but a region with diverse cultures and religions, so the specific considerations for expatriate teachers may vary depending on the country and community they are teaching in.

Syed (2003) emphasises that the differences of language and culture that occur between teachers and students in some Arab Gulf EFL classrooms are a serious factor that foreign teachers encounter. The persistence of cultural conflicts (particularly in EFL classrooms where the use of English can lead to cultural barriers) can create a learning environment that is not supportive and respectful of cultural differences. Even teachers who recognise cultural issues in the classroom may not have the necessary skills to resolve these conflicts in a new cultural setting. This may even be the case with teachers who have dealt with similar cultural issues previously in a different

context. For example, some teachers who have taught English previously to Muslim students in the US or UK may generalise from that experience and may assume that that would help them when it comes to teaching English in Oman. They may ignore other contextual factors that affect the new cultural and educational context such as political, religious, and social issues. For this reason, this study aims to identify those contextual factors that affect expatriate EFL teachers' perspectives and teaching practices concerning cultural diversity in the institution and in its classrooms.

The ability to effectively navigate these cultural differences and engage with students from diverse backgrounds is referred to as Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). ICC refers to an individual's worldview and their perceptions and responses to cultural differences (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). EFL teachers with well-developed ICC (whether innate or acquired through experience or teacher training) are equipped with the skills necessary to effectively modify their teaching practices and align themselves with their students' host culture.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the intercultural dynamics of the EFL expatriate teachers in the foundation-year intensive English programmes at a state university in Oman (Sultan Qaboos University). Specifically, the study aims to explore the intercultural interactions between these individuals and the teachers' understanding of cultural differences through a qualitative case-study.

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, it raises critical inquiries: How do such teachers adapt to the cultural context of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU)? What factors influence their teaching practices and decisions? What modifications did they have to make to operate effectively within this environment? What challenges and struggles did they encounter while in this space? Answers to these questions will illuminate the dynamics of this cultural context and reveal opportunities for contribution to the literature of the field.

Currently, there is a lack of attention given to how expatriate teachers view the cultural context at the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and how they navigate socio-cultural issues while teaching. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the perspectives and experiences of expatriate EFL teachers at the CPS.

It will examine the perceptions and teaching practices of these teachers in relation to their interactions with the local cultural and educational context at the CPS, SQU. By doing so, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise in intercultural communication and teaching practices.

This study is significant because it can inform the development of effective pedagogical approaches for EFL teaching in Oman and similar contexts. Overall, it seeks to contribute to the knowledge of intercultural interaction among expatriate EFL teachers and provide insights into how to enhance teaching practices in diverse socio-cultural educational settings.

## **1.2. Aims of the study**

The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore the perspectives and teaching practices of expatriate EFL teachers in relation to their intercultural interactions with the local socio-cultural educational context in a university in Oman.

## **1.3. Objectives of the study**

- 1 To explore how expatriate EFL teachers perceive and interact with the cultural educational context at SQU.
- 2 **To explore EFL teachers' awareness and knowledge of their students' cultural concerns and how to deal with them.**
- 3 To gain insights into ELT teachers' perspectives, practices and engagement within the SQU cultural context.
- 4 To identify the cultural and contextual factors that affect expatriate ELT teachers when teaching English at the CPS at SQU.
- 5 To understand how cultural and educational policies, contextual factors are influencing teaching English at SQU.

## **1.4. Research Questions:**

- 1- To what extent do intercultural backgrounds/knowledge/training/experiences contribute to the development of expatriate teachers' intercultural communication while teaching at the CPS, SQU in Oman?

- 2- What are the expatriate teachers' intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the institutional culture of the CPS at SQU?

**Sub-question a:** What are the contextual factors that affect teaching in this particular context (CPS at SQU)?

**Sub-question b:** How do the contextual factors affect teachers' perspectives and teaching practices?

- 3- What are the expatriate teachers' intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the contextual factors in the classroom?

**Sub-question:** To what extent do the teaching practices of expatriate ELT teachers align with the local cultural educational expectations at SQU?

**Note:** Institutional culture refers to the shared values, practices, and norms within an organisation (e.g., SQU culture, CPS culture). Local culture, on the other hand, reflects the traditions, customs, and social behaviours of a specific geographic community or region (e.g., Omani culture outside SQU campus). The former influences work environments; the latter shapes everyday life in a particular place.

### **1.5. Significance of the study**

The significance of this research can be understood from several perspectives. There is a lack of research focusing specifically on the perspectives and experiences of expatriate EFL teachers in Omani universities, which is a significant research gap. Other studies have explored the experiences of expatriate EFL teachers in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, but these may not be directly transferable to the Omani context due to the contextual factors (power dynamics) and the unique cultural and educational features of Oman and SQU in particular.

This study will contribute to the relatively less researched topic of the importance of the effect of contextual factors (macro and micro) in ELT in Oman. By exploring this topic, findings will show how teachers interact with the contextual factors (e.g. religion, politics, and institutional policies) to teach the English language in a particular cultural and educational situation. This can help inform the development of intercultural communication (IC) training programmes for teachers, which would enhance their understanding of socio-cultural considerations and enable them to effectively navigate these issues in the classroom.

This study should reveal interesting perspectives from expatriate English language teachers at the CPS at SQU on how the educational context within this particular culture impacts on their teaching perspectives and practices. This study will also be important for policymakers who need to listen to ELT teachers' views and how they interpret policies so that modifications and development can take place accordingly.

This study is significant to ELT materials developers, teachers and publishers, who seek to understand the needs and challenges of different educational and cultural situations. In addition, this study may also be vital to serve as a benchmark for further studies that may encourage similar institutions in Oman, or even elsewhere in the wider region, to modify their current ELT materials in order to conform to the demands of both local and global intercultural needs.

From a cultural perspective, this study should contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of contextual factors in shaping teaching practices and the ways in which cultural awareness and sensitivity can positively impact educational outcomes. Additionally, the findings of this study should inform policy decisions aimed at promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity in educational settings. This study should highlight the importance of cultural context in education and provide a foundation for future research in this area.

Through an in-depth analysis of the perspectives and teaching practices of expatriate EFL teachers in Oman, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the importance of IC to EFL teachers and how contextual factors contribute to shape the IC of expatriate teachers at the CPS, SQU, in Oman. This should inform the development of effective pedagogical approaches for EFL teaching in Oman and other similar regions.

## **1.6. Positionality**

Announcing my positionality is, first, a way to understand myself in relation to my research and what limits and hinders my understanding of certain issues (Hammond and Wellington, 2013). Hammond and Wellington (2013) point out that a researcher's positionality might be influenced by their background and where they are conducting their research. However, holding a different position to those people being researched does not necessarily mean we cannot understand other people's experiences (Hammond and Wellington, 2013). Rather, we can strive to be objective when dealing with them and avoid personal prejudices and biases. Being aware of these issues, I



am going to express my positionality on conducting this research. In the following section, I will clarify how my learning and teaching experiences have driven me to think about researching this topic and how my personal and cultural backgrounds have contributed to approaching these issues.

### **1.7. My professional experience**

In my first year as a student (undergraduate) at SQU, I took some courses from the Language Centre (which has now become the CPS) and experienced a number of incidents that triggered me to question my identity as a Muslim student. Most of the teachers were non-Omanis (expatriate) at that time (and even now) and the teaching materials used were commercially available EFL textbooks. Some expatriate English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers would bring materials (e.g speaking activities) to the classroom that were not suitable for Muslim Omani students, such as films containing scenes deemed immoral in the Omani context. They might also discuss topics that made Muslim students feel uncomfortable, such as gender roles and dress codes in Muslim countries for both genders, and sometimes engage in theological and ideological discussions. Generally, Omani students do not like to argue with teachers about religious teachings and practices which are accepted and practised widely in their society. Because we had a lower level in English and had limited knowledge, we were not able to argue with teachers who were knowledgeable and to whom we felt we owed respect. Discussing these issues in class with expatriate teachers meant many students felt that the teachers were trying to impose foreign Western ideas upon them.

When I graduated from SQU, I worked in the Language Centre (CPS) as an English language teacher. Working in the CPS, where the majority of colleagues were non-Omanis (expatriate), I was often asked questions about cultural and religious issues pertinent to the place of work and their students' issues. I, therefore, concluded that some of them were concerned about cultural issues and I realised they were negotiating their professional and personal identity to adapt to that particular context. Reflecting on the issue and considering how my Islamic identity played a role in guiding my teaching practices while working at the CPS, I realised that my Islamic identity influenced me in various aspects. For instance, I was mindful of the socio-cultural, political, and religious issues that needed to be addressed with care, even without explicit mention. Moreover, I had to check in advance the suitability of the materials I considered using in class, taking into account students' socio-cultural backgrounds (ethnicities, religious affiliations, tribes, regions), as well as their gender dynamics and sensitivities. I was aware of such issues because I was born in

Oman, and I was a student at SQU and later a teacher at the CPS at SQU. All of that experience raised a question in my mind: how would expatriate teachers, hailing from diverse cultural, religious, political, and social backgrounds perceive and interact with all of these contextual factors at the CPS in Oman?

I had also been called a number of times, along with other Omani EFL teachers, to participate in the induction sessions by speaking to newly appointed teachers to the CPS at the beginning of their work. Some of them had not taught in the Middle East before, so they needed to be inducted to the new environment. These induction sessions were helpful for them as I and other Omani colleagues could answer their queries and draw their attention to some of the issues that they might encounter while teaching Omani students. However, those sessions were voluntary and not officially part of the CPS or the university policy. As a result, the nature of these sessions varied from year to year, depending on who volunteered from the Omani teachers and what the new colleagues' needs were. These Omani teachers, themselves, also varied in their knowledge and experience about which cultural and religious issues expatriate teachers should be aware of while teaching at the CPS, SQU. In addition, attending such sessions did not mean an expatriate teacher would become culturally competent, neither did it preclude them facing cultural challenges later on (Sharp, 2007).

Another motive for conducting this research is that teaching at CPS is not only a challenge to expatriate teachers but also to me as an Omani. Teaching mixed gender classes, males and females in Oman is not easy as gender dynamics in the classroom affect the method, the behaviour and the whole preparation of the teacher for that particular classroom (Canada & Pringle, 1995). I remember once that I taught a class consisting of three female Omani students and 19 male students. The female students sat at the end of one side of the class while the males occupied the other side. The females would not participate a lot, even though in the speaking class, they were required to speak as part of class activities. As a teacher, I would find it difficult to hear their voices in speaking activities. Encouraging them to speak would embarrass them in front of their male classmates. After a few weeks, when they got their marks, which were low, for one of the quizzes, they came to me after the lecture and explained why they had scored low. They felt uncomfortable in class because the males dominated, and I (the teacher) unintentionally gave them more attention and time. This consequence can also happen to the males if the female students

outnumber the males in a classroom. When one gender dominates a class in number, the less numerous genders may feel uncomfortable and be less active in class.

I understand that Omani teachers who are familiar with students' cultural backgrounds can also face challenges while teaching in this educational context. Some Muslim teachers might be in a dilemma negotiating their Islamic identity and their professional identity at the same time, when trying to be innovative in their teaching by, for example, finding a video on YouTube that can supplement their teaching or by selecting a newspaper for a reading activity. They feel that they need to be careful and watch the video or read the article before showing or reading it in class as the item/items may not be culturally, socially, religiously, or even politically appropriate to Omani students. Therefore, it is interesting to explore other teachers' perspectives and teaching practices on teaching with respect to their own gender, religion and culture. I decided to find out, also, if the teachers' previous IC experiences with teaching before they joined the CPS, SQU, played a role in adapting to the new teaching environment at the CPS, SQU.

Finally, working as a member in the Curriculum Unit at the CPS provided me with a clearer picture of what was going on regarding materials used in the CPS. It is important to explore how teachers interact with these materials in terms of culture. At the same time, I became aware of the importance of intercultural communication competence (ICC) (Byram, 2008) and I decided I would like to explore how teachers should have IC skills when teaching English as an international language at the CPS, SQU, in Oman.

## **1.8. Thesis structure**

**Chapter One** introduces the topic under study and presents the aim, objectives, research questions, and significance of the study, along with the rationale behind it. The chapter then discusses how the researcher's positionality and professional experience urged him to conduct this research.

**Chapter Two** provides insight into the background and contexts of the study's setting. It commences with a brief exploration of Omani cultures and subcultures, transitioning to the working environment where the study participants taught: the Centre of Preparatory Studies (CPS) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). The chapter then delves into the cultural and religious context

of SQU, encompassing its architectural structure, Islamic and national occasions, coeducation, gender considerations, and attire. Subsequently, it addresses the cultural challenges faced by English language teachers at the CPS, SQU, and concludes with a discussion on the issue of English teaching materials at the same institution.

**Chapter Three** introduces the conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding the study. It commences by elucidating fundamental conceptual elements, namely 'culture' and 'context,' pivotal to the research and frequently employed. Subsequently, it delves into the definitions of teachers' conceptions and beliefs. Finally, it outlines the theoretical framework encompassing 'critical intercultural communication' (CIC), and 'a contextual approach to intercultural communication' (CAIC).

**Chapter Four** reviews the literature to establish a theoretical foundation for the study, beginning with an exploration of teaching as a complex social practice from a sociocultural perspective. It emphasises the investigation of EFL expatriate teachers' perspectives within the sociocultural context of their work in Oman. The chapter highlights the importance of considering cultural contextual factors such as socio-religious, political, institutional, and classroom culture when studying teachers' perspectives and practices. Notably, it highlights the crucial role of Intercultural Communication (IC) in EFL teacher education. The review also addresses sensitive cultural issues in the Middle East, including gender dynamics, coeducation, and censorship's impact on ELT materials.

**Chapter Five** outlines the research methodology, highlighting the qualitative approach's suitability for investigating expatriate English teachers' intercultural interactions in Oman's university setting. It covers research design, objectives, and questions, emphasising the rationale for the sampling strategy. The chapter details data collection methods, including a pilot study, and their implementation. The analysis involves reflexive thematic analysis. Acknowledging the researcher's insider status, ethical considerations are addressed and the chapter concludes by outlining criteria for enhancing research quality.

**Chapter Six** explores teachers' perspectives on intercultural communication (IC). It examines their backgrounds to determine pre-existing IC skills and their impact on IC within CPS. The chapter further reveals expatriate teachers' IC skills through various sources, emphasising both knowledge and experiential learning. Varied perspectives on IC emerge, with some developing unique approaches in social interactions. Lastly, teachers' views on expatriate teachers' induction sessions at CPS are discussed.

**Chapter Seven** explores expatriate EFL teachers' perspectives on the institutional culture at CPS, SQU, and its impact on their intercultural interactions and teaching practices. It examines teachers' varying views on the concept of culture, highlighting its complexity. Discussions touch on unofficial university cultural guidelines, participants' challenges in distinguishing religion from culture, and examples of Islam's influence on CPS and SQU culture. The chapter highlights diverse perspectives, emphasising the complexity of the cultural context at SQU.

**Chapter Eight** investigates expatriate teachers' views on cultural and religious issues in their classes and intercultural interactions. It discusses issues such as 'Gender dynamics' and 'ELT methods and materials at the CPS, SQU. The examination of 'gender dynamics' delves into sub-themes like coeducation, gender segregation, personal space, and student interactions, revealing a nuanced situation at SQU influenced by cultural backgrounds and the emergence of a 'third culture'. The 'personal space' issue underlines the importance of cultural sensitivity, particularly with conservative female students. Challenges arise in ELT methods like CLT in mixed-gender classrooms, and teachers navigating sensitive topics like religion and politics with diverse perspectives on handling them.

**Chapter Nine** concludes the study and addresses the research questions. It presents key findings and discusses the study's contributions, limitations, and recommendations for stakeholders, including policymakers, teacher training institutions, curriculum developers, teachers, learners, and future research. It explores the implications while suggesting avenues for further research to enhance understanding of the fields of IC and ICC.

## **Chapter Two: Background and Context of Study**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the context in which this study is being conducted. It aims to clearly depict the contextual background of the educational institution (CPS, SQU) and English Language Teaching (ELT) in Oman and explain why this context is significant and worthy of research. The chapter will first introduce the research problem. It will then describe the key characteristics of the context, such as the socio-cultural, religious, linguistic, and educational aspects, which may influence the implementation and effectiveness of ELT practices. The significance of the context will be discussed, highlighting its potential impact on the learning outcomes of students and the professional development of teachers. Additionally, the chapter will identify gaps or areas that require further investigation within the context.

### **2.2. Oman: cultures and micro/sub-cultures**

As highlighted by Mujtaba et al. (2010), Omani culture is recognised for its diversity and heterogeneity, primarily stemming from a population composed of various ethnicities and languages. Al-Azri (2013) attributes this diversity to historical factors such as maritime trade, tribal migration, and interactions with the outside world. Therefore, Oman itself does not have one culture although the Omani government promotes Omani nationalism by promoting the popular Omani Arab culture to be the official culture (Al-Azri, 2013). Rather, Oman has a number of minorities across the country such as Baluchies, Jabbalis, Mehris, Harsosis, Kamzaris, Lawatis, Swahilies, Persians, and other Arab communities who migrated from other countries. Although they are all Omanis by nationality, they have different languages other than Arabic and some of them have distinct cultures in their local regions. This makes clear that being Omani does not mean that you must be an Arab or a Muslim. Being Omani does not mean you have to be similar to all Omanis. The Oman of today has been influenced by its geopolitics and other historical factors that should also be considered. In the past, Omani sovereignty expanded to encompass areas from Qatar all the way down to areas on the south coast of Iran, Pakistan, India, the south east of Africa and to areas as far as the Congo in the centre of Africa in the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. All of that was under the control and sovereignty of the Omani Empire before it shrank and divided in 1857. Their rule of Zanzibar ended in 1964 and other new countries were formed out of it such as the UAE in 1971. To understand Omani cultures clearly, this information should not be ignored so interacting with Omani students especially at SQU, where students

originate from all over Oman, can be based on broader understanding and knowledge of the Omani socio-cultural fabric.

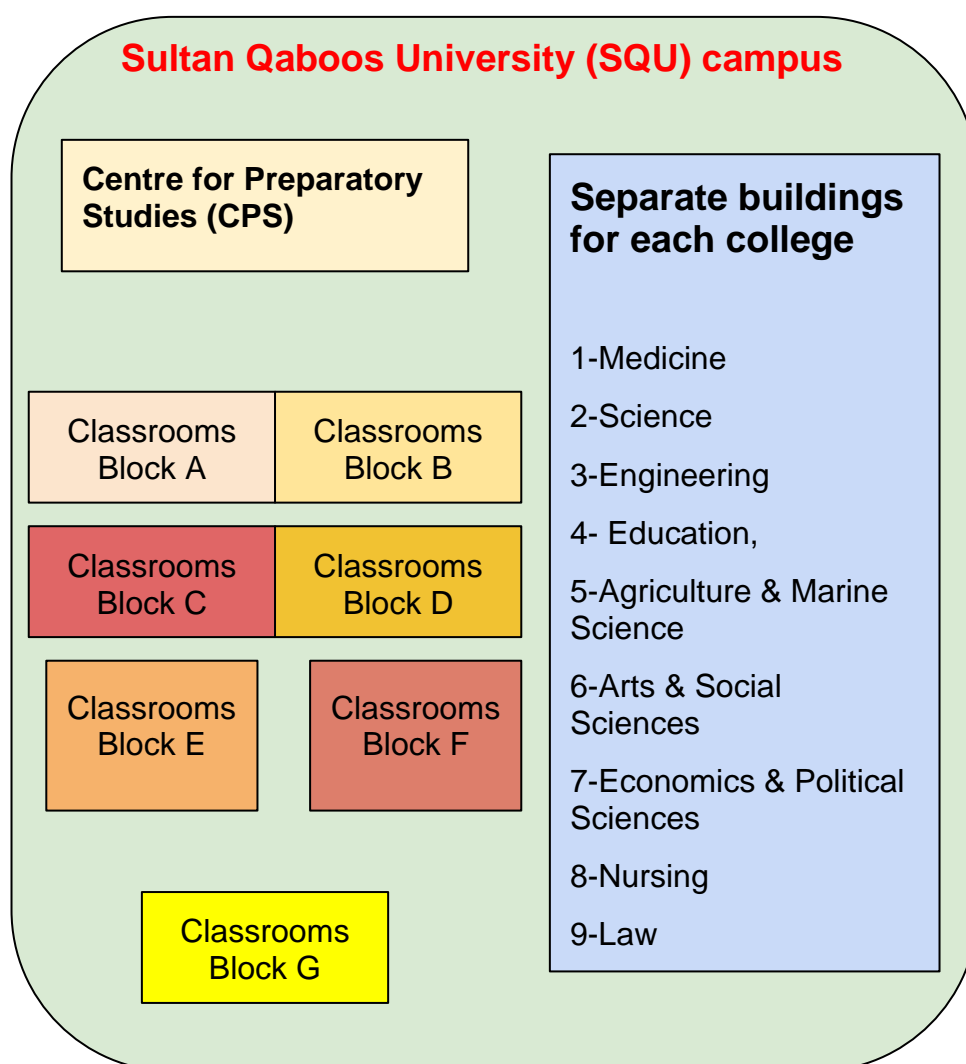
Microcultures in Oman can be minorities who are generally classified based on the language they speak and other aspects such as ethnicity or religion (Peterson, 2004). Baluchies, Lawati, Kamzaries, Swahilis, Mehri and Shahris are considered microcultural groups. Some are seen as 'indigenous' but others are regarded as 'diasporic or migrant' microcultures (Peterson, 2004). Shahris, for example, in the southern region of Oman have been indigenous Omanis and are subject to the majority of the same laws as any other group of Omani residents. However, they have their own distinct cultural identity and language. They maintain distinctive norms of customs and communication practices (such as their traditional male and female clothes and their own native language) that form their distinctive societal and community culture. Virtually all members of the Shahri community speak either Mehri or Gabbali (Jabbali) as their native language amongst themselves (Peterson, 2004). For them, Arabic, which is the main official language in Oman, is their second language for interacting with those who are not Shahris or Gabbalis, outside of the domestic family or household situations.

### **2.3. Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and the English Language Programme at the Centre of Preparatory Studies (CPS)**

This study was conducted at the Centre of Preparatory Studies (CPS) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) which was built in 1986. SQU is the first state university in Oman and is considered to be the most prestigious university in the country. SQU campus consists of 9 colleges (1-College of Medicine, 2-College of Science, 3-College of Engineering, 4- College of Education, 5-College of Agriculture & Marine Science, 6-College of Arts & Social Sciences, 7-College of Economics & Political Sciences, 8-College of Nursing, & 9-College of Law). The CPS is a centre that provides the Foundation Programme (FP) which prepares SQU first-year students in English language, Mathematics, Information Technology and Study Skills (Foundation Program Overview, n.d) to enable those students to study their major subjects in their colleges at SQU (Centre for Preparatory Studies, n.d.).

After finishing high school with the General Education Diploma, high-attaining students in Oman pursue their higher education through many routes. Around 3000 students arrive at SQU with a

low or medium level in English proficiency despite having studied English in schools for 12 years. This period is meant to be adequate to prepare students for higher education in English (Sergon, 2011). Those who pass the university's English Placement Test and the Exit Test start their major subjects in their colleges at SQU while those who do not, take an intensive English Language Programme run by the FP at the CPS. Depending on their level in English, students spend one to three semesters on this programme. The CPS consists of around 200 English language teachers from over 30 nationalities (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Tuzlukova and Stead, 2016) with Omanis making up only 19% of those teachers. The CPS employs expatriate teachers by offering renewable three-year contracts to qualified candidates who have TESL/TEFL certification and at least two years of teaching experience in the field (Tuzlukova and Stead, 2016). This current study takes place within a rich diversity of teachers from a wide range of national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.



**Figure 1: SQU campus that includes CPS as a separate centre for the Foundation Programme**



## **2.4. The cultural and religious context of SQU**

### **2.4.1. The architectural structure of the university campus**

Oman is a Muslim-majority country, so when SQU was built, this first Omani university took into account the country's Islamic culture and heritage, starting with its architectural structure. The university campus embodies aspects of Omani tradition alongside aspects of modern life with the aim of making it appropriate and functional for educational purposes (Postgraduate Students' Guide, 2012). It is noticeable that most if not all university buildings are aligned to face Mecca (the *qibla*)<sup>1</sup> and the university mosque is located in the heart of the university, so Muslim students and staff can access it easily during the day. In addition, all colleges and buildings provide supplementary prayer rooms for men and women. Therefore, teaching at Sultan Qaboos University requires a consideration of its specifically Islamic context as it also designates gender spaces such as walkways, stairs, computer labs, restaurants, sport centres, rest rooms (see further discussion in Chapter Seven).

### **2.4.2. Coeducation and gender consideration**

One other major cultural and religious issue that must be considered when teaching at this university is gender. The majority of classrooms, lecture theatres, libraries, and laboratories have separate entrances for each gender. Even though male and female students share the same classes, each gender has not only its own entrance to the classrooms but also its own corridors. It is generally understood that students will sit separately (without being told to) so engaging in mixed-gender pair or group work is unusual (Al-Mahrooqi, and Sultana, 2012). This issue is further discussed with the participants of this study in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Cultural and religious facets of the local context at SQU such as these were considered before it was established. The government introduced coeducational higher education with these cultural modifications so Omanis would accept coeducation as a concept in higher education. It would have been very difficult for Omanis to accept having coeducation in higher education in 1986 at a time when there was no coeducation, even in state schools. It would also have been difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> The direction that Muslims face when they pray.

operate separate universities for both genders, considering that the concept of higher education was novel. Additionally, it would have been more expensive for the government to construct two separate university campuses, as is the case with all Gulf countries. This is one distinction that sets Oman apart in establishing higher education, differing from the Gulf states.

Nevertheless, the GCC's education ministries have made the decision to hire teachers of both genders to teach in these institutions. In the case of Oman, Basic Education schools, state schools, also have a coeducational system where pupils who are in grades 1–4 are taught by female teachers. Then, they move to a gender-segregated school system starting from Grade 5 to grade 12 except in private or international schools which are generally coeducational. For students at SQU who experienced single-sex education from Grade 4 through Grade 12, the introduction of an expatriate teacher of the opposite gender in higher education or private English language institutions represents a significant shift in their social and educational environment. This encounter becomes more than just an academic experience; it serves as their initial meaningful interaction with someone from a different cultural background. This aspect of culture may vary even among GCC countries where, it might be assumed, they are similar because they share many aspects of culture, economy, and religion. Yet, they are different as Dahl (2010) points out how this aspect could be perceived in the UAE:

[Y]oung men and women rarely interact with people of the opposite sex outside their immediate families, so initially they may be very uncomfortable and unsure about how to act when confronted by a Western man or a female instructor who has uncovered hair and wears clothing considered by their families to be unsuitable for going out in public (p. 53).

### **2.4.3. Attire**

Another important social aspect of Omani culture that can be seen clearly among Omani students and staff at SQU is the way they dress. Omani male students generally wear a white long robe called a *dishdasha* with either a cap or a turban. Female students wear a long black dress called an *abayah* with either a headscarf or a head covering such as a *hijab* (called locally *lihaf*). Although some women in Oman cover their faces in some regions in Oman either for cultural or religious reasons, female students and teachers are not allowed to cover their faces while they are in the university according to the SQU rules. Such a rule indicates that the policies at SQU do not always

align with more general religious teachings or societal norms and values. Instead, they may originate from political considerations, with the justification of these policies not explicitly stated.

The dress code at SQU for Omani male and female staff and students generally matches the clothing worn by people in the community outside of SQU on formal occasions such as weddings, official ceremonies or when going out, such as shopping, visiting relatives, or friends in general. It is also the dress code for Omani male and female university staff, in general, with some exceptions for technicians or doctors in the university hospital. However, this dress code does not apply to expatriate staff who are only expected to wear appropriate and decent attire (trousers, t-shirts, shirts, whether with long or short sleeves for males, and blouses preferably with long sleeves and long skirts (longer than knee length) for females).

Insisting on a particular attire as university policy is another example of how this educational institution mirrors its country's culture and traditions. Some foreign teachers may not understand why students dress in that way if they are not aware of the university policies. SQU, thus, represents to some extent a microcosm of the broader culture of Omani society, even though the university culture may differ in some respects or have its own specificities, as evidenced by the case of banning face coverings for women on campus.

#### **2.4.4. Islamic and national occasions**

Like elsewhere in Oman, SQU gives its students and staff time slots between their lecture times and during their working hours for prayers. During the month of Ramadhan (a lunar Islamic month), lecture times and working hours are shortened to accommodate people who are fasting and people who are not fasting are also included. Oman also gives days off for some Islamic events and national days throughout the year and all staff and students take official leave on those occasions (such as Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adh'ha, New Islamic Year, National Day, Prophet's Birthday, and Prophet's Ascension, Accession Day) (Raj, 2024).

#### **2.4.5. Socio-cultural considerations of teaching English at the CPS, SQU, Oman**

Teaching English at the CPS, SQU in the context just described may, therefore, cause challenges or misunderstandings for teachers on how to relate to students in this cultural context. Many SQU teachers come from different national and cultural backgrounds and may either interpret things differently or act differently according to their existing knowledge or their initial understanding of the current culture with which they are interacting. Some SQU teachers may be unsure of how to interact with their students as they may not be aware of what is appropriate and what is not in this culture (Palmer, 2015). For example, as described previously, a challenge may be how to deal with male and female students who are segregated to an extent but at the same time share one classroom. The students themselves often find it a challenge to be in a coeducational classroom (Mackenzie, 2016). It is worth remembering that the university culture may be new to the students themselves (Hall, 1976; Holliday, 1999). Some learning activities might not be suitable in this context and CPS English language teachers may have to think twice when planning an interactive activity that requires gender interaction or if the number of male or female students is not enough for an activity to be implemented separately. This may cause a challenge to many teachers who are not familiar with such aspects of culture or who do not have enough experience working in different cultural contexts. These socio-cultural issues will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

Being a student or a teacher at SQU, the university administration considers it important to be aware of these cultural and religious facets of SQU, to encourage mutual respect and avoid conflict. The environment at SQU is actually quite different from other higher education institutions in Oman in terms of its local culture and educational settings. SQU has its own idiosyncratic cultural rules which can be called, as Bhabha (1994) calls it, the 'third space' or as Holliday (1999) terms it, 'the small culture'. Some other higher education institutions, especially the private ones, may not reflect some of the above-mentioned socio-cultural concerns, as they operate with their own administrations, policies, regulations, and, consequently, their own cultures. This particular context is worthy of study as there is a distinct lack of studies that focus on finding out the significance of the socio-cultural context in a particular educational institution and how it affects the way expatriate EFL teachers teach English and interact with this particular socio-cultural context. This study, therefore, considers a range of social and cultural features while seeking teachers' perspectives and explores the impact of these contextual factors on their perspectives and teaching practices.

## **2.5. English Teaching materials at SQU**

When English was first introduced to higher and further education institutions in Oman, it was introduced using English language packages that were produced mainly in the U.S. and the UK and that were mainly produced for global consumption. This is an aspect of what Ritzer has called ‘McDonalldization’ (Ritzer, 2011). Although the CPS makes efforts to select suitable materials from international publishers and spends significant sums on purchasing high quality EFL materials to meet the CPS and the students’ needs, some of these materials fail to be suitable, completely or partially, for the CPS requirements because they are not designed for this part of the world. There have been issues with these teaching materials not considering the Omani cultural context or not covering some of the learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve in specific courses. In such cases, the CPS produces some in-house teaching materials to include the local touch and desired learning outcomes. However, these materials are often produced inexpensively in monochrome and may not always match the quality of internationally published materials available commercially.

In Higher Education institutions in Oman, and at the CPS at SQU in particular, teachers teach English language either by using commercial international textbooks that are likely to be provided and approved by the institution or by bringing their own materials to the classroom as long as they meet the course learning outcomes stated in the CPS document. In the CPS, the in-house materials that are produced by the institution are few and the CPS is still dependent generally on commercial EFL textbooks. These materials are often criticised for ignoring the local cultural contexts (Mahmoud, 2015; Alghamdi, 2018). It is; therefore, possible to find institutions that use commercially available English language textbooks throughout their teaching where there is no mention of Omani culture or Omani topics at all. This is a direct result of there being no clear policy based on research that guides these institutions on how ELT is contextualised.

In this respect, according to Byram (2008), the influence that policy has on the practice of teachers in their classrooms varies from one country to another and varies even within one country. He adds that even in centralised systems it is very difficult for teachers to implement all policies. As a result, teachers end up following their own intuitions and so risk bringing materials to the classroom that either do not suit students culturally or do not conform with the educational policy. Rather, they follow their own perceptions and beliefs about their students’ culture (Prowse & Goddard, 2010).

Internationally, researchers in the field (Holliday, 1994, 2009; Bax, 2003; McKay, 2003) argue for adopting a locally appropriate pedagogy or a culturally responsive pedagogy that suits the

cultural context and to not merely transfer what has been applied in native English speakers' educational settings. McKay (2003) states that an 'appropriate pedagogy of English as an International Language (EIL) needs to be informed by local expectations regarding the role of the teacher and learner' (p. 140). Likewise, a number of researchers in Oman have emphasised the importance of selecting suitable ELT materials for the Omani cultural context (Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova, 2010; Al Seyabi, 2010; Khan, 2010).

Therefore, it is important to explore how the Omani cultural context, its ideologies and its policies have shaped ELT at SQU and how ELT teachers interpret its particular cultural and educational context, whilst at the same time negotiating their personal and professional identities. It is important to explore how ELT teachers deal with the available ELT materials and their views on using such materials in their teaching.

## **2.6. Summary of the chapter**

This chapter has presented the background and the context of the study, where it took place. It has provided an overview of the context for the study, focusing on the educational institution and English Language Teaching (ELT) in Oman. It introduced the research problem and described key aspects of the cultural, socio-cultural, religious, and educational context that may influence ELT practices. The significance of this context was discussed, emphasising its potential impact on teacher professional development. The chapter further explored microcultures in Oman, including linguistic and cultural diversity, and delved into the specific context of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and the Centre of Preparatory Studies (CPS). Cultural and religious facets at SQU, such as gender considerations, attire, and coeducation, were examined. The chapter concluded by addressing cultural challenges faced by English language teachers at the CPS, SQU and the impact of teaching materials on the cultural context of ELT.

## **Chapter Three: Conceptual Framework and theoretical framework**

This chapter presents the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of this study. It starts by clarifying some conceptual key issues such as ‘culture’ and ‘context’ which are central to the study and frequently used. Then, it discusses the definitions of teachers’ conceptions, perspectives and beliefs. Finally, it presents the theoretical framework which consists of ‘critical intercultural communication’ (CIC), and ‘a contextual approach to intercultural communication’ (CAIC).

### **3.1. Conceptual Framework**

#### **3.1.1 Culture and Context**

To research a topic that is so connected to expansive and multidisciplinary concepts such as ‘culture’ and ‘context’ in ELT, it is necessary to first define these terms in a general sense and then within the field of study, specifically intercultural communication (IC). This step helps to narrow down the scope of the investigation before proceeding to the next stage, which involves using a framework or set of guidelines for discussing cultural and contextual issues related to English language teaching (ELT), based on the existing literature. It is important to understand how these concepts are related to each other as well as the perspectives held by ELT professionals.

The Theoretical Framework section incorporates culture and context as essential elements in its theories, models, and approaches. In this section, the theoretical framework, my objective is to offer a thorough elucidation of these concepts and to establish their relevance to the domains of IC and ELT. Although these two concepts have some overlap, each concept can impact learning and teaching in unique ways (Savard and Mizoguchi, 2019). Hence, it is important to clearly differentiate between context and culture to have a better understanding of their effects. Savard and Mizoguchi (2019) have provided clarification regarding the distinction between the two concepts in the following statement:

[W]e use our cultures in contexts and the intensity of their influence may vary according to the context. It is only in context that culture has an influence. Without the context, culture has no concrete influence, only a potential influence (p. 5).

Savard and Mizoguchi (2019) highlight the dynamic relationship between culture, context, and their influence. It suggests that culture's impact is contingent upon the context in which it is situated. The influence of culture is not fixed or universal but rather varies in intensity depending on the specific context. It suggests that understanding culture requires an appreciation of the situational dynamics in which it operates, recognising that its impact can fluctuate or transform depending on the context it encounters. Their view also emphasises the importance of considering both culture and context in understanding their influence in educational contexts, particularly in the field of language teaching.

### **3.1.1.1 Conceptualising culture**

Although it is quite difficult and may be impossible from reviewing the literature to come up with one universal definition of culture (Holliday, 2011; Spencer-Oatey, 2012; Leerssen, 2021), suggesting or selecting a working definition of culture that is compatible with the scope and the theoretical framework of this study is necessary. That is because, as Moon (2010) states, the way 'culture' is defined directs the way it is studied. Additionally, "culture is often considered the core concept in intercultural communication" (Martin & Nakayama, 2013, p.88). Therefore, with all its complexity, there is no way to avoid discussing it. Discussing some definitions may serve as an essential prerequisite for delving into more specific cultural domains such as institutional and classroom culture. By providing this foundational understanding, it will establish a common ground, ensuring that readers and researchers alike possess a shared comprehension of the intricate concept of culture. This not only prevents potential misinterpretations but also enables the researcher to contextualise culture within educational settings effectively. This discussion equips this study with the necessary analytical lens to critically examine how culture in a specific context influences educational institutions and classrooms and thus teachers' perspectives and their teaching practices. This emphasises the opinion that culture is not an abstract notion but a pervasive force that warrants our attention and scrutiny in the realm of education.

There is disagreement regarding different understandings of 'culture', its nature, (Spencer-Oatey, 2012) and the impact that 'culture' has - and will continue to have - on education. In general, the literature discusses countless definitions of culture across many disciplines including but not limited to, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies (Kang-Young, 2009) and every discipline has contributed its unique viewpoint to the way in which we conceptualise culture (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011). Academics and other researchers have come up with different



definitions of the term ‘culture’, which can mean different things depending on both the context (Seelye, 1997) and the way they understand culture in their field (Rings and Rasinger, 2023). There is, therefore, no universally accepted definition (Leerssen, 2021) which shows how complex this concept is. Williams (1985) even described it as "one of the three most complicated words in the English language" (p.87) and “a notoriously difficult term to define” (Spencer-Oatey, 2012, p.1). In their study entitled ‘Culture: a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions’, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) cite 164 definitions of culture. However, my study is only concerned with the concept of culture that is commonly encountered in the fields of intercultural communication (IC), critical intercultural communication (ICC), and English language teaching (ELT).

A vast body of work within the fields of IC pedagogy has highlighted important problems regarding how culture is understood, perceived and defined (Holliday 2011; Spencer-Oatey, 2012; Jandt, 2013; Ferri 2018; Leerssen 2021; Dervin and Jacobsson 2022). Similarly, within the realm of foreign language instruction, culture has been examined through multiple lenses and interpreted diversely by various researchers and educators (e.g., Kramsch, 1998; Byram, 2008; Holliday, 2011; Sun, 2013; Risager, 2007; Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018). Hence, delving into an exhaustive review of cultural definitions and concepts across various disciplines lies outside the scope and aim of this study. Nonetheless, for the purpose of illustrating the diverse range of definitions and approaches adopted by different researchers towards the concept of culture, I will touch upon some. This exploration intends to highlight the complexity inherent in the notion of culture and, ultimately, to elucidate relevant conceptualisations pertinent to the study of intercultural communication.

### **3.1.1.2 What constitutes culture?**

Historically, and from a practitioner point of view, teachers have tended to define culture in terms of tangible things that people share such as food, artefacts, books, music, and so on (Brogger, 1992; Moore, 1996). This definition of culture, as Seelye (1997) argues, is too narrow and does not prepare, unfortunately, teachers or students to understand the behaviour of others from different cultures because it only includes a few aspects of culture. Therefore, teachers have come to realise that including authentic materials in language instruction is not enough. They also need to expand the definition of culture to include ideas, values and worldviews of people or individuals who live in certain places, speak a common language, and share ways of living and behaviour (Moore, 1996). This inclusive approach has been accepted and used widely by other researchers

such as Byram (2008) who defines culture as "shared beliefs, values and behaviours of a social group" (p.60). Other scholars such as Hall (1976) view 'culture' as a comprehensive view of people's lives that covers all aspects of human life and he argues that "there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched or altered by culture" (p.16). He sees culture as 'man's medium' that includes:

How people express themselves (including shows of emotions), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved, how their cities are planned and laid out, how transportation systems function and organised, as well as how economic and government systems are put together and function (pp.16-17).

According to Brown and Lee (2015), "culture is a way of life. It is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. It makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations" (p.156). This perspective emphasises that culture is not merely a superficial layer of customs; it is a profound force shaping our perceptions, behaviours, and relationships, embedding itself into the core of our existence.

Thompson (2007) suggests that anthropologists in the 1930s viewed culture as a 'complex whole', wherein its elements formed a system that could be compared to those of other societies or groups. This inclination reflects an effort to systematically categorise culture. From this perspective, culture is also seen as "a learned meaning system that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next and are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p. 10). This definition shows that culture is static and not changing over generations. Within this definition as well, culture was also defined as 'nationstate' or confined to nations and countries (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). This view is represented by the traditional view of culture. This perspective is known as the essentialist view (Holliday, 2011).

Importantly, the critical perspective on culture challenges the conventional notion of culture as static and instead considers it as dynamic and evolving (Agudelo, 2007; Griswold, 2013; Kramsch, 1993; Martin & Nakayama, 2013; Moon, 2010; Rings & Rasinger, 2023). This perspective represents the 'non-essentialist view' (Holliday, 2011). Agudelo (2007) argues that culture is a

fluid concept that undergoes constant change and is shaped by the social sciences and academic research. He contends that the traditional idea that culture is a static and complete entity has been proven incorrect. Instead, anthropologists and social scientists recognise culture as an ever-evolving, dynamic, and permanently incomplete process (Agudelo, 2007; Rings and Rasinger, 2023). A more recent comprehensive critical perspective definition of culture is the one by Rings and Rasinger (2023), who define it as “learned, programmed or conditioned values, beliefs, assumptions and norms common to a larger (self-sufficient) population that expresses these characteristics in particular patterns of behaviour, rituals, artefacts and institutions” (p.7). They argue that culture exhibits a dynamic nature as individuals engage in interactions, negotiate meanings, and actively participate in shaping various aspects of their culture, including beliefs, behaviours, and rituals. These efforts aim to challenge existing norms, seek improvements, and explore alternative approaches.

### **3.1.1.3 Conceptualising Culture through models: Iceberg model of culture**

Many models of culture have been developed by scholars in different disciplines. Each of these models provides a different perspective on the nature and components of culture and the ways in which it shapes human experience and behaviour. Examples of the models that conceptualise the complexity of culture are the ‘iceberg model’, the ‘tree model’ and the ‘onion model’ (Gibson, 2002). These models utilise diverse attributes to visually represent the components of culture. For instance, Hall (1976) classifies what constitutes culture as being made up of ‘overt culture and covert culture’. This comprehensive definition is also outlined by Kramsch and Zhu Hua (2016) though they use different words to argue what culture constitutes. They state that culture is getting both ‘smaller’ and ‘bigger’. The big C culture is literature and the arts, and the small culture is "the way of life and everyday behaviours of speakers, readers and writers in daily communication" (p.47). When reviewing the literature, a researcher has to be aware of such definitions as different scholars express them differently though they share similar meaning as exemplified in Hall’s (1976) and Kramsch’s and Zhu Hua’s (2016) definitions.

In language education, Halualani (2011) and Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011) better articulate Hall’s (1976) visualisation of culture. They further divide culture into big C ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ and little C ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’. The table below illustrates this idea with examples to each category.

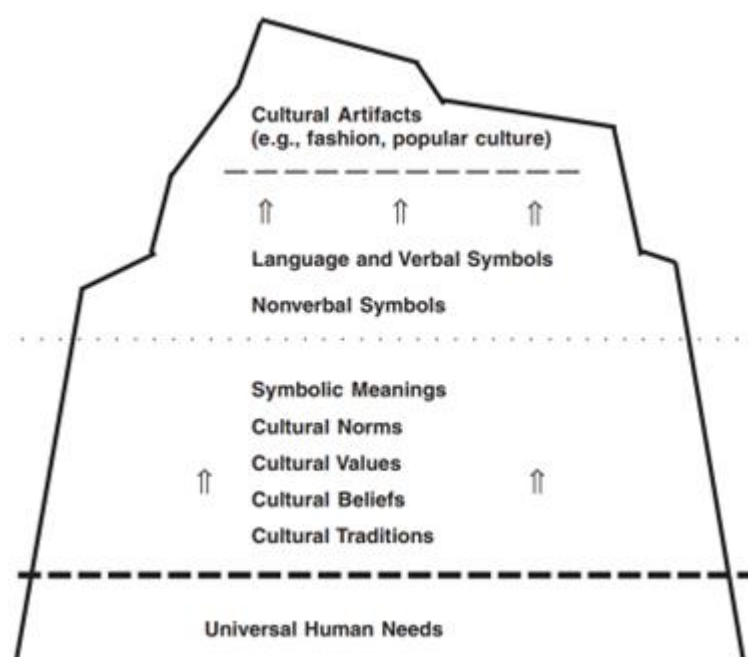
**Table 1**

	<b>Big C culture</b>	<b>Little C culture</b>
<b>Visible culture</b>	Literature, arts, architecture, history, and geography of the country in which the target language is spoken.	Gestures, body language, use of space, dress, food, leisure life, and daily customs.
<b>Invisible culture</b>	Native speaker's core values, beliefs, social norms, assumptions, and legal foundations.	Popular opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes.

I personally find the Iceberg model of culture proposed by Ting-Toomey (1999) useful and easy to clearly conceptualise. The concepts of ‘overt and covert’ (Hall, 1976, p. 14), seen and unseen, and the concrete and the intangible aspects of culture have been expressed by Hall (1976) and used extensively by other researchers afterwards (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Halualani, 2011; Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011). That was then translated into the ‘iceberg culture model’ which was attributed to Hall by a number of researchers such as Rattanawong (2023) and Shirnazarova (2023). In fact, I could not find this model in any of Hall’s books, such as ‘Beyond Culture’ (1976) that other researchers referred to. Hall (1976) shows that culture has two dichotomies ‘overt and covert’ (Hall, 1976, p. 14) but he does not represent these dichotomies to the iceberg model. Ting-Toomey (1999; 2019) compares culture to the iceberg. Using a metaphor of the iceberg, (see Figure 4) the tip of the iceberg represents the artefacts, verbal and non-verbal symbols, and the things that we see and hear, while the deeper layer of the iceberg, which is larger and more important, represents the beliefs, traditions and values that underpin the behaviours. Hall’s conceptualisation and classification of culture as ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ to a certain degree simplifies the concept of culture and helps to contextualise it in my study. This model of the iceberg by Ting-Toomey (1999) conceptualises culture in a comprehensive way which is compatible with previous definitions that showed the inclusive nature of culture such as Hall’s previous concept of culture (1976) and Kramsch’s and Zhu Hua’s (2016) definition. The iceberg model of culture helps to identify and understand the visible and invisible aspects of culture that may be impacting the perspectives and practices of EFL expatriate teachers at SQU. For example, the model can be used to analyse

cultural norms, values, assumptions, and artefacts that may be influencing how EFL expatriate teachers approach teaching and communication in a new cultural context.

Moreover, it has helped me to understand how teachers view the layers of culture at SQU, at the CPS, and in the classroom, and how they interpret the surface layer which they see every day at SQU. It also helped me in the analysis process to understand why teachers behave or do certain things which can be seen as overt aspects of culture and asks them to reveal the covert aspects of their behaviour, beliefs and perceptions and whatever is underneath the surface of their iceberg culture. This was especially done by using the Stimulated Recall Discussion method (SRD) after observing their classes (class observation).



**Figure 4: The Iceberg Model of Culture (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.10)**

This model can be seen in a more developed specific model which is the ecology model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which adds more layers to the invisible layer which are macro and micro contextual elements. However, I have not included it here as Neuliep's (2018) model (CAIC) (see Figure 5) is sufficient and is more relevant to this current study.

Hall's (1976), Ting-Tommey's (1999), and Neuliep's (2018) conceptualisation of culture and subcultures/microcultures can be used to understand other sub-cultures that exist within the big culture of Oman such as university culture, CPS culture and classroom culture. Drawing on this

depiction of culture helped me to ask my participants this question: “Are there any cultural guidelines for new teachers of the Omani culture and SQU contextual culture and how might you understand and interpret them?”, “What socio-cultural considerations you need to be aware of that could influence your teaching practices?”

Hall (1976) argues that the only way to understand the reality of covert culture, such as those values and thoughts underlying the behaviour of certain cultural aspects, is to actively participate in that culture, and he contends that these aspects ‘must be lived rather than read or reasoned’ (p.58). His statement may explain how the presumptions that teachers hold or have constructed about Oman before they start their job in the CPS, might or might not be true. This prompted me to ask expatriate teachers about their perspectives of Oman before and after they lived in Oman. By understanding this, teachers can understand the cultural context in Oman and how it functions in its own way and within its own boundaries which can be similar or different to those teachers’ cultural backgrounds.

#### **3.1.1.4 Iceberg model of culture and the CAIC**

As I have indicated, the iceberg model suggests that culture has visible and invisible aspects. The Context Approach to Intercultural Communication (CAIC) emphasises the importance of understanding the specific cultural and social contexts in which communication takes place. These two approaches are interconnected because understanding the visible and invisible aspects of culture, as described in the iceberg model, is a way for navigating communication in different cultural contexts, as emphasised in the contextual approach (Neuliep, 2018).

#### **3.1.1.5 Iceberg model of culture and CIC**

The iceberg model suggests that culture is complex and multifaceted, with visible and invisible aspects that can impact communication. CIC, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of examining power dynamics and social inequality in IC. These two approaches are interconnected because understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of culture, as described in the iceberg model, is crucial for identifying and challenging power dynamics and social inequality in communication, as emphasised in CIC.

### **3.1.1.6 Other comprehensive views of culture**

Culture is defined by Neuliep (2018) as “an accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal code system” (p.51). Since the concept of culture is a core element in his model of the ‘contextual approach to intercultural communication’ (CAIC), Neuliep (2018) has discussed this definition as follows. One way to characterise a culture is to examine its norms and practises in order to learn more about its members' shared beliefs and values (Neuliep, 2018). In general, members of the same culture will agree on a set of shared values and norms (Neuliep, 2018). The norms and standards of behaviour by which members of a given culture are expected to conduct themselves are rooted in the culture's underlying values and principles (Neuliep, 2018). In his definition, ‘an identifiable group of people with a common history’, signifies that cultural groups can be distinguishable from one another by the commonalities in their shared norms of thought, feeling, and action. People who belong to a particular culture have a history in common in addition to common values, beliefs, and practices (Neuliep, 2018). He elaborates that all cultures have their roots in the traditions, rituals and customs they practise which they pass on to new generations. In many societies, both official and informal schooling include substantial historical instruction and history is a crucial part of the curriculum (Neuliep, 2018). Learning the history of a culture is the same as learning the values that have been upheld by that society and help understand their present and future (Neuliep, 2018). Neuliep (2018) also states that a culture has specific ‘verbal and nonverbal symbol systems’ that indicates that the means of interaction between members of a society are a crucial part of culture. Those who belong to a culture share a common set of culturally-bound symbols that they use in their spoken and nonverbal exchanges. Therefore, culture determines the meanings of the symbols used in verbal and nonverbal communication.

Al-Hsani (2010), from Oman, defines culture as "a way or system of life that represents and outlines the manners, values, customs and protocols of a specific society" (p.205). Although his definition is similar to Byram's (2008) and Neuliep's (2018) being about shared beliefs, it may denote that shared culture is the guiding system to people's life which is perhaps not the case in some societies where religion governs and shapes people's social and cultural life in their societies (Al-Harthi and Al-Harthi; 2013; Durkheim, 1976; Greetz, 1973; Mowlana, 2014).

Durkheim (1976) posited that religion plays a pivotal role in shaping culture by acting as a unifying element within society. It offers a collective framework of beliefs, values, and rituals that foster a

sense of community among its adherents. Through the practice of religious customs and ceremonies, individuals not only reaffirm their connections but also contribute to the solidarity of the society at large. Beyond its spiritual aspects, religion serves crucial societal functions, according to Durkheim (1976). It serves as a catalyst for social integration, regulating behaviour by reinforcing shared norms and values. Moreover, religion imbues human existence within a social context with profound meaning and purpose. It functions as a mechanism for societal control, reinforcing the moral foundation upon which the fabric of society is built. This multifaceted role of religion helps shape the cultural landscape, influencing how communities interact, organise, and derive meaning within their social frameworks.

In Muslim contexts, the influence of religion (Islam) on culture is clearly explained by other Omani researchers, Al-Harthi and Al-Harthi (2013), who argue that Islamic principles and values play a central role in every aspect of Omanis' cultural and societal life. To them, Islam, the dominant religion in Oman, influences socio-cultural aspects of life in the country. This shows one of the arguments and differences of how culture can be viewed by different researchers who can be guided by their epistemological or their educational background. Al-Hsani's definition of culture may confuse people in academia with the concept of religion which is also seen as a system that outlines the manners, values and protocols of people. It is beyond the scope of this study to engage in a detailed discussion of this argument.

To summarise the above discussed definitions of culture, culture is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of beliefs, practices, values, and norms shared by a group of people. It includes not only tangible aspects like language, traditions, and customs but also intangible elements such as worldviews, ideologies, and social behaviours.

To define culture in this study, it is more beneficial to adopt a cultural perspective within the field of ELT and the critical perspective that is manifested (outlined) in the theoretical framework of this study. In this regard, Holliday (2011) presents two paradigms that can distinguish 'essentialist' from 'non-essentialist' views of culture. Using the 'small culture' 'lens', researchers can avoid 'hard' divides such as ethnic or national identities and instead focus on 'softer' cultures within social groups. 'Small cultures' consist of events, interactions, and rituals that a specific group habitually engages in, making the cultures context-specific and not generalist in nature (Holliday, 1999). By understanding 'small cultures', teachers and researchers can gain a better understanding



of their classroom without relying on sweeping assumptions based for example on ethnic stereotypes. Hence, this perspective on culture could be more valuable for the present study.

In addition to these overarching definitions, various models (e.g. iceberg model, onion) and classifications have been developed and employed to elucidate these intricacies of culture. Scholars have attempted to explain the notion of culture by segmenting its diverse elements into different categories, as this categorisation can aid in partially simplifying the complex nature of culture.

### **3.1.1.7 National cultures: monolithic entity vs subcultures**

The above discussion of definitions of culture and how they are conceptualised by researchers demonstrates that understanding culture is a highly complex process and occupies a big space in the field of intercultural communication and ELT. Culture has also been metaphorically visualised in terms of having different layers that people may or may not be aware of. Referring to the models illustrated (such as Iceberg model, CAIC) is one way to decipher this concept and help see cultures in a clearer way although this is not always fixed but often fluid, unpredictable and open to modifications.

Despite these attributes of culture, the traditional view is still prevalent when it comes to practice as people try to maintain fixed concepts of what certain cultures are. To a certain extent, such thinking is understandable as long as the critical perspective is not present. One example of this is how Hofstede (2010) made an effort to categorise cultures according to nations, so they can be recognised and dealt with when it comes to IC. He explains how culture shapes our perception of individuals and groups by establishing different sets of values and assigning varying degrees of importance to them across different countries and cultures. Hofstede's (2010) research is representative of a pervasive trend in both intercultural studies and training that treats countries as the fundamental cultural unit from which all others are analysed and generalisations about cultural norms and expectations are drawn (Holliday, 2020).

The historical and current environmental contexts of these cultures have a significant impact on these values. It is important to acknowledge that cultural values play a vital role in determining organisational practices and customs. However, Fontaine (2007) warns against assuming cross-

cultural differences without adequate knowledge and awareness, suggesting that such differences may stem from ignorance, stereotyping, and lack of understanding rather than actual differences.

Concerns have also been voiced regarding rigid, unchanging, and overly-abstract conceptions of culture, in which the concept of culture is held to be unchangeable and comprehensive (Biesta, 2023). Many scholars have argued that the concept of 'national cultures' is oversimplified because it fails to take into account the unique characteristics of sub-cultures within a nation and instead treats them each as whole nations than federations (Evaristo *et al.*, 2005; Harb, 2016; Martin & Nakayama, 2013; Moon, 2010; Rings & Rasinger, 2023; Straub *et al.*, 2002). Myers and Tan (2002) assert that models of national cultures do not accurately depict the genuine cultural beliefs that are held inside the various nations and it does not allow for the recognition of any subcultures.

This problematic issue was tackled by Kramsch (1993), Holliday (1999, 2011) and Rings and Rasinger (2023). Holliday (2011) proposed the concept of 'small culture' that emphasises the importance of understanding and respecting the diversity of cultural practices within society. According to Holliday (1999, 2011), each culture is not a monolithic entity but comprises of various subcultures or 'small cultures' that exist within it. This idea has been categorised by Rings and Rasinger (2023) as 'sub-cultures'. These 'small cultures' or 'sub-cultures' may have their own distinct languages, values, beliefs, and practices, which may differ from the mainstream culture of the society. Holliday (2011) argues that the failure to recognise and appreciate the existence of these 'small cultures' can result in a lack of understanding and respect for cultural diversity, leading to discrimination and marginalisation of minority groups (Holliday, 2011).

Holliday's (2011) concept of 'small cultures' highlights the need for IC and understanding, particularly in contexts where people from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other.

Kramsch (1993) characterises culture as a membership in a community of discourse that shares a mutual social and historical space, and a common imagination. Similar to critical researchers, she also highlights that culture is heterogeneous, which implies that members of a society cannot be seen as a uniform group as they vary in multiple aspects. There is no definitive member of a society or nation. Nonetheless, Lewis (2008) contends that the inhabitants of any country hold essential beliefs and presumptions about reality that impacts their conduct. Therefore, people do not act in a particular way solely due to their nationality; nevertheless, growing up in a culture leads to the

acceptance of its norms and rules, and these individuals start behaving accordingly, thereby acquiring the culture. Additionally, Kramsch (1993) argues that cultures are in a continuous state of change, and alterations in society affect language, which mirrors the changes in society. Language is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves according to society and cannot remain static. Consequently, there may be significant variations between generations. Other pivotal factors that mould a person's cultural identity are gender, religion, ethnicity, political inclination, socioeconomic status, education, and geography (Holliday, 2010). For this current study, it was important to understand this because the university context, under study, constituted of such micro components among its members such as genders, ethnicities, politics, religion, education, all which could have influenced individuals including expatriate teachers and students.

The concept of 'culture' is, therefore, elusive. This is due to the fact that cultural groups are inherently complex, multifaceted systems in which members embrace a wide variety of practices and conventions that are frequently challenged, evolve through time, and are implemented by people in highly nuanced, unique, and often idiosyncratic ways (Holliday, 2010; Huber and Reynolds, 2014). On one side, it is crucial to update our understanding of what constitutes culture to reflect the present culture, as some aspects of the culture is no longer fixed to a specific place and time in history. Culture must be recognised as a fluid discursive process, continuously built and reconstructed in diverse ways by individuals engaged in power struggles over symbolic meaning and personal interpretations of the past (Kramsch, 2013). This view is also embraced by CIC perspectives which views culture as site of struggle (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). On the other hand, there are other aspects of culture that do not seem to change easily and should also be recognised.

However, each of these perspectives on culture provides a different perspective on its nature and function, and each has implications for how culture should be studied and understood. Despite their differences, these perspectives share the idea that culture is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, shaped by a variety of factors, including environment, economy, politics, language, and individual experiences. Adopting this perspective is in line with the CIC perspective which construes culture as never static (Nakayama & Martin, 2017) but it also recognises the 'small cultures' within the broader culture. To reconcile the two views, a dialectical approach is needed when discussing intercultural communication as proposed by Martin and Nakayama (2010; 2013).

### 3.1.1.8 Microcultural groups with broader cultures

According to Rings and Rasinger (2023) microcultures/subcultures can also be “different affiliations within a territory” (p.7) which can form cultures that exist within other cultures. Most societies have smaller communities - ‘sub-cultures’ or ‘microcultures’ - that function independently from, but in close proximity to, the larger culture. Microcultures are subsets of a larger culture that share the same environment but are identifiable by their own special or specific characteristics, such as a separate language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age range, profession (Neuliep, 2018) or even affiliations (Rings and Rasinger, 2023). In many cases, the histories of microcultures are distinct from those of the mainstream culture (Neuliep, 2018). Therefore, Neuliep (2018) defines ‘microculture groups’ as “an identifiable group of people who share a set of values, beliefs, and behaviours and who possess a common history and a verbal and nonverbal symbol system that is similar to but systematically varies from the larger, often dominant cultural milieu” (p.57).

Gibson (2002) pointed out that when interculturalists discuss ‘culture’, they encompass a broader scope than just the concept of national culture. They encompass a diverse array of cultural classifications, which consist of for example, **organisational culture** (An example is the culture prevalent within Microsoft), **occupational culture** (This pertains to the culture observed among professionals like lawyers, doctors, or teachers), **gendered culture** (Referring to the unique cultures associated with both males and females), **generational culture** (Addressing the distinct cultures existing among the young, middle-aged, and elderly populations), **faith-based culture** (For instance, the cultural differences between Protestantism and Islam), **geographical culture** (Such as the variations between northern and southern Italy), and **socioeconomic culture** (Encompassing the working class, middle class, and upper class cultures). Gibson (2002) argues that in certain scenarios, these types of cultures can exert a more significant influence than national culture when fostering connections among people. Collaborative endeavours involving scholars from diverse nationalities, engaged in research projects, often highlight that their mutual professional interests are so robust that disparities in national culture lose their significance.

This understanding leads to the conclusion that culture is not a monolithic entity confined to national boundaries but is instead a complex tapestry woven from numerous threads of cultural dimensions. These dimensions influence how people relate to one another, define themselves, and navigate societal norms.

In this section, I have discussed how the concept of culture is employed in this study. The research topic will focus on the perspective of teachers in regard to their intercultural communication within the institutional culture and classroom culture. This includes their views on the culture in which they are teaching (referred to as the host culture) and how they approach issues connected to the cultural context. Such issues may include socio-cultural and religious challenges that arise in the classroom. The other complex, but relevant concept to study is the concept of context, which is discussed in the following section.

### **3.1.2 Context**

#### **3.1.2.1 Definition of context and its relation and importance to ELT**

Multiple scholars have emphasised the significance of context wherever teaching and learning takes place (Pennycook, 1989; Kramsch, 1993; Holliday, 1994; Richards and Rodgers, 2001, 2014; Tudor, 2001; Bax, 2003; Kabir, 2011; Al Issa, 2015). For this reason, referring to a clear definition of context and how it is relevant to this study is vital to limit its scope and use it practically in the following sections.

The conceptualisation of context can be vague and needs to be operationally defined. Gouldner (1955) proposes that context is everything. Byram and Grundy (2003) state that “context’ is thus as complex a concept as ‘culture’ ” (p.1). The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'context' as "the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it" (Cambridge Dictionary, online). The term ‘context’ has been defined by Merriam-Webster as “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs” and as “the environment or setting in which something (whether words or events) exists” (Merriam-webster, n.d). For example, in linguistics it refers to the surrounding words or phrases that give meaning to a particular statement or idea. For instance, the meaning of a word can change depending on the context in which it is used. In addition, in a situational context, the situation or setting in which a particular event occurs can also impact its interpretation and significance. In literature, context can refer to the time period, cultural background, and social circumstances in which a work was written, which influence its meaning and interpretation. Understanding the context of particular events, statements, or ideas is often essential to gaining a full and accurate understanding of them.

According to these definitions, the term ‘context’ can be applied to the field of ELT to refer to the various settings where teaching and learning takes place. It is axiomatic that the teaching and learning of languages take place in a certain location or environment, sometimes referred to as being “lived in a particular context” (Tudor, 2001, p.135). Teachers, learners and their environments (including online) are part of a bigger picture of context in language classrooms (micro). This wider meaning of context includes the setting, the surrounding environment and interrelated conditions that have any influence on the context of teaching and learning.

Context can also refer to the broader (macro) cultural, political, economic, and historical factors that shape a situation or event (Pennycook, 1989). This meaning of context includes the “cultural context, political context, local institutional context and context constituted by the teachers and learners in the classroom” (p.248). In addition, Pennycook (1989) states that “second language education (SLE) is involved in a complex nexus of social, cultural, economic, and political relationships that involve students, teachers, and theorists in differential positions of power” (p. 590). In a similar vein, Holliday (1994) states that ELT classrooms are embedded within a multifaceted and interconnected cultural network that includes the institution, students, academic professionals, and country cultures. This network is known as ‘ELT culture’. All these views are also in line with the CIC approach, the theoretical framework of this study, which emphasises the importance of context as its main key principles.

Different researchers may observe different aspects of context because context can be highly subjective. This subjective viewpoint also suggests that 'context' is not only a social phenomenon, but also a deeply personal one, implying that there is no common or universal set of contextual interpretations that all individuals hold.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) argue that the context where teaching and learning take place is vital and sometimes teachers do not pay it enough attention. In order to thoroughly explore the context of this study, which examines the ways in which teachers interact with cultural and contextual factors that shape their environment, it will be necessary to employ specific lenses that allow for focused observation of key aspects. By closely examining these contextual factors and seeking to understand their connections to the broader context under investigation, a deeper understanding of the complexities at play can be achieved.

From the above discussion, it can be argued that context is a crucial element that helps to provide meaning and significance to any situation, event, statement, or idea. It encompasses a wide range of circumstances and conditions that surround a particular situation, providing background information and environment to help understand its meaning. Therefore, the contextual factors shape our experiences and perspectives, which in turn affect how we understand and interpret a particular situation. The cultural context, for example, includes the norms, values, and beliefs of a particular society, which can affect how people communicate and interact with one another. Another recent example highlighting the significance of historical and political factors within a specific context is the ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Understanding this conflict is impossible without referring to the historical and political elements that have contributed to its creation.

Understanding context is also crucial for effective communication and for avoiding misunderstandings. It allows us to interpret situations and messages more accurately and to adapt our communication style to fit different cultural or social contexts. By recognising the various contextual factors that shape our experiences and perspectives, we can develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the world around us.

Such reflection on the concept of context is highly relevant to the topic of this study as it emphasises the crucial role contextual factors can impact upon the ELT system from curriculum development to classroom management and teacher-student interactions. These conditions include a variety of contextual factors, such as social, religious, cultural, educational, political, and institutional contexts, both within SQU and throughout Oman as a whole. Furthermore, they extend to broader contexts, including the regional and international perspectives. Neglecting to consider these contextual factors may result in a lack of or insufficient understanding of the challenges and opportunities that ELT practitioners face at SQU. This approach aligns with the CIC and the CAIC that have been chosen to make up the theoretical framework for this study because all of them emphasise the importance of contextual factors in studying issues.

It is crucial to consider these contextual factors when analysing the ELT system, as they provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay of factors that shape the teaching and learning experience. Furthermore, taking a contextual approach to IC and CIC further

emphasises the need to consider how contextual factors impact upon the individual in the context under study and the wider system as a whole. By exploring the contextual factors that influence teachers' practices, researchers can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and develop strategies to improve it. This approach can also help to promote intercultural understanding and communication, allowing ELT practitioners to effectively navigate the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students. Therefore, a thorough consideration of contextual factors is critical for developing the field of ELT and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in SQU.

To summarise the discussion, culture and context are two distinct but interrelated concepts that play a significant role in shaping human behaviour and experience. Culture provides a shared set of values, beliefs, and norms that can guide behaviour, while context provides the specific situation in which behaviour occurs. Understanding the difference between culture and context is essential for accurately interpreting and predicting human behaviour (teachers' practices) in a variety of settings (Savard & Mizoguchi, 2019).

Based on the above discussion of the two concepts, culture and context, it drives me to explore the concept of culture's influence within different contexts. This could involve examining studies that investigate the role of culture in various educational settings, such as language classrooms or multicultural environments. By analysing different contexts, I can explore how cultural factors interact with other micro/macro factors and affect language teaching, intercultural communication, or teaching approaches. Additionally, it can explore through research that investigates the ways in which culture shapes individuals' beliefs, values, and behaviours, and how these manifestations may emerge or be suppressed depending on the context in which they are situated.

### **3.1.3 Teachers' perceptions, beliefs and perspectives**

Teachers hold many beliefs and perceptions about different things, just like everyone else. However, beliefs, perceptions and perspectives about teaching, learning, and students as well as the context in which they teach, can significantly affect their instructional practices and their own willingness to participate in professional development opportunities (Five *et al*, 2019). Since this study aims to explore the perspectives and teaching practices of expatriate EFL instructors, the significance of understanding teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and practices in the EFL classroom



cannot be overstated. This supports the importance of examining the underlying assumptions and values that guide teachers' pedagogical decisions. Such an examination can yield valuable insights into effective instructional or teacher training strategies and identify areas where further professional development may be necessary. In this section, I argue that the term "conception" can be used interchangeably with "beliefs" and "perspectives" as they are interconnected and frequently used in literature in this manner.

In the literature on teachers' beliefs and knowledge, a variety of words have been employed, including teachers' "beliefs" (Crawley & Salyer, 1995), "personal practical knowledge" (Golombek, 1998), "conceptions" (Freeman, 2002), and "orientations" (Zúñiga, 2016) as well as many others. This multiplicity of usages could possibly lead to confusion and be a brake on the analysis and discussion chapter of this thesis. However, while it is important to define the key terms used in this section, such as beliefs and perceptions, this study does not aim to explore the theoretical arguments surrounding the various definitions of these terms. Rather, the purpose is to select relevant definitions and restrict the use of these terms within the scope of this study. This is because there is no consensus on the definition of belief, and the 'concept has acquired a rather fuzzy usage' as stated by Borg (2001, p.186). Entwistle *et al.* (2000) also mention the varying uses of the term "conception" in the literature in which the term "conception" has been primarily utilised in North America to explain how researchers describe various aspects of teaching. My aim here is to establish a working definition of these terms that encompasses the various terms that my participants use to mean belief, perceptions, views, perspectives and so on.

Perceptions and beliefs are two distinct concepts, but they are often so interconnected in some situations that they can be viewed as two variations of the same concept rather than separate entities. In the case of teacher perceptions, beliefs play a crucial role in shaping them. Research has revealed that teachers' beliefs significantly influence their perceptions of their students' abilities, needs, and behaviours (Schommer, 1993). A teacher's beliefs are formed by their experiences, education, cultural background, and societal influences. Teachers' beliefs, such as their expectations for student achievement, assumptions about student backgrounds, and personal biases, are fundamental to how they interpret and respond to student behaviour and academic performance. These beliefs, in turn, shape how a teacher perceives their students, the classroom environment, and the teaching and learning process. Consequently, teachers' perceptions can be deeply ingrained, and teachers may not be consciously aware of their underlying beliefs (Kaymakamoğlu, 2018; Khader, 2012). Thus, it is essential to view teachers' beliefs and

perceptions as a unified concept, as they work together to shape and interpret teaching practices and student experiences.

Verloop *et al.* (2001) note that a teacher's beliefs reveal their values, ideology, and teaching philosophy. Borg (2001) defines belief as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p.186). Inceciay and Dollar (2011) define belief as "a mental state that is acknowledged as true by the person holding it, while the individual may know that other beliefs may be held by others" (p.3394).

Oikonomou and Patsala (2021) define teachers' perceptions as "thoughts, opinions, and beliefs that instructors hold based on their personal experiences; the term usually refers to how teachers conceptualise their professional activity and behaviour, as well as their teaching practices and experiences" (p.275). According to their definitions, perceptions not only encompass opinions and thoughts but also beliefs. However, in many research studies (Alsbaugh *et al.*, 2020), beliefs and perceptions have been used interchangeably, often being treated as a singular construct rather than being distinguished from one another which could suggest that there is some degree of overlap between the two concepts.

In the context of teaching, 'teachers' beliefs' may refer to the beliefs they hold that are relevant to their teaching practice. These beliefs can also be considered as perceptions when they are examined as part of the teachers' interpretive frameworks or lenses through which they view and make sense of their teaching experiences. In other words, beliefs are a type of perception that reflects the teachers' subjective interpretations of teaching situations and the factors that influence their decision-making. As Johnson (2006) notes, perceptions are 'inherently interpretive and evaluative' (p. 239) and can include beliefs as one of the key components. For example, a teacher may perceive that grammar instruction is essential for language learning because of their belief that grammar is the foundation of language structure. Therefore, when researching EFL teachers, it is essential to consider both their beliefs and perceptions, as they are closely interconnected and can influence their pedagogical practices in significant ways.

In this study, the context of researching expatriate teachers' perceptions, and practices, it may be helpful to use a more inclusive definition of perception that includes both beliefs and perspectives. This is because, as mentioned earlier, perceptions and beliefs are related and can influence one another and which teacher participants tend to use interchangeably. Additionally, expatriate teachers' perspectives can shape their perceptions by influencing the way they interpret and make sense of incoming information.

Using a more inclusive definition of perception that incorporates both beliefs and perspectives can enable me to capture the complex ways in which expatriate teachers make sense of their experiences in a new cultural context. This, in turn, can help me develop a more nuanced understanding of their perspectives and identify factors that may be contributing to their perceptions and beliefs. One way to do this is by defining perception as the process of interpreting and making sense of sensory information, which includes the meanings and explanations individuals assign to that information based on their beliefs, values, and perspectives. By including beliefs and perspectives in the definition of perception, I can acknowledge that these factors can influence how individuals perceive and interpret the world around them. This can be particularly important when researching expatriate teachers' experiences, as their beliefs and perspectives may be shaped by their cultural background and previous experiences, which can, in turn, influence how they perceive and interact with the host culture.

In this study, 'teachers' perspectives' refer to the viewpoints, beliefs, and attitudes held by the expatriate EFL teachers. This might include their thoughts on teaching, language instruction, cultural adaptation, and more. 'Teachers' teaching practices' in this study involves a study of the actual methods and approaches the teachers use in their classrooms. It could encompass instructional strategies, and ways of adapting teaching to different cultural contexts.

### **3.2 Theoretical Frameworks**

The following section outlines the main theoretical frameworks of this study. It also aims to justify their use of those frameworks, how they relate to each other and why they are suitable for this current study.

To conduct a comprehensive investigation on how expatriate teachers view and interact with the cultural context at SQU, it is important to view it and analyse it from multiple perspectives.

Specifically, as this study centres on expatriate EFL teachers who have relocated to a new continent and are teaching in a region with significantly different cultural norms, geopolitical structures, and religious beliefs compared to their own, it is crucial to identify appropriately helpful theories and frameworks to understand the pertinent factors and their connections in order to interpret the data and comprehend the implications of this study.

The core concept of ‘culture’ lies at the heart of this study, necessitating a nuanced exploration of various concepts of ‘culture’ including - but not limited to – religion, social practices, the influence of social contexts, institutional practices and traditions, power dynamics, social spaces, and other interdisciplinary perspectives (Nakayama, 2020). The arrival of these teachers to an institution does not occur within a vacuum, but happens in a multifarious context that needs thorough exploration to get a comprehensive understanding. A thorough understanding of these processes also demands an engagement with critical intercultural literature. Therefore, to provide a robust theoretical framework for this study, it is crucial to incorporate relevant literature from a wide range of sources. I have found that the principles found in critical intercultural literature can act as a general theoretical framework.

In this section, the critical intercultural communication (CIC) approach will serve as the overarching theoretical framework. This is distinct from the approach of traditional intercultural communication (TIC). Adopting a critical perspective on IC (CIC) helps to centre this research on the core issue of context. To investigate how expatriate EFL teachers perceive and interact with the cultural context, inside a higher education institution, requires referring to relevant theories and approaches that emphasise taking into account the surrounding environment and cultural factors that teachers interact with. Although the CIC approach places a strong emphasis on context, culture, and history (Nakayama, 2020; Nakayama & Martin, 2017), the research also requires support from other specialised approaches with a comprehensive contextual framework. Such auxiliary approaches can be considered as supplementary and complementary to the main CIC. The main CIC is quite general whereas the specialised approaches are more specific in nature by providing a more detailed model of the aspects of context. Neuliep’s (2018) contextual approach into intercultural communication (CAIC) counteracts the generality of CIC. In addition, a CIC approach posits one aspect of viewing the nature of culture as fluid, dynamic and unstable (Nakayama, 2020; Nakayama & Martin, 2017) but does not provide models to visualise it. Since ‘culture’ is an essential but complex set of factors in the CIC perspective, it is important to

conceptualise it better using different models. To meet this suggestion, I have also used the 'Iceberg' model to conceptualise culture.

By integrating these various but complementary perspectives and approaches, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of expatriate teachers in the higher education context in Oman, and to examine the ways in which their perspectives and practices are shaped by the cultural context in which they work.

In the following section, I provide a detailed description of the perspectives, models, and approaches that will be used in this study. Then, I elaborate further and justify their usefulness and relevance.

### **3.2.1 Traditional Intercultural Communication (TIC) and Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC)**

Intercultural communication (IC) is the process of exchanging information and understanding between individuals who come from different cultural backgrounds (Jandt, 2013). TIC research sought to explain and predict the ways in which people from different cultural backgrounds communicate with one another in interpersonal, organisational, and other face-to-face or mediated settings. It also focused on either (1) gaining an understanding of (and sometimes making predictions about) how various cultural communities communicate, or (2) making comparisons between the communication styles of two or more cultural groups (how, for example, do the Japanese and American communicators differ in interpersonal, organisational, and other face-to-face or mediated contexts?) (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). However, Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) goes beyond this basic level and involves a deeper understanding of cultural contexts and the ability to reflect critically on one's own cultural biases and assumptions (Nakayama, 2020).

IC is a multidisciplinary field that aims to understand and improve communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. However, it is not a neutral or objective field. Power dynamics, such as who has the power to define the dominant culture, who gets to decide what is 'normal' or 'acceptable,' and who is excluded or marginalised, shape how IC is studied and

practised (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Nakayama (2020) argues that power relations between individuals must be considered.

Rings and Rasinger (2020) contend that TIC has often overlooked the connection between issues such as stereotyping, discrimination, racism, and mechanisms of exclusion, despite these being crucial aspects of communication between cultures. They suggest that this is because power dynamics are not given enough attention in the discipline of TIC. In other words, the ways in which power operates in intercultural communication (IC) are not always adequately examined by TIC, which leads to a lack of understanding of how these issues are connected. To address this gap, scholars (such as Halualani, 2011; Halualani & Nakayama, 2010; Nakayama & Martin, 2017; Nakayama, 2020) have called for a more critical approach to IC that centres on power dynamics, social justice, and equity. This approach acknowledges that IC is not a neutral or objective field, but rather one that is deeply entangled with questions of power and oppression. By examining the ways in which power operates in IC, scholars can gain a more nuanced understanding of how cultural difference is constructed, and how to work towards more equitable and just communication between cultures. This is essentially the main differences between TIC and CIC.

In ELT programmes, the critical approach to IC (CIC) can be used to address cultural identity struggles and power dynamics (such as the contextual factors) that may arise in intercultural interactions. By cultivating these skills and knowledge, teachers can better navigate cultural differences and improve their IC in English-speaking environments. It is important to clarify at this point that this study is not meant to assess teachers' CIC. Rather, CIC is used in this study to understand what affected expatriate teachers' perspectives and teaching practices while interculturally interacting with the socio-cultural context at the CPS and SQU context. It is to explore what power dynamics affected teachers' IC at the CPS, SQU.

### **3.2.2 Critical intercultural communication (CIC)**

The rise of globalisation and recent developments in technology have increased interactions between cultures, in ways which may not be equitable (Nakayama, 2020). The critical approach (that stems from the critical theory (CT)) looks at structural factors such as economics, politics, and beliefs, instead of just focusing on individuals, to better understand intercultural communication (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). IC is currently being studied and understood in a variety of new, profoundly impactful, and rapidly expanding methods, including critical

approaches to IC. The critical method provides a new ‘lens’ for IC, taking into account the realistic complexity of cultural interactions (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Critical approaches to IC have prompted serious doubts about much of the established body of knowledge in this field of IC (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). According to Martin and Nakayama (2000, cited in Nakayama & Halualani, 2010) “a critical perspective might be described as one that addresses issues of macro contexts (historical, social, and political levels), power, relevance, and the hidden and destabilising aspects of culture” (p.2).

‘Critical intercultural communication studies’ (Rings and Rasinger, 2023) is a dynamic and engaging subfield within the broader discipline of communication. With its rapid growth, it serves as a bridge linking various related fields, providing a wealth of research opportunities (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). Nakayama and Martin (2017) clarify that there is no single paradigm or theory that encompasses all of what is meant by ‘critical intercultural communication’. Rather, it is a perspective, or an approach for looking at the interplay between different cultures and experiences, and for understanding how they communicate with one another (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). This critical approach in IC increased in the 1990s when ‘critical - approach’ scholars attacked the traditional IC ‘theory’ that was dominant at that time. These scholars believed that significant facets of cultural cognition, dialogue, persona, and international engagement were being ignored (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). During that period (1990s) there was growing discontent with the *status quo* of IC approaches which gave rise to a call for new approaches during this time period. Critical scholars began to worry that crucial facets of studying culture, identity, communication and IC were being neglected, despite the fact that they had a significant impact on day-to-day lived experiences. These scholars felt that these aspects should not be ignored because they were important to understanding culture (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

TIC studies had mostly looked at cultural and intercultural issues within the framework of a single country or a single national culture (Nakayama, 2020). By contrast, postcolonial scholars (with a critical perspective) provided a new framework, specifically looking at the power relations and broad historical and geopolitical factors at play during colonialism (Nakayama, 2020). They also considered the repercussions, consequences and aftershocks. This was part of a wider general effort to discover how to reposition or change these effects to build a postcolonial world that is more just and equitable (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). The earliest works on postcolonialism focused on the interactions between the natives of the occupied Asian territories and their Western

(European and North American) colonisers. However, this field of study eventually broadened to cover studies of the cultural interactions between people living in the Southern and Northern regions of the world (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Postcolonial researchers investigate topics such as language, race, gender, class, and sexuality by locating such occurrences within the international and national histories of various countries and within their geopolitical contexts (Nakayama, 2020).

This subfield places a strong emphasis on concerns of power, context, socioeconomic ties, historical and structural influences, and how these factors all have a role in creating and constructing culture, as well as IC interactions. The critical perspective, according to these experts, is to “understand the role of power and contextual constraints on communication in order, ultimately, to achieve a more equitable society” (Martin & Nakayama, 2014, p. 195). Additionally, in order to maintain a critical viewpoint while engaging in intercultural dialogue, investigators must “understand how relationships emerge in historical contexts, within institutional and political forces and social norms that are often invisible to some groups” and how cross-cultural relationships are “constrained and enabled by institutions, ideologies, and histories” (Collier, 2002, p.2).

The discipline of CIC studies is well adapted to observe and analyse how overarching conditions and power structures operate at the global, national, and local levels. IC encounters and connections are shaped by both the overt and covert manifestations of power. Critical perspectives have always been effective at uncovering the whole range of these dynamics (Nakayama, 2020). This idea has informed the core of this current study. Therefore, adopting this critical ‘lens’ for this current study has the potential to disclose many additional dimensions, levels, and intersections of power (as well as features that we have yet to completely perceive and grasp). Consequently, CIC perspective can provide valuable insights into a wide range of issues concerning local and global forms of intracultural and intercultural relations. CIC can help understand the power dynamics of the cultural contexts of the institution and how expatriate teachers view and interact with them. Moreover, CIC informs the study to explore the contextual factors (macro and micro) that affect expatriate teachers’ teaching practices in Oman.

A CIC approach has a number of principles and objectives which are explained below.



### **3.2.2.1 Key concepts within CIC**

Nakayama and Martin (2017) list a number of concepts that distinguish CIC from TIC approaches. These points are 1) culture as a site of struggle, 2) importance of context, 3) importance of power, 4) importance of history, 5) elimination of oppression, and 6) ethical research methods.

#### **3.2.2.1.1 Culture as a site of struggle**

TIC researchers' definition of "culture" was the target of one of the earliest critiques in the critical tradition (Ono, 1998). Two main points emerged from these critiques: (A) the importance of broadening our conception of what constitutes "culture," and (B) the requirement of viewing culture as something that is always shifting, fluid, dynamic, and subject to change (Nakayama, 2020; Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

Traditional studies of IC such as the one done by Hofstede (1994) concentrated on contrasting the communication norms of different nationalities (e.g., American versus Japanese). Researchers who criticised these studies noted that they implicitly assumed two things: (A) that when they referred to "Americans," they meant white Americans and/or white men; and (B) that persons from other nations were regarded as a 'monolithic entity'. They also pointed out that this approach basically disregarded the wide range of cultural practices that exist within the United States and other nations. This led to results that were, at best, inconclusive, misleading, and inaccurate, and actually had a tendency to reinforce stereotypes, such as the notion that all individuals from Japan communicate in an indirect fashion and that all people from the United States speak from an individualistic perspective (Hofstede's (1994) study perpetuated this idea). As a result, members of these cultures may experience difficulties in their regular interactions with members of other cultures due to the pervasiveness of these misconceptions (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

Critical scholars have advocated a conception of culture and cultural identity that is more complex and multidimensional, one that takes into account the communities and groups that exist within a nation and that are differentiated according to factors such as age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and ethnicity (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Every single cultural identity is always going to be in some kind of relationship to other identities, both inside individuals and within communities (Holliday, 2010). They are not merely dissimilar or distinct, rather, the nature of their interactions is shaped through communication, in ways that cause them to intersect with one another as well as to produce hierarchies among themselves. It is not possible for critical scholars

to separate out a single identity and investigate it without the influence of other identities (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

Secondly, critical scholars started to emphasise new ways of thinking about culture, perceiving it as being more fluid and dynamic. These challenged the conventional equating of a nation with a stable and unchanging culture (e.g., India and Indian culture, Germany and German culture). Furthermore, CIC scholars believe that culture is malleable and a space where individuals and communities engage in cultural transformation in pursuit of, such as, improved quality of life. Culture, in this sense, does not merely evolve through time; it evolves in response to the efforts of agents who advocate for specific shifts and cultural change. For instance, the shifts in American society's perspective on race and inter-racial marriage did not occur spontaneously; they were a part of a wider conflict over different parts of society's perspectives on race (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Even racial classifications have a cultural basis, and international racial classifications do not necessarily correspond with or approximate U.S. classifications, nor do they serve the same purposes in every country (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Critical academics contend that these socially created systems of classification inherently influence how individuals within and across racial groups view and interact with one another (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

Another crucial idea for those who study CIC is the concept of hybridity. Hybridity challenges the concept of monolithic cultures. It makes the argument that distinct cultures do not exist in today's world due to the effects of globalisation. Instead, we live in societies that have been profoundly shaped by the circulation of both people and goods around the planet (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). The suggestion is that every culture has been influenced by others, and as a result, all cultures have elements from other cultures. Many individuals in the contemporary world regard themselves as 'cultural hybrids', having absorbed elements from a variety of different cultures (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

### **3.2.2.1.2 Importance of context**

TIC studies have placed more emphasis on the microlevel of contact, or the individuals themselves, examining how their own language, cultural norms, and belief systems, etc., affected their individual communications with one another. Critical perspectives, on the other hand, highlight the larger social, political, economic, and historical factors that influence interactions

between cultures. The nature of intercultural interactions, as well as the construction of identities within and between cultures, is inextricably involved with power dynamics. By employing these critical perspectives, the conventional ideas of TIC itself have become a target for critique and a springboard for fresh perspectives on our globalised society. Cultural identities, from the perspective of critical scholars (CIC), are meaningless – in and of themselves – apart from as seen in these wider settings (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Nakayama and Martin (2017) gave a number of examples to emphasise this idea. They argued that considering the political and historical contexts in which interfaith dialogues take place is essential for any study of Muslim-Christian or Jewish-Muslim interactions. Another example they gave was that to fully grasp what it means to be French Canadian, one must be familiar with Quebec's current politics and linguistic and cultural history. There's more to being French Canadian than hearing how French Canadians talk and spotting linguistic and cultural differences.

Adopting this critical approach (CIC) is helpful in gaining an understanding of the context that is being investigated in this current study. It will raise questions aimed at understanding why do teachers avoid some political and religious topics to discuss in class? Why do they need to skip some units? Why do they censor their materials? Why do male and female students sit separately? Why do female students have their own corridors and lifts? Why are class periods shortened during the month of Ramadhan? To what extent other contextual factors such as religion and politics affect teaching inside the classrooms? Why should teachers adapt/skip ELT materials when teaching in some countries? CIC helps to understand how the broader contexts influence the micro institutional cultures they are part of.

To have a complete understanding of these questions, CIC informs this current study that it is necessary to explore the political, religious, economic, and social factors that have played - and continue to play - a role in shaping teachers' perspectives and practices in Oman and the worldwide community. The importance of each of these contextual factors have been discussed further in the Literature Review Chapter.

### **3.2.2.1.3 Importance of power**

By highlighting the wider influences that impact intercultural interactions, critical approaches inform the methods that question the premise that these encounters occur on equal ground. Rather, people of different cultures rarely interact with one another in situations where they would be

considered absolutely equal players (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Since scholars influenced by critical perspectives prioritise social justice and equality in their research, power dynamics are an area of interest for them. Each culture has its own set of norms and customs that, inherently, confer some degree of authority on particular groups, individuals and organisations (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

CIC has also posed a challenge to – and had an impact on – the conventional research methods used to investigate IC. Traditional studies of intercultural communication (TIC) have looked into the role that communication plays during intercultural transitions which occur when people leave their homelands and attempt to adapt to new cultural environments. These are typically where individuals have relocated to different countries. Many people who relocate to a new country do so without giving much thought to the bigger influences that affect potential adaptation (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). These influences include political and economic issues, societal attitudes in the host culture or, even more significantly, the degree to which the individual themselves have to adapt (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). When it comes to CIC, the question of who should adapt to whom is often raised. This highlights the fact that depending on the power dynamics at play, studies of CIC aim to better comprehend the challenges faced by visitors and locals as they both attempt to make sense of unfamiliar social norms and customs from different cultures while navigating their day-to-day lives (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

Our conception of what it means to be competent in IC has been shaped, in part, by the emphasis placed on the significance of power dynamics in interactions across cultural groups (intercultural interactions). Most people regard ICC as an outcome-oriented process that requires familiarity with multiple cultures, sensitivity to cultural norms, and the ability to behave in ways that are accepted across those cultures (Aririguzoh, 2022). Of course, being motivated to succeed in multicultural settings is also important. TIC assumes that people of different cultural backgrounds are willing to communicate with each other and possess the necessary information, attitudes, and skills to do so. This theoretically enables the individuals to be effective (competent). However, scholars of CIC studies have pointed out that this approach overlooks power dynamics. Different individuals of hierarchical levels (teachers versus students) may have significantly different ideas about what it means to be competent, depending on their position in the hierarchy (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

CIC scholars argue that any paradigm for teaching IC skills must answer fundamental questions like, “who gets to determine what is IC?” “In what ways do social factors and historical settings shape how we understand and define ICC?”. “When it comes to modern conceptions of competence, what part does power play?” (Nakayama & Martin, 2017, p. 8).

Experts of CIC scholars not only study the ways in which people submit to dominant power structures, but also the methods by which they challenge the hegemonic practices of power as well. Individuals can subvert as well as conform (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). People participate in cultural production as active agents through the practices they engage in on an everyday basis. They also participate in social mass movements that aim to alter the policies and procedures of existing governmental, educational, medical, and other institutions. Distinct power dynamics emerge in all sorts of intercultural interactions and individuals respond to these dynamics in a wide variety of ways. Critical theorists including CIC scholars are interested in more than just dominance and resistance (who dominates and who fights back); they also care about the processes by which - and the reasons why - people give in to or give way to dominance (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

#### **3.2.2.1.4 Importance of history**

CIC scholars view the historical context as an essential ‘macro setting’ when trying to explain intercultural encounters. The study of history is given a lot of weight since it tries to elucidate the reasons behind why certain cultures are more connected to others, such as their having mutual influences in their historical transactions (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

Scholars consider history and collective memory - the everyday recollection of common people - as crucial in shaping cultural identities. As explained by Blair (2006), collective memory is what generates communities, and it is also true that communication needs shared cultural assumptions in order to be effective. These shared experiences and stories are integral parts of public ceremonies and festivals, but also reflect power dynamics. However, communication can also arise from disagreements about how the past is perceived and portrayed. It is important to recognise that not all memories are equal, and that some may be used to hide or erase certain aspects of the past (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

A critical perspective also investigates whose interests are served by the way history is discussed and presented. Rather than viewing absences or arguments in history as neutral, this approach considers the motivations behind presenting certain versions of history (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

It is also crucial to remember that various cultures have different historical perspectives. These divergent interpretations of historical events can cause disputes between groups of people from various cultures as well as clarify the nature of the connections between cultures that underlie unequal power dynamics (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

#### **3.2.2.1.5 Elimination of oppression**

CIC holds that the field of IC as a whole should work towards the elimination of oppression and power imbalances in international interactions and should work towards providing just interactions between people (Nakayama & Martin, 2017).

#### **3.2.2.1.6 CIC guidelines in research methods and ethics?**

TIC has been critiqued when researching IC encounters. These critiques include 'researcher's motivations', 'data ownership', 'researcher and researched people relationship' (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). For this current study, all these issues have been recognised and discussed in the Methodology Chapter.

CIC scholars have echoed the call for greater attention to the voices of individuals whose daily lives are shaped by contacts across cultures (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). This can be done by asking questions such as "what is it like for you when you encounter people from different cultures?" On occasion, they will conduct interviews, and on other occasions, they will engage in participant observation (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). One question that is explored in this current study concerns the way in which expatriate EFL teachers working in Oman's institutions of higher education make sense of their cultural contexts.

Critical scholars have also turned to more ethnographic research methods and case studies in order to get to this level of meaning and comprehension of how people 'on the ground' navigate their way through everyday disputes. Being informed by the CIC framework, this current study is a case study which used semi-structured interviews and participant observation to collect data. A

researcher's entry into a cultural practice, how that researcher will be seen, and how that person's participation might alter the event and its meaning are all crucial considerations.

CIC scholars are not motivated by a specific method but rather by a wide critical perspective and the desire to gain insight into the workings, negotiations, and navigations of the world of ordinary people. By doing so, they call into question several long-held assumptions in the field of IC research, making room for a richer, more nuanced understanding of interactions between people of different backgrounds (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010).

Given the critical approach of IC and its emphasis on context as one of the main elements to be considered, I have chosen to use the contextual approach to IC as a part of the theoretical framework to explore how contextual factors are interconnected with, and contribute to, the formation of the cultural context at this university. Through this framework, I investigated how teachers were affected by the contextual factors in their interactions and in forming their perspectives and teaching practices as English teachers.

### **3.2.2.2 Rationale of using critical intercultural perspective (CIC) in this study**

The critical intercultural perspective (CIC) provides a useful framework for exploring expatriate EFL teachers' perspectives, practices, and interplay with the local educational and cultural context in Oman. This can be explained in the following ways:

CIC used as a theoretical framework in this study suggests examining the power dynamics in intercultural communication between expatriate EFL teachers and local cultural context and students. Martin and Nakayama (2010) provide a comprehensive overview of IC in various contexts, including education, which may be useful in understanding the complex intercultural dynamics at play with EFL teaching in Oman. As noted by Ting-Toomey (1999), power relations are a fundamental aspect of IC and can have a profound impact on the way in which individuals interact with one another. In the case of the expatriate EFL teachers, an understanding of power dynamics within the cultural educational context can shed light on the challenges and struggles faced by these teachers as they navigate this new environment and communicate effectively with students and colleagues from different cultural backgrounds.

In this context, a CIC approach would involve examining the cultural contextual factors that have shaped SQU culture (institutional culture), as well as the power dynamics between Western expatriates as teachers of their native language and Omani students whose English is not their native language. This would involve acknowledging the ways in which Western cultural values and practices have been imposed on the educational context at SQU through colonisation and globalisation, and how this has led to cultural misunderstandings and conflicts.

Furthermore, CIC emphasises the importance of promoting social justice and equity in intercultural interactions. By examining the challenges and struggles faced by the expatriate EFL teachers, it is possible to identify if the institution provides opportunities to support their professional development and to improve the educational experiences of all stakeholders. This approach is consistent with the work of Giroux (1997), who argues that education should be viewed as a site of struggle involving power and social justice.

One of the central tenets of CIC is the recognition that culture is not a static entity, but rather is constantly changing and evolving. As such, it is important to examine the cultural context at the institution not as a fixed entity, but as a dynamic and evolving system of social relations. This approach is consistent with the work of Bourdieu (1993), who argues that it is crucial to recognise that cultural practices are shaped by conflicts and power struggles in society. He argues that these struggles over power and domination play a significant role in shaping cultural practices and determining what is considered valuable and legitimate in a given cultural context.

Furthermore, a CIC approach would also involve acknowledging the diversity that exists within the Gulf region and avoiding stereotyping or generalising about the local regional population. This means recognising the differences that exist between different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, and being mindful of how these differences can affect communication. For example, a study that investigates expatriate teachers' perspectives of cultural diversity among the individuals in a given cultural context at the CPS, SQU could use the critical intercultural approach to frame its analysis.

Another reason for this approach is that a critical perspective does not view these expatriate teachers as a single entity; they are diverse individuals. As for this study, the critical perspective on intercultural communication (CIC) does not classify American participant teachers (or the British teachers) as holding a single perspective, cultural viewpoint, or set of attitudes just because they are from the same country.



By emphasising the power dynamics, understanding cultural context, and promoting IC, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex intercultural dynamics at play.

In the following section, the contextual approach to intercultural communication (CAIC) is explained.

### **3.2.2.3 A contextual Approach to Intercultural Communication (CAIC)**

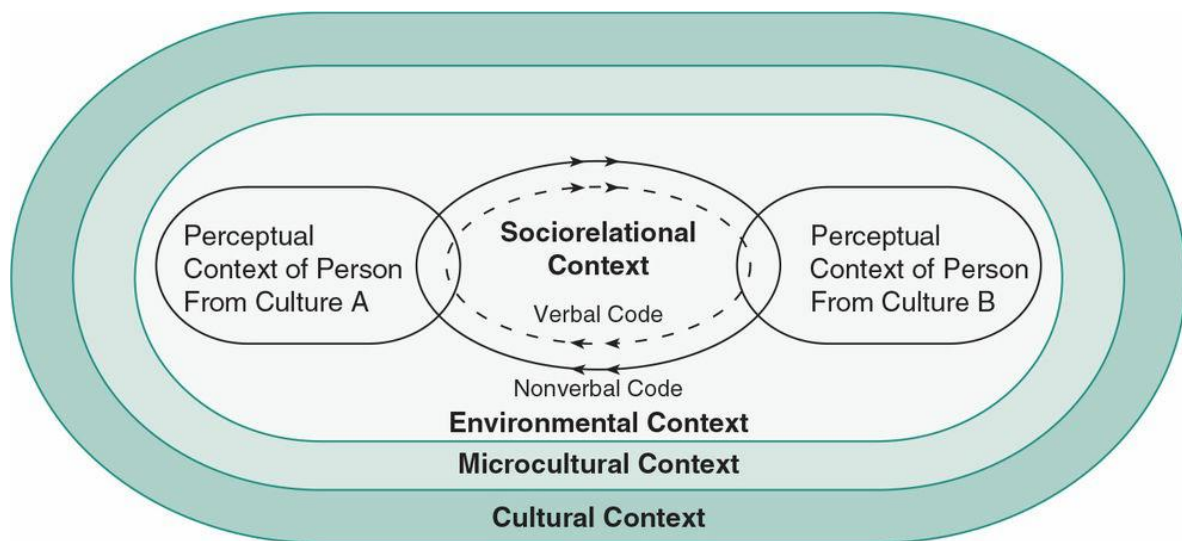
The contextual approach to intercultural communication (CAIC) (Neuliep, 2018) can be considered another part of the theoretical framework. This approach emphasises the importance of considering the specific context in which intercultural interactions occur and the ways in which that context impacts teachers' perspectives and teaching practices. It highlights the need to understand the cultural, social, historical, and institutional factors that contribute to shape intercultural interactions. This idea aligns with CIC which emphasises the broader factors affecting IC.

In the case of this study, the CAIC provides a framework for examining the ways in which the specific context of the university in Oman influences the experiences of the expatriate EFL teachers and their interactions with the local culture. This approach helps to situate the research within the broader context of the university in Oman and provides a more nuanced understanding of the intercultural dynamics at play.

### **3.2.3. A Contextual Model of intercultural communication (CMIC )**

IC happens when two or more people from different cultures or microcultures interact and communicate using either spoken or unspoken means, or both. Neuliep (2018) argues that every interaction between people, whether verbal or nonverbal, takes place inside a particular cultural framework. In other words, IC occurs within cultural contexts. He discusses the centrality of context in IC in a model he calls a contextual approach to intercultural communication CAIC.

This model proposes that IC takes place inside and between a number of different contexts that are connected to one another which all play a role in and influence IC. These contexts include cultural, microcultural, environmental, perceptual, and sociorelational contexts.



**Figure 5: Contextual Model of Intercultural Communication (Neuliep, 2018, p.60)**

The term "context" is used to describe the total environment in which a piece of communication takes place. He gives examples as follows:

For example, when you interact with your friends, you interact in some physical context, such as your dorm room. You also interact within a social context—that is, friend to friend. You also interact within a psychological [perceptual] context —your thoughts and emotions about your friend (p.60).

To understand what occurs when someone from Culture A (see Figure 6) speaks with someone from Culture B, the CMIC looks to identify a number of contexts that constitute such interactions.

Starting from the outer circles of the model, the '**cultural context**' is represented by the model's outermost circle, which is part of the contextual approach to IC. The cultural context is seen through the definition of culture provided by Neuliep (2018) which is 'an accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal symbol systems' (p. 51). Thus, a cultural context is present whenever two or more members of different cultures engage in social interaction. This means that you are always operating within a cultural context if you are interacting with someone from a different culture. This is the widest circle since the influence of culture may be seen in every facet of the communicative process, including where it takes place (Neuliep, 2018).

The model assumes that interactions between persons of diverse cultural origins occur in a variety of circumstances, such as cultural, microcultural, environmental, social-relational, and perceptual contexts, all of which can influence the meaning of the words and gestures exchanged (Neuliep, 2018).

The ***Microcultural Context*** constitutes the next largest circle in the model. Microculture “is used to refer to those identifiable groups of people that share a set of values, beliefs, and behaviours and possess a common history and verbal and nonverbal symbol system that is similar to, but systematically varies from, the larger, often dominant cultural milieu” (Neuliep, 2018, p. 60). These communities stand apart from the greater ***Cultural Context*** in some significant way. Sometimes the variation might be attributed to a person's ethnic or cultural background, or even their language as a means of communicating outside of the context or value system of the prevailing or majority culture (Neuliep, 2018). Note that the model places the ***Microculture*** within the greater ***Cultural Context***, reflecting the conceptualisation that microcultures are embedded within larger cultures. Microcultures are also sometimes referred to as subcultures or minority cultures (Neuliep, 2018; Rings and Rasinger, 2023).

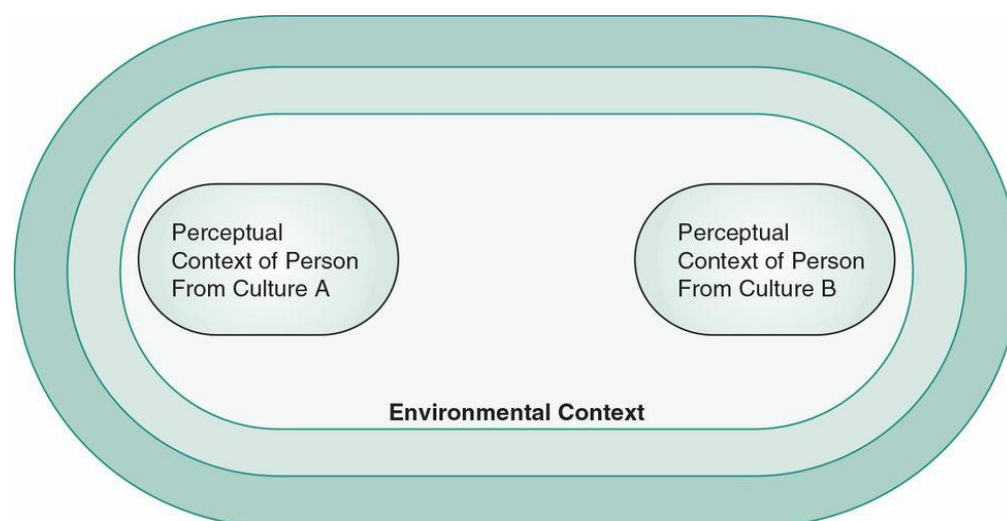
The model's ***Environmental Context*** occupies the next largest circle. This sphere stands in for the actual space where the conversation takes place. Location, topography, buildings, landscapes, homes, personal space, schedules, and weather all contribute to a culture's unique ***Environmental Context*** (Neuliep, 2018). This ***Environmental Context*** is responsible for dictating when, how, and which specific rules apply to a given situation, whereas ***Cultural Context*** is responsible for establishing the overarching guidelines for communication (Neuliep, 2018). For instance, although shouting is frowned upon in most mosques or quiet spaces in libraries, it is the accepted norm at football games. All these contextual considerations significantly affect how people express themselves to one another.

According to the model (Figure 7) the ***Environmental Context*** is embedded inside the ***Microcultural*** and ***Cultural Contexts***. Simply put, this is due to the fact that the way in which one interprets their surroundings is heavily influenced by one's own ***Cultural Contexts*** and the ***Microcultural*** groups to which one belongs. This is conceptually the case because individuals' culture and membership of ***Microcultural*** groups greatly affect their interpretation of the world

around them (Neuliep, 2018). A person who was brought up in Oman, where the average summer temperature is around 45 degrees, will not consider temperatures of around 35 degrees to be abnormally high. However, for someone who has spent their entire life in Iceland, temperatures of this kind could seem intolerable.

### **The perceptual contexts of the interactants**

The *Perceptual Context* is represented by the two circles that are contained within the *Environmental Context* (s). It constitutes the beliefs, values, and intentions of the people involved in an interaction. The way an individual takes in, organises, and later recalls data is an example of their *Perceptual Context* environment (Neuliep, 2018).

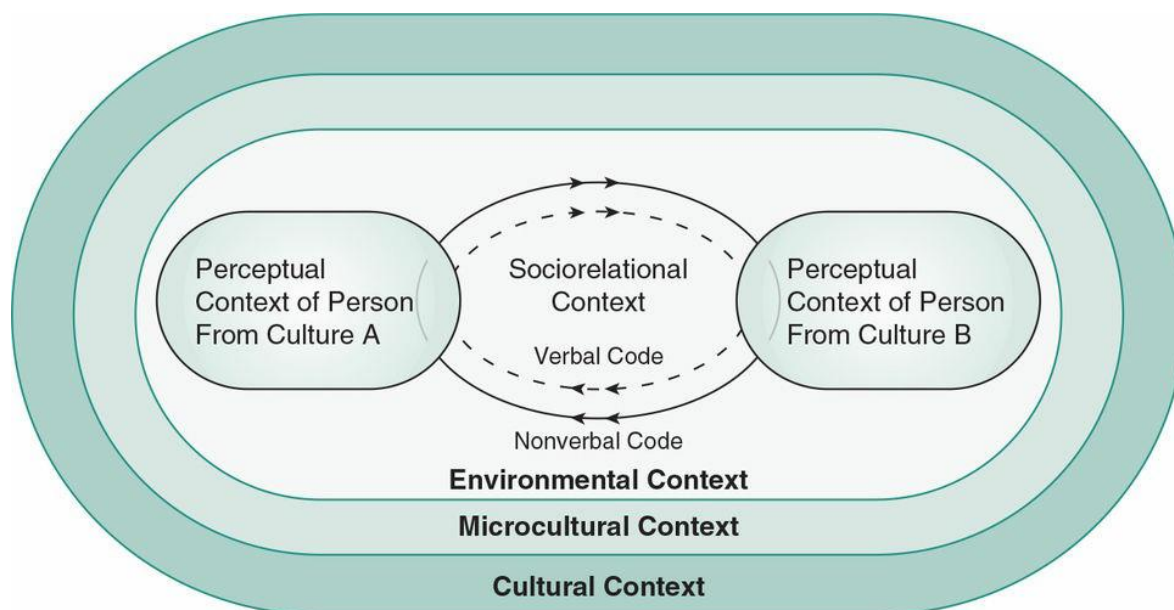


**Figure 6: the Environmental Context**

An individual's senses (hearing, sight, taste, touch, and smell) are the primary means by which they take in information. We commit it to memory for subsequent use and recall it whenever necessary. Human information acquisition, storage, and retrieval are shaped by and reflect prevailing cultural norms to varying degrees (Neuliep, 2018). The views, values, and attitudes of a person are typically instilled in them by their culture. The way people think and feel about other people, especially the prevalence of stereotypes, is shaped by one's culture (Neuliep, 2018).

### **The sociorelational context**

The model's *Sociorelational Context* consists of the arcs joining the *Perceptual Contexts*. See **Figure 7:**



**Figure 7: The sociorelational context**

This *Sociorelational Context* is about how personal *Perceptual Contexts* are connected to one another and interact with each other. People, or more specifically, *Perceptual Contexts*, are linked to one another conceptually by virtue of the interactions that they maintain with one another. This relationship is demonstrated in the model by way of the *Sociorelational Context*. Every time two people connect, they form some sort of social bond in which each plays a specific role, depending on the groups to which the two of them belong (Neuliep, 2018). People form friendships, romantic relationships, business partnerships, and more, through the groups to which they belong when they engage (Neuliep, 2018). Roles influence the language and body language used in communication (Neuliep, 2018).

Each member of such a connection has a certain function. Individuals' interactions with others, topics of conversation, modes of expression, and styles are all determined by their roles which can be somewhat different in different societies (Neuliep, 2018). The gender roles that are expected of individuals in a society might change from one culture to another (Neuliep, 2018). One individual may take on the role of student, while another, who is instructing them in communication, is taking on the role of teacher. Therefore, it may be said that a student does have a relationship with his or her teacher, and that this relationship is known as a student–teacher relationship.

People are expected to act in certain ways in accordance with their assigned roles. Neuliep explains how an individual's roles, such as being a student or a teacher, prescribe how they behave and interact with others. The **topics** individuals interact about are also defined by their role. The **manner** of people's interaction with others is also influenced by their role, with different styles of talk and language being used depending on the situation and the people involved (male and female interactions). A person's interactions vary with the role they are assuming. For instance, the interaction between students and teachers exists in nearly every culture, although the manner in which these roles are defined differs greatly from one culture to another (Neuliep, 2018).

The physical, relational, and perceptual settings are directly influenced by culture (Neuliep, 2018). Significant intercultural differences exist in classroom layout, student-teacher dynamics, and teacher-student perceptions. Neuliep used instances of pupils in the US, Japan and Korea because being a student in these countries have quite distinct perceptions. In Korea and Japan, students show enormous respect and strict formality towards their teachers to whom students often look up to as role models. In contrast, students in the US can interact informally with their teachers and may get involved in activities outside the formal classroom. This informed the study's approach to examining how expatriate teachers interact with both genders in Omani classrooms, where the genders sit separately.

The verbal and nonverbal interactions that people have with one another are what set their respective relationships apart from those of other people and define the nature of those relationships. The verbal and nonverbal cues you give and receive, for instance, with a teacher differ from those with a close friend (Neuliep, 2018). The two rings labelled "**Nonverbal code**" and "**Verbal code**" graphically indicate the **Sociorelational Context** of the contextual model. The nonverbal circle, which is depicted as a continuous line, is the larger of the two circles. The verbal circle is smaller and is shown as a circle-shaped string of dashes. Since most of our communication consists of nonverbal behaviour, the nonverbal message circle is wider than the verbal message circle (Neuliep, 2018). Eye contact, body language, and personal space all contribute to a mutual understanding whether or not words are exchanged (Neuliep, 2018).

The **Sociorelational Context** is constituted through a combination of the perceptual contexts, and it is characterised by the verbal and nonverbal messages that are transmitted. The environmental context has an impact on the **Sociorelational Context**, which in turn is characterised by the

*Microcultural* and *Cultural Contexts*. The diagram just lays down general factors to take into consideration when trying to understand how IC takes place in multi-layered contexts.

This model is useful because it reveals how these contexts mutually affect and shape IC. In considering the CAIC it can be argued that intercultural communication is a phenomenon that is created as a result of complex overlapping causal factors involving intricate interaction of several contexts. Having this conclusion, CAIC goes hand in hand with CIC and it is compatible with its principles as they both investigate IC from various contextual factors.

Since context is such an important factor in my study, **this CAIC** model helps to consider the different cultural contexts that have affected ELT in Oman and how these different contexts play a role in impacting the teachers' perspectives and practices while teaching within and through those contexts.

### **3.2.4. Rationale of using the CAIC in this study**

A contextual approach to intercultural communication (CAIC) is inherently aligned with the focus and methodologies employed in this research. The foundation of CAIC, which highlights the significance of context, seamlessly resonates with the philosophical underpinnings, theories, and perspectives shaping this study. Specifically, the qualitative research methodology, constructivist viewpoint, CIC, and insights garnered from the literature review collectively converge towards the centrality of context. The study is anchored in qualitative research principles, emphasising the contextual nuances essential for a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the constructivist view and CIC framework share a common emphasis on the pivotal role of context in shaping intercultural interactions. The literature review reveals a consensus among numerous researchers within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) who stress the paramount importance of context. This aligns seamlessly with the CAIC approach, reinforcing its appropriateness for investigating and comprehending intercultural communication dynamics within the specific context under study. Therefore, the choice of a contextual approach is not only theoretically sound but is also supported by established philosophies and perspectives that highlight the centrality of context in the realm of intercultural communication.

Neuliep (2018) proposes a CAIC that recognises the dynamic interplay between cultural, social, historical, and institutional factors. This approach is highly relevant to the current research as it emphasises the importance of analysing the specific context in which intercultural interactions take place. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of the complex and nuanced nature of intercultural interactions and the ways in which cultural, social, historical, and institutional factors shape them (Neuliep, 2018). Using this perspective, I can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of expatriate EFL teachers and their interactions with the local cultural and educational context (Nguyen & Schmidt, 2016). By taking a contextual approach, the researcher can explore how these contextual factors shape and influence the interactions between the expatriate teachers and the sociocultural context at the CPS, SQU.

Moreover, the CAIC can also help the researcher to better understand the dynamic and evolving nature of intercultural interactions. CIAC perspective acknowledges that intercultural interactions are not static, but are constantly changing and adapting to the specific contexts in which they occur (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, 2017). That is because the IC interactions occur within a cultural context that is also changing.

Previous research has investigated the experiences of expatriate EFL teachers in different cultural contexts (e.g. Hudson, 2006; Halicioglu, 2015; Lee & Chen, 2018; Elrayah & Alzahrani, 2024). These studies have explored the challenges and opportunities that such teachers face in adapting to new cultural environments and the ways in which their interaction with the local context shapes their perspectives and practices. Nevertheless, the existing studies predominantly concentrate on a traditional view of IC. Therefore, it is a crucial requirement for research that encompasses the experiences of expatriate ELT teachers through the lens of CIC perspectives. This research should investigate how cultural, social, historical, and institutional contexts impact their perspectives and teaching practices.

Additionally, the contextual approach highlights the importance of developing cultural competence, or the ability to adapt to and navigate different cultural contexts effectively. By understanding the contextual factors that shape IC, it is possible to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to make that navigation.

This approach also recognises the complex intercultural dynamics that exist in the classroom and encourages teachers to critically reflect on their own cultural beliefs and values, as well as those



of their students. In the case of the expatriate teachers, the contextual approach can help to shed light on the challenges and struggles they face in navigating a new cultural context. Cultural norms, geopolitical structures, and religious beliefs will very likely differ from those of the expatriate teachers' home countries. This can obviously create communication challenges and misunderstandings or even adaptational struggles. Understanding the contextual factors that shape these differences is important for developing effective communication strategies and promoting positive intercultural relations.

The CAIC is, therefore, a relevant framework for the topic of exploring expatriate EFL teachers' perspectives and teaching practices concerning their interaction with the local educational cultural context in a university in Oman. This approach (CAIC) is about understanding the unique contextual factors that shape IC and the way in which individuals interpret and respond to these factors (Kim, 2000).

In conclusion, these key models, approaches and theories can be used together to provide a more nuanced understanding of the perspectives and practices of EFL expatriate teachers in a cultural context in higher education. By applying these concepts to this study, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the complex cultural dynamics at play and identify potential areas for improvement and development in EFL teaching in intercultural contexts. This will also be a contribution to the study of ICC as using these different interrelated and complementary approaches is possibly unique.

### **3.3 Summary of the chapter**

This chapter presented the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the study. It began by clarifying key conceptual issues such as 'culture' and 'context,' which were central to the study and frequently used throughout. It then discussed the definitions of teachers' conceptions, perspectives, and beliefs, providing a clear understanding of these constructs within the study's context. Finally, the chapter presented the theoretical framework, consisting of 'critical intercultural communication' (CIC) and 'a contextual approach to intercultural communication' (CAIC). These frameworks served as guiding principles, shaping the analytical lens through which the study examined the interplay between teachers' intercultural communication with the contextual factors within educational contexts. In essence, this chapter laid the groundwork for the subsequent

exploration and analysis of the study's research questions within the identified conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

## **Chapter Four: Literature Review**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature on the various topics that are essential to understanding the research problem, the data collected, and its subsequent analysis. The significance of the researched topic can be demonstrated through the examination and discussion of key research on the subject and so can assist in establishing a connection between the context of this study and that of other studies conducted in both similar and related but different contexts. It will also help to develop a theoretical discussion and identify any gap or gaps in the literature that this study might address.

The chapter begins by discussing the emphasis on teaching as a social practice. This review aims to demonstrate that this study approaches teaching from a socio-cultural perspective. It then examines the literature regarding the connection between teachers' perspectives and practices, aligning with this study's focus on investigating teachers' perspectives and practices within a specific socio-cultural context. As this study places significance on context and culture, as informed by the CIC, it examines literature regarding the contextual factors impacting English Language Teaching (ELT) and shaping teachers' perspectives and practices. These factors encompass religious, political, institutional cultural contexts, as well as classroom culture and context. Subsequently, the chapter delves into the significance of Intercultural Competence (IC) in the context of ELT and EFL teachers. Following that, the socio-cultural issues encountered by EFL teachers in the Middle East and the Gulf region are discussed. These include gender and coeducation dynamics, ELT materials, and the strategies employed to adapt to the local teaching contexts. By exploring these issues, this literature review contributes to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that expatriate EFL teachers face in culturally diverse educational settings and how they can be better supported to improve the quality of ELT instruction in similar contexts.

### **4.2. Teaching as a complex social practice**

Teaching is widely acknowledged as a social practice (Mardahl-Hansen, 2019) that takes place in a specific cultural context. This view of teaching emphasises that it is a complex and dynamic process that is influenced by the social, cultural, historical, religious, economic and political factors that exist within the educational setting. Therefore, it is important to examine the broader

societal and cultural influences that shape the experiences of teachers with students within the classroom context.

One of the key arguments in support of teaching as a social practice is that it involves interaction between individuals and groups. According to Mardahl-Hansen (2019), learning and teaching can be understood as a social process of enculturation, whereby individuals become members of a particular community of practice. This perspective highlights the role of social interaction in the teaching process and suggests that the experiences and practices of teachers are shaped by the social and cultural norms of the communities in which they work.

Another key aspect of teaching as a social practice is that it involves the negotiation of power and authority between teachers, students, and other stakeholders (Gee, 2004). Gee (2004) suggests that teaching is not simply the transmission of knowledge, but also the negotiation of social, cultural, and political values. Teachers play a significant role in shaping the cultural norms and values of the classroom, and these norms and values can have a profound impact on the experiences of students and on the outcomes of their learning.

Mardahl-Hansen (2019) describes teaching as a complex social practice that involves a complex mixture of interrelated activities, considerations, and demands. The purpose of teaching is multifaceted and historically constituted. Ideally, it aims at nurturing all students, presenting factual knowledge, supporting student discussions, and preparing them to manage their own lives and to participate in society. The social practice of teaching, though, also involves conflictual connectivity among its different aspects, with the relations between these aspects involving concrete, social, and embodied dilemmas. Mardahl-Hansen (2019) suggests that teaching is not solely determined by academic plans or social interaction between students and teachers but that it is also carried forward by intentions and continuous responses to the ever-changing situation that is the classroom itself and the context within which the classroom sits. To elaborate further, the social and cultural context in which teaching takes place can have a significant impact on the practices of teachers and the experiences of students (Ladson-Billings, 2023). For example, cultural and linguistic diversity can have a profound impact on the experiences of both teachers and students, so it is important for teachers to understand the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2023). This also underscores the need for teachers to be mindful of the power dynamics that exist within the classroom and the impact these dynamics can have on the experiences of both teachers and students. For these reasons, it is important to examine in detail how teachers' practices are shaped towards the cultural context and how this context may

inform or shape their perspectives while teaching, an area discussed in detail in the following section.

### **4.3. Teachers' perspectives and their relation to practices**

In terms of a conceptual framework, the definitions of teachers' perceptions, beliefs and perspectives have been discussed in detail in Chapter 4. In this section, the literature published on the importance of teachers' perceptions and their potential influence on teaching practices is examined and evaluated. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the learning experiences of students. Their beliefs, perceptions, and perspectives greatly influence the practices they employ in the classroom. This is clear because the impact of teachers' personal and professional experiences on their teaching methods has been widely researched and documented in the literature. The purpose of this literature review is, therefore, to synthesise current research and highlight the main themes that have emerged with regard to teachers' beliefs, perceptions, perspectives, and the ways in which they inform their teaching practices.

There has been debate regarding the significance of teachers' beliefs on their teaching practices. Some authors suggest a positive correlation between the two, while others argue that there is no direct connection, as evidenced by the works of Levitt (2001), Wilcox-Herzog (2002) and Basturkmen (2012). A growing body of research though, suggests that examining teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions is essential because these factors greatly impact teachers' practices and choices in the classroom (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001; Errington, 2004; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Borg, 2006). According to Errington (2004), the beliefs and perceptions of teachers "appear to have a potentially significant impact on innovation by influencing what is possible, desirable, achievable and relevant from the teacher's own governing perspective" (p. 40). Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the information, attitudes, and perspectives held by teachers as these factors have a significant bearing on the decisions they make regarding their classroom practices. This, in turn, is because teachers' beliefs and perceptions play a vital role in shaping their understanding of what is possible and desirable in their teaching, as well as their ability to innovate and adapt to new teaching methods and approaches.

There is also research to imply that instructors' beliefs are a factor in the instructional strategies that they decide to implement in a classroom context (Borg, 2003; Breen *et al.*, 2001; Farrell & Lim, 2005). Breen *et al.* (2001), for instance, claim that it is a teacher's beliefs that "influence how the teacher orchestrates the interaction between learner, teacher, and subject matter in a particular classroom context with particular resources" (p. 473). In a similar vein, Hos and Kekec (2015)

argue that teachers' beliefs are among the key parameters in English teaching, playing a crucial role in both teaching and learning a second language. However, they emphasise that beliefs are not static and may be influenced by classroom practices. As Breen *et al.* (2001) suggest, it is not just beliefs that shape classroom practices, but classroom practices that may also impact and potentially alter teachers' beliefs.

In an interview conducted by Birello (2012), Borg argues that for the past 40 years, the primary concentration in the field of teacher education has been on behaviours; hence, the goal of researchers has been to identify the behaviours that are most conducive to successful learning. However, Borg notes that this approach oversimplifies the complex nature of education and fails to consider the individual beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and feelings of teachers. In essence, he believes that attempting to programme teachers to behave in a certain way is unrealistic and ineffective, as teachers bring their unique perspectives and preferences to the classroom. Instead, Borg advocates for a more holistic approach to teacher education that acknowledges the importance of examining teachers' underlying beliefs and knowledge to affect positive change in the classroom.

In sum, by understanding teachers as complex individuals with unique perspectives and values, teacher education programmes can better support teachers in developing their own teaching approaches that align with their individual strengths and perspectives. It also follows from this that teaching is about much more than simply influencing the actions of others. Borg contends that:

[B]eneath the behaviour there are beliefs and knowledge and related constructs which influence what teachers do, and it started to become very clear that if we want to fully understand what teachers do, we can't just focus on behaviour, we need to understand what they believe, what they know, their attitudes, their feelings (Birello, p. 88).

Borg adds that this is made abundantly clear when we consider the failure of widespread educational reforms to produce the desired effects despite substantial investments of time and resources aimed at convincing educators to alter their practices. This is, he contends, because the reforms in question were aimed at changing people's actions but ignored their beliefs. As a result of these considerations, it is now common knowledge that, while teachers' actions certainly matter, so do their beliefs, and that examining the latter is essential if we hope to affect positive change in the classroom.

Teachers' beliefs, therefore, should be examined since they have such a significant impact on their actions, pedagogical choices, and continued growth as educators, which includes their pedagogical decisions and the approaches they employ in the classroom (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). Teachers' pedagogical ideas strongly influence their instructional designs, lesson plans, classroom decisions, pedagogical strategies, and overall educational goals. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017), the ideas held by educators both guide and affect the teaching methodologies, classroom practice, and students' achievements. For instance, a teacher's approach to teaching a foreign language may vary depending on whether he or she views the learning of such skills as essential to a multicultural society and a globalised world. Regardless of their approach though, teachers should be well-versed in a variety of learning theories and employ those that are most appropriate for their classrooms and their students (Altan, 2006; Al-Maskri *et al.*, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016; Al-Bulushi *et al.*, 2017).

According to Andrews (2003), there is a clear connection that develops between the ideas that teachers have and the classroom practices that they employ, even though teachers hold a wide variety of values that can sometimes be in direct conflict with one another. This is evinced by various studies (e.g., Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Borg, 2009; Martinez *et al.*, 2015). However, recent research has shown that teachers' personal beliefs may not always align with their pedagogical practices in the classroom (Basturkmen, 2012). Although teachers' beliefs are deeply intertwined with their practices and can shape how they make pedagogical decisions, there may not necessarily be a direct correlation between what teachers say they believe and how they act in the classroom (Freeman, 2002; Borg, 2003). This is partially because beliefs can be difficult to quantify and can vary in strength due to an individual's unique set of ideas, experiences, and/or body of knowledge (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Hos & Kekec, 2015; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). Additionally, deeply held beliefs can be influenced by various factors that may override personal beliefs (Borg, 2003; Farrell & Lim, 2005). Given these complexities, it is essential for language instructors to reflect on their own beliefs and how these beliefs inform their teaching approaches (Farrell, 2007). However, many teachers lack clear insight into their own beliefs and how these beliefs may affect their classroom practices (Khader, 2012; Kaymakamoğlu, 2018). Therefore, exploring the complexities of teachers' beliefs and the implications of these beliefs for classroom practice can promote greater self-awareness in the teachers and help enhance the quality of language instruction.

Many and various influences form the beliefs of educators. Researchers have argued that instructors' attitudes are formed by their individual backgrounds and experiences in the classroom (Gabrys-Barker, 2010; Khader, 2012; Wang, 2016). Social psychologists are of the opinion that

influential elements including religion, culture, and society all play a role in shaping the beliefs of educators (Xu, 2012; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). In the context of Oman, instructors may find themselves in a difficult position, torn between the desire to teach something and the obligation to teach something else. Even when the recommended teaching materials conflict with their personal ideas, some teachers, especially inexperienced and part-time instructors, frequently rigorously follow the book to avoid criticism. This discrepancy may arise from factors that professional development initiatives do not address or from insufficient administrative assistance (Khader, 2012). There is a possibility that educators may face a number of obstacles that will hinder them from teaching in accordance with their ideas (perspectives).

Borg (2009) contends that it is clear from the existing literature that ignoring context while examining the connection between beliefs and practices is largely fruitless. He emphasises the role of ‘context’, which is a core concept in this present study. He contends that if we want to obtain a comprehensive picture of what is going on, we must account for context whenever we design studies of beliefs and practices. He states that if we ignore context:

we will end up with a partial understanding of what is going on because the relationship between beliefs and practices is not a direct and linear one so we know that context mediates that relationship and so whenever we are setting up studies of beliefs and practices we must build attention to context into that equation (Birello, p. 92)

By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers (qualitative data) and following up with them after class observations, I was able to learn about teachers’ perspectives on the topic of interest. These perspectives and practices do not have much value if they are not examined in the context in which they occur.

Research on teachers’ mindsets shows that their knowledge, beliefs, and dispositions greatly influence their interactions with students, their classroom decisions, and their pedagogical strategies (Borg, 2003; 2009). It has been argued by Richards (1998) that teachers’ belief systems “are founded on the goals, values, and beliefs they hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it” (p. 51). This is a particularly valid point given that contextual elements – especially the institutional ecological contexts in which teachers work – are known to affect teachers’ attitudes and actions (such as their interactions with colleagues, students, and the larger community) (Tudor, 2003; Kramsch, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Otwinowska, 2014; Yazan, 2018).



Moreover, it is essential to incorporate a critical intercultural ‘lens’ and a contextual approach to intercultural communication in this research to gain a thorough understanding of the intricate cultural dynamics at play and how they may influence the perspectives and practices of teachers as outlined by a number of researchers (Tudor, 2003; Kramsch, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Otwinowska, 2014; Yazan, 2018). By utilising these ‘lenses’, it is possible to analyse and interpret the complexity of the context in which this study is being conducted and gain insight into the potential impact it may have on all the participants. Since the critical intercultural communication (CIC) approach emphasises the importance of context/s (such as socio-religious, political, institutional, and classroom) when studying such issues, the following section discusses the importance of contextual factors in ELT.

#### **4.4. The importance of contextual factors in ELT**

When studying any matter, it is essential to have a firm grasp of the context as it has its own impact on other things that exist in that context (Borg, 2009; Ladson-Billing, 2023). Contextual factors in teaching refer to the social, cultural, historical, and educational background of language learners, as well as the language-teaching context, which includes the teacher, the classroom, the curriculum, and the materials used (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In ELT, contextual factors are crucial because they shape the ways in which language is taught, learned, and used (Brown & Lee, 2015). Bax (2003) argues that although context is recognised as an important factor in ELT, it has been neglected. He contends that “context and contextual factors are high priorities for many teachers and writers. Good teachers naturally take account of the context in which they teach - the culture, the students, and so on -” (p. 284).

Hall (1976) emphasises the importance of context when it comes to the IC of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. His theory of “high-context” and “low-context” cultures (p. 91) explains how the features of some cultures influence communication and may lead to communication breakdown even if that communication happens in the same cultural context. Considering this theory, and turning to the ELT context, having a situation in which teachers are from different backgrounds to their students and have different cultural communication expectations may cause frustration and communication breakdown.

Holliday (1994), Pennycook (1994), Shaw (1997), Richards and Rodgers (2001), Bax (2003), and Kabir (2011) prioritise context as the very first thing that needs to be considered before making any decisions regarding methodological approaches or language system used for teaching. Bax (2003) summarises this view succinctly in stating that “good teachers everywhere pay attention to

context; good training courses pay attention to context" (p. 286). He adds that the context "will include an understanding of individual students and their learning needs, wants, and strategies ... as well as course books, local conditions, [and] the classroom culture" (p. 285). Similarly, Alamri (2018) argues that "context should be at the heart of the lesson, because it is the source of interaction, activities, tasks, assessments, and knowledge" (p.133).

In the same vein, Kabir (2011) explains that when applying a method to the teaching of a language, teachers should first consider the culture and environment of the country or region they are teaching in, including its socio-political and geographical aspects as well as its institutional aspects. Context is viewed by Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 248) as the "beginning point in language programme design". They emphasise that the following contexts should be considered during teaching and learning: cultural context, local political context, institutional context, and classroom context created by the teachers and students. Considering contextual factors in ELT is crucial for crafting an effective and engaging learning environment that caters to individual students' needs. This importance is highlighted by teachers' beliefs and practices, the materials used in class, and the curriculum design, all significantly impacting the efficacy of language learning (Nunan, 2003). Thus, as Richards and Rodgers (2014) contend, teachers must be aware of these factors and adjust their teaching strategies and materials accordingly.

The impact of this consideration of teaching context has different forms as it can affect the way teachers select the teaching materials, the way they think, the way they speak, the way they act, the way they dress, the way they behave, the way they teach, and almost everything. This 'contextual power' or 'power of context' cannot be ignored and it plays a significant role in critical and critical intercultural communication (CIC) studies.

Kirkebaek *et al.* (2013) also note that teaching and learning is embedded in the culture in which it takes place, and so is enmeshed in the political, economic, social, and cultural contexts of their environments. They stress the significance of being aware of the force of context to comprehend teaching and learning and be able to successfully negotiate it. Teachers should not make an effort to avoid or restrict the effects of the culture; rather seek to explore the ways in which they might be included into and utilised fruitfully in the process of teaching and learning about culture. Another researcher, Brown (2001), suggests that in addition to the classroom setting, language teachers should be aware of two other crucial but interconnected domains: the socio-political and institutional contexts. He notes that neglecting these domains can result in ineffective teaching. Adding an additional perspective to this view, Byram and Grundy (2003, p. 1) argue that

the profession of language teaching has caused an awareness of the political and social importance of language instruction.

Moving now to the classroom environment itself, Tudor (2001) suggests that classrooms can be viewed through an ecological lens as a “socially defined reality” (p. 11). This perspective views the classroom not as a static entity but as a dynamic space deeply connected to the larger society. Within this setting, both teachers and students actively contribute meaning to the classroom environment (Rißler et al., 2014). Tudor (2001) argues that classrooms should be viewed as “social as well as a pedagogical reality” (p. 104). This indicates that although pedagogy is the primary purpose of the classroom, the manner in which this function is viewed and defined in society is shaped by a diverse group of social actors. It places an emphasis on contextual and situational psychological aspects such as local norms, beliefs, and expectations (Tudor, 2001). This ‘ecological approach’ pointed out by Tudor (2001) is first attributed to Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (1979), which emphasises the importance of a holistic perspective of issues under study. When used in ELT issues, the ecological approach informs considering all factors that contribute to the teaching and learning environment. This philosophy is clearly quite broad and has been utilised in various fields, including IC studies. However, given the specific nature of this present study, I have chosen to adopt a more relevant approach, namely, the CAIC proposed by Neuliep (2018), as explained in the theoretical framework (see page 119). This approach acknowledges the significance of the various contextual factors which can include social, religious, cultural, educational, political, and institutional contexts, that could impact the ELT system at SQU. Being informed by CIC and CAIC, it is hoped that the power dynamics that affect EFL teachers - and how those dynamics influence those teachers’ perspectives and practices - can be explored here to shed light on how contextual factors inform teachers' interactions at various levels. Ultimately, this study will aid the researcher’s understanding of how the ELT at SQU has been influenced by contextual factors at both the micro and macro levels.

In sum, then, it is evident that contextual factors play a crucial role in ELT, as they shape ELT teachers and the process of teaching and learning. Understanding and taking these factors into account can help teachers create a more effective and engaging language learning environment (Brown, 2000). The following sections shed light on specific contextual factors and explore how each of them plays a role in contributing to the bigger picture of ELT contexts.

#### **4.5. Importance of the socio-religious context**

A society's cultural context embodies the collective set of beliefs shared by its members. This includes mannerisms, behaviours, social norms, and routines prevalent among the society's members. In essence, culture encapsulates the entirety of a society (Kabir, 2011). Coleman (2003) argues that English language institutions are not detached from the wider society which includes "international, national, community, ethnic, bureaucratic, professional, political, religious, linguistic, economic and family contexts in which schools and other educational institutions are located and with which they interact" (p. 1). In addition, Shahidullah (1999) shows that since "socio-cultural factors" are culturally contextual because they are rooted in and shaped by local customs and traditions, they diverge widely from one society to another. This means then that teaching methods are, to a certain extent, contextually and culturally dependent. Therefore, a method is considered contextually appropriate if it considers the learners' socio-cultural factors, and so assists in understanding that the cultural setting in which language instruction takes place is essential to achieving success (Kabir, 2011). In other words, it is essential to recognise that political, social, and cultural issues in the larger community impact what happens in a classroom (McKay, 2003).

Religion can also exert a substantial influence on the values, attitudes, and behaviour of language learners and instructors, particularly in societies where religion holds a significant place in daily life. Geertz (1973) argues that religion provides a way of understanding the world by giving people a set of symbols that help them interpret their experiences. These symbols can take many forms, such as myths, rituals, and beliefs. By using these symbols, people can make sense of their place in the world and find meaning in their lives. Furthermore, Geertz (1973) believes that religion is not just a private matter, but a public one that plays a crucial role in shaping social and cultural life. He further argues that religion provides a shared system of symbols that helps to define a community's identity and values and provides a basis for social organisation. Geertz's (1973) theory of religion as a 'cultural system of symbols' has implications for the field of ELT, which will be explored in more detail below.

Religion can impact the language learning process in various ways, and understanding the cultural significance of religion can help teachers better meet the needs of their students. According to Mowlana (2014), both Islam and sociocultural values and norms wield substantial power and influence over how individuals communicate and interact with one another. Nadeem et al. (2017) conducted a study that aimed to investigate whether there was a relationship between religion and intercultural communication competence (ICC) within the Malaysian context. They found that religion represents a commanding force in Malaysian social life, capable of shaping individuals' choices and conduct.

Many authors agree that religion (particularly in Muslim dominant cultures) has a strong impact on education. In the Gulf countries, for instance, Hayes (2015) shows that religious and societal views have a strong influence on education. Al-Harthi and Al-Harthi (2013) focus specifically on the impact of Islamic doctrine on Omani society, concluding that its significance should not be underestimated. They note that Omani culture dominates people's life through both the sole official language which is Arabic and the Islamic values that tend to be practised by most people as part of their societal and religious practices. Therefore, Omani students are almost exclusively Muslim and Islamic values and practices permeate their daily life. This view is shared by Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2018), who state that the religious, political, and societal factors that constitute Omani national culture may have an impact on the quality of educational outcomes. This knowledge clearly has implications for the teaching and learning of English in various ways, including the selection of topics and materials, learners' attitudes and expectations, and the dynamics of teacher-learner interactions (Elyas, 2011).

In Muslim government countries, the education system is heavily influenced by Islamic values and teachings, and EFL teachers are expected to teach language in a way that does not clash with local religious norms and values. For example, the dress code reflects certain expectations regarding what is appropriate and acceptable to wear (see Chapter Two for more details). Thus, teachers who are not familiar with Islamic culture and religious practices may inadvertently offend Muslim students and colleagues by not following cultural norms or by not showing sensitivity to religious practices. This can lead to misunderstandings and barriers to effective communication and building relationships. Elyas (2011) gives an example that in some religious cultures, there may be taboos or sensitivities around certain topics, such as gender roles or sexuality, that may influence the choice of topics and materials in ELT and EFL classrooms.

#### **4.6. Importance of the political context**

Foucault (1972) states that "every system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry" (p. 47). The political context plays a crucial role in shaping the decisions and actions of individuals and organisations. It includes the various political structures, systems, and processes that govern the society and influence its social, economic, cultural, and religious life. Without an understanding of the political context, it can be challenging to make sense of political events and trends, and to develop effective strategies for addressing political issues.

The political context can be looked at on both a macro and micro scale (Mckay, 1992). The macro-political context (including international politics) greatly influences ELT globally, particularly in the Gulf region. This is because the ideologies that are embedded in English language teaching have a political and cultural agenda (Judd, 1987; Phillipson, 1992; Mckay, 1992; Canagarajah, 2003; Karmani, 2005; Mohd-Asraf, 2005; Pennycook, 2007; Byram, 2008; Mahboob, 2011; Hasan, 2014; Hamid, 2022). Phillipson (1992) argues that the English language is "owned by the socioeconomic centre of global power that comprises the BANA (Britain, Australasia, and North America) countries" (p. 19). Similarly, Pennycook (2007) maintains that we must acknowledge that ELT has political, economic, and cultural consequences in the context of aid to developing countries when we closely examine the role of education in development. More specifically, Shome and Hegde (2002) emphasise the significance of postcolonialism for the field of communication studies and encourage researchers in this field to consider the impact of colonialism and other political and transnational factors on the formation of hybrid cultural identities as well as the everyday intercultural encounters that occur. This argument implies that a language serves as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values and promotes the beliefs and practices of the culture in which it is primarily used, while potentially suppressing or overshadowing those of the cultures to which it is introduced ('cultural imperialism') (Tomlinson, 1991; Said, 1994). Thus, Holme (2003) argues that "the widespread adoption of English-medium education in the Gulf could be perceived as making those countries into perpetual consumers not just of the language of the BANA states but of the knowledge and values systems implicit in it" (p. 19). Linked to this sentiment is Byram's (2008) view that foreign language education is set apart from simple learning because it serves social and political purposes that are evident in the formal structures of educational institutions. These objectives are explicitly or implicitly reflected in the learning goals established by governments at the local or national level.

The micro level of the political context refers to the political situation and environment of a country or region, which can have a significant impact on the lives of its citizens, including expatriates who are working in that country (Mckay, 1992). Another way the political context affects EFL teaching is through government policies, which can have a significant impact on EFL teaching through their policies on language education, teacher training, curriculum development and the general social and cultural climate of the country (Abad, 2013). Syed (2003) shows quite conclusively that policymakers have connected progress and modernisation with the English language, and this fact has led to the widespread, essentially global, inclusion of this language as a subject across the curriculum at all educational levels in most countries. A study by Liddicoat

(2004), for example, found that government policies in Australia had a significant impact on the teaching of EFL as they influenced the curriculum and teacher training programmes.

#### **4.7. Importance of the institutional cultural context**

The idea that "school cultures are unique and distinctive" (Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014, p. 66) suggests that each school has its own set of beliefs, values, practices, and regulations that differentiate it from other schools. School cultures are defined by Deal and Peterson (1999) as a combination of factors, including "traditions and rituals that have been built up over time as teachers, students, parents, and administrators work together and deal with crises and accomplishments" (p. 4). These individuals contribute to the creation and evolution of the school culture through their actions, interactions, and relationships. To be more specific, traditions and rituals can include everything from the way that students are greeted each morning to the way that teachers collaborate on lesson planning. These traditions evolve over time, often get passed down from one generation of educators to the next and become part of the fabric of the school.

Schein's (2017) work on organisational culture emphasises how shared values, beliefs, and assumptions shape an organisation's culture and influence the behaviours of its members. He introduced the concept of 'organisational culture' and the idea that organisations have "cultural artifacts" (visible manifestations of culture), "espoused values" (stated beliefs and values), and "basic underlying assumptions" (deeply ingrained beliefs). However, Deal and Kennedy (2000) advocate the notion that organisations are not homogenous entities in terms of culture. Their work supports the idea that organisations can contain multiple sub-cultures, each contributing its unique perspective to the larger organisational context. Their perspective; therefore, underlines the intricate and multifaceted nature of organisational cultural dynamics, acknowledging that diverse groups within an organisation may hold their own values, norms, and behaviours that interplay with the broader cultural framework. As a result, the coexistence of multiple sub-cultures within an organisation adds depth to its cultural identity and reflects the complexity of managing and understanding the diverse elements that shape organisational behaviours and interactions. Further discussion on subcultures will be in the conceptual framework (See pages 93-96).

Institutional cultures themselves are powerful cultural forces, and the experiences that individuals have within the context of their schools can have a profound cultural impact on their actions, thoughts, and feelings. Indeed, many researchers, (Brunner, 2001; Hongboontri, 2003; Beaudoin and Taylor, 2004; Craig, 2009; Guise, 2009; Jurasaitė-Harbinson and Rex, 2010; Burns, 2013;

Maslowski, 2001; Muhammad, 2009; Rosenholtz, 1991; Sato and Kleinsasser, 2004; Schien, 2010, 2017; Rind & Kadiwal, 2016; Puzio *et al.*, 2017) have explored the relationship between schools and culture in various ways. Their work highlights the importance of understanding how school experiences can shape individuals' behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes, and emphasises the need for educators to be mindful of the cultural impact of their practices and policies. This is because educational institutions such as schools and universities do not operate in isolation from their social or political environment, but rather, they exist within a larger socio-political context and are affected by official national language policies (Bruner, 2001; Brown & Lee, 2015). This context includes government policies and regulations, cultural and societal norms, and economic conditions. As a result, institutions must operate within the parameters set by these factors, and their decisions and actions are influenced by them. Education institutions must be aware of these socio-political factors when making decisions about language policies and language teaching. By doing so, they can ensure that their decisions align with the broader goals and values of society, and that they are able to provide high-quality education that meets the needs of all students, regardless of their linguistic background.

It is also true that the institutional context in which EFL is taught has a significant impact on EFL teachers' practices, pedagogies, perspectives, and behaviours. Factors such as government policies and regulations, cultural and societal norms, religious teachings and economic conditions within educational institutions can shape the teaching and learning of EFL and influence the ways in which EFL teachers approach their profession (Miller, *et al.*, 2013; Shah, *et al.*, 2013; Rind & Kadiwal, 2016; Puzio *et al.*, 2017). For instance, the policies and regulations of institutions may shape the content and method of teaching, the use of technology, and the assessment practices (Xue *et al.*, 2021; Chan, 2023). One example of the institutional context affecting EFL teaching is the role of institutional policies on teacher training programmes, curriculum development, and the allocation of resources (Abad, 2013). A particular example is Liddicoat's (2002) finding that institutional policies in Australia had a significant impact on the teaching of EFL, as they influenced the curriculum and teacher training programmes.

Another key point has been raised by Rosenholtz (1991), who argues that "teachers, like members of most organisations, shape their beliefs and actions largely in conformance with the structures, policies, and traditions of the workaday world around them" (p. 2). As a result, teachers' identification with their school cultures such as matters related to education, such as institutional practices, cultural norms, organisational frameworks, and student-teacher dynamics may shape the practices they choose to implement or avoid in the classroom (Nehez & Blossoming, 2020). Rosenholtz (1991) shows that in order to comprehend educational institutions, we must see things



from the perspective of the educators who work within them. They are the ideal lens through which to view the interplay between school culture and teachers' values, practices, and pedagogical stances. They are also best placed to allow an understanding of their beliefs and behaviours in the classroom. Specifically, Thompson (2010) argues that:

[This] allows us to search in two distinctions, in the individual and in his environment, for sources of diversity and uniformity. To the extent that individuals bring similar aspirations, beliefs, and standards into situations appearing to offer similar opportunities and constraints, we can expect to find similarities or patterns in the ensuing action. We now need to explore the extent to which categories of individuals are similarly programmed, and situations in complex organizations are similarly structured (p. 102).

Thompson (2010) emphasises that understanding the behaviour of individuals, particularly teachers within organisations, is fundamental to grasping their actions and the dynamics within the learning process. As Thompson (2010) elaborates, this is because “(1) the individual, who brings ambitions, standards, and information on ideas about causality; and (2) the context, which gives possibilities and restrictions,” interact to produce human behaviour (p. 101). Therefore, in order to gain a deeper comprehension of school cultural context and the reciprocal connections between institution cultures and the beliefs, practices, and pedagogical strategies utilised by teachers, it is necessary to investigate teachers' perspectives of their respective social organisations. This is also useful because teachers should be aware of the challenges that their students face in their teaching context. For example, Burns (2013) notes that Omani students come from various sub-cultural backgrounds, presenting challenges for them as they adapt to university culture in foreign contexts. Some of these challenges include adjusting to the unveiling of females (a very small minority among them) at university, participating in mixed-gender classes, interacting with teachers who may exhibit emotional responses different from those in Oman, and navigating relationships with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, cultural attitudes within educational institutions can also shape the institutional context of EFL teaching. For example, a study by Alptekin (2002) found that cultural attitudes towards language learning and the use of English within educational institutions can impact the teaching of EFL, as they can influence the curriculum and teacher training programmes. According to Puzio et al. (2017), teachers frequently faced obstacles in implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy due to their strong adherence to local institutional authority and policies. They indicated that institutional policies restricted them from utilising teaching methods such as using a language

other than English in the classroom, as it contradicted the institution's policy of English-only instruction. They concluded that “teaching is an institutional and hierarchical practice” (p.230).

Additionally, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) emphasise the significance of intercultural language teaching and learning, which can provide insights into how teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity affect their capacity to establish rapport with local counterparts and learners, and subsequently influence their teaching practices.

Kramsch (1993) highlights the importance of cultural context in language teaching, and this can be relevant in exploring how differences in educational practices affect the teachers' perceptions of the local culture and how they adapt their teaching practices accordingly. For example, this current study could explore how differences in educational practices, such as classroom management, and teaching in a coeducational setting affect the teachers' perceptions of the university culture and how they adapt their teaching practices accordingly.

Interestingly, Shah *et al.* (2013) note in their study that unfavourable institutional policies such as teacher evaluations and attendance policy forced teachers to adopt practices that clashed with their convictions. McKay (1992) suggests that expatriate teachers who discover that the language policies of an institution conflict with their philosophy should consider either not teaching in that institution and seeking other institutions aligned with their views, or alternatively, negotiating with the school administration to challenge and potentially revise the existing policies.

In the Gulf region specifically, EFL teachers face unique challenges due to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students (Abu-Shawish, Ellili-Cherif, & Romanowski, 2021). This encompasses variations in students' languages, ethnicities, and subcultures, all of which contribute to the overall culture of the institution and influence teachers' approaches in instructing within such diverse cultural contexts.

It has also been highlighted that language instructors have a responsibility to protect their host institutions' cultures and pedagogical tenets. In other words, they are not free but rather constrained by the regulations of the institutions in which they teach (Holliday, 1994). Therefore, teachers must adapt their methods and strategies to fit inside the framework of their institutions (McKay, 2003). Some schools in Bangladesh, for example, have a strict policy against male and female pupils interacting with one another, as Kabir (2011) reported. According to the study, socialising between male and female students is considered religiously and culturally disrespectful and unacceptable in several educational institutions in the country. For this reason, it is challenging for a language instructor to facilitate activities, such as group discussions, pair work, and dialogue

practice, in these classroom settings. Similarly, female students and male teachers are not allowed to openly interact with one another, so male instructors are restricted in their interactions with female students. They need to exercise extreme caution when delivering lectures, interacting with female students, or engaging in conversation with them (Kabir, 2011). It is, therefore, clear that religion and culture can shape the institutional policies in educational institutions. This holds true for institutions in the Gulf region, where varying degrees of restrictions and regulations are implemented, aligning with local political and social needs, not solely with religious viewpoints.

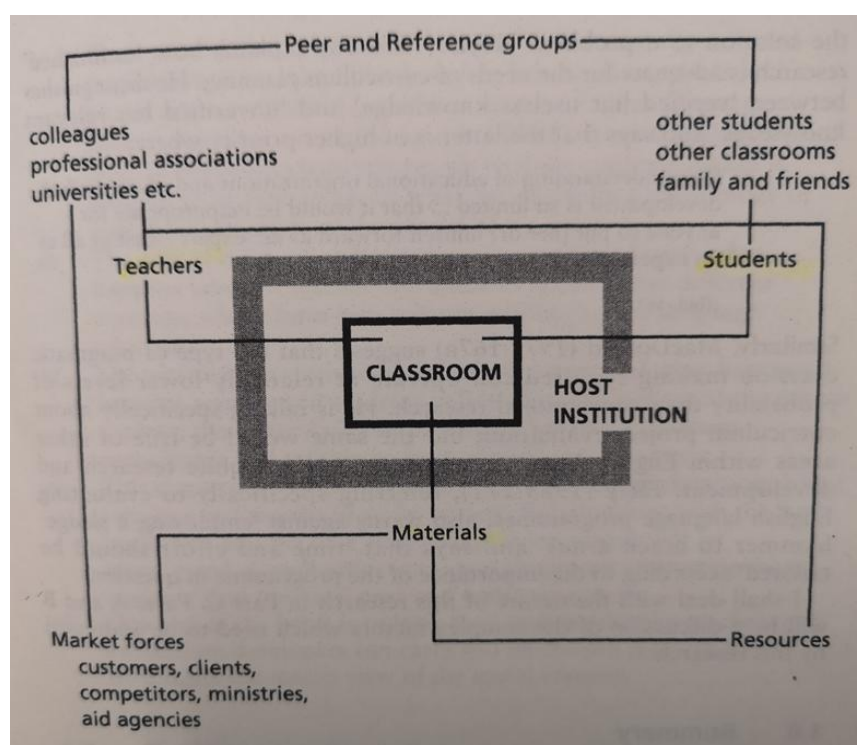
#### **4.8. Importance of classroom culture and context**

Researchers in the field of education can utilise theories about classroom culture as a tool to probe the unseen that lies underneath the surface, shaping and affecting the actions of both instructors and students while they are in the classroom (Ji & Gong, 2017). However, traditional studies of language education have put their emphasis on students and the teaching process while ignoring the significance of the larger social and cultural setting (Ladson-Billings, 2023). Indeed, many studies have shown that the classroom context can play a significant role in shaping student motivation, engagement, and achievement (Brophy, 2013), and ignoring this can lead to challenges in introducing new teaching approaches to diverse student populations who have different cultural backgrounds (Panicker, 2020).

The classroom context is a complex and multifaceted environment that is shaped by various internal and external factors (Ladson-Bilings, 2006; Wedell & Malderez, 2013; Weldres Bećirović, & Bešlija, 2018) and can be defined as the physical, social, and emotional aspects of the learning environment that impact student learning outcomes (Holliday, 1997). Classroom culture also refers to the shared norms, values, behaviours, and interactions that define the learning environment (Tharp & Gallimore, 2010). Teachers, students, materials, and teaching methods all interact to create a distinct classroom culture that can either support or impede students' learning. This distinct culture has been called a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994). It is also true that education occurs within a larger context or environment, and as a result, the classroom can be seen as a complex system composed of interconnected factors and occurrences that affect the teaching and learning environment. Holliday (1997), for instance, emphasises that the classroom environment is a culture that has to be viewed from a macro view of the social context, which relates the classroom to the wider context that influences decisions and interactions in the classrooms. He explains that this culture exists within other wider cultures "between which there are many complex channels of influence" (p. 15). Likewise, Wedell and Malderez (2013) advocate for a multidimensional approach that integrates various levels of influence, ranging from individual

behaviours and interactions to broader societal and cultural forces. This approach considers how these different layers of influence interact and shape educational outcomes. The authors suggest that educational processes are not solely determined by either individual or societal factors but are shaped by a combination of both, alongside contextual elements that include historical, political, and cultural influences.

Despite the classroom being viewed by some as merely a physical location for acquiring information, it is a social reality from the perspectives of educationalists and anthropologists (Tudor, 2001; Rißler *et al.*, 2014). As such, social groups such as classrooms develop unique cultures and social ties among their members (Gallego *et al.*, 2001, p. 951). Holliday proposed a model (See the figure below) for a classroom that is influenced by a number of factors surrounding it.



**Figure 2: The classroom and the host educational environment (Holliday, 1997, p.17)**

Holliday's (1997) model, presented above, illustrates that the classroom is situated in a host institution. These can range from public schools to a private language institutes, universities, or colleges. This host institution is part of the broader educational setting. In addition, in state education, the local community (including parents and employers) strongly influence the 'hosted educational environment' in which the classroom is situated. The **term** 'hosted educational environment' is defined by Holliday (1997) as "any type of environment which influences the host

institution and in turn, the classroom” (p.15). Unlike in state education, host educational environments in private language institutions are often not limited to the local area but may extend globally. In the context of an English language education project, the larger educational setting could involve the Ministry of Higher Education, aid organisations, and other pertinent governmental bodies from both the host and donor nations, all of which can also play a role in influencing market dynamics. Additionally, students and teachers in the classroom are influenced by their respective peer and reference groups, and there may be expectations shaped by previous classroom experiences in different host institutions.

Apart from students and teachers, other significant casual elements or factors in the classroom are the materials, content, and methodologies used. Of course, teachers contribute to the creation of these materials to different extents through their interactions with students, publishers, libraries, and curriculum developers within the host institution. These interactions and activities also have a significant impact on shaping the educational environment of the institution. Consequently, within the educational environment of the host institution, there exists an intricate web of influences and interests. It is vital to also recognise the significance of the economy, as well as other political and bureaucratic institutions in the larger society, as they affect various resources, including salaries and available facilities (Holliday, 1997). As Holliday (1997) notes, the way people interact with each other in the classroom is influenced by “social forces with both the institution and the wider community outside the classroom” (p. 9). He also argues that “it is not sufficient to look only within the classroom to understand this interaction [...] [but also] the wider educational institution, the wider educational environment and the wider society” (p. 11).

Pennycook (2021) usefully provides a clear picture of how these considerations are directly related to the work of language educators: “our classrooms... are affected by and have effects on the wider social, cultural, economic, and political world... As educators we have to believe this: otherwise our only role is to reproduce the social world as it is” (p. 130).

The classroom context can be much more complex when teachers face diverse societal expectations to conform to as a variety of students with different beliefs and cultural backgrounds may be present. In this sense, Holliday (1994, 1997) raises concerns about how social forces from both society and institutions outside the classroom can influence interactions within the classroom. Specifically, he is concerned about how these social forces can affect how students and teachers communicate with one another. That interconnected and complicated relationship is well illustrated in the models (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). This position is also reinforced by Shaw (1997), who argues that the contexts in which educational experiences are taking place have a significant

impact on teaching and that these contexts should be considered. In the same vein, to understand the complexity of what is going on in the classroom, teachers need to be aware of the multifaceted nature of what is occurring in the classroom. These arguments for considering different factors when studying intercultural issues are supported by the CIC and CAIC, as will be discussed as part of the theoretical framework of this research (see page #).

As has been shown, factors such as the cultural background of the students, social norms outside the classroom, and expectations of parents and the community all play a role in shaping the classroom environment (Holliday, 1997). As a result, teachers must take a holistic approach when selecting teaching strategies that are relevant, engaging, and meaningful for the students. This is particularly vital given that the classroom environment is dynamic and serves as a space for identity formation, where language and language learning play a critical role (Hall & Eggington, 2000). It is essential for instructors to understand the classroom setting before designing lessons to prevent any hindrance to learning (Holliday, 1994; 1997). Finally, it is also necessary for teachers to understand that their practice is influenced by contextual factors such as logistical constraints, cultural norms, and institutional pressures.

Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that the classroom environment is composed of several factors, including the physical space, teaching strategies, and teacher-student interactions. However, the classroom is not a separate entity but is rather part of a larger system that encompasses both the educational system and the surrounding society. This means that teachers should consider the broader societal context and its impact on the learning environment. As Hall and Eggington (2000) contend, the connection between classrooms and the outside world is mutually influential. The classroom is not solely shaped by the external environment, but rather it is an integral part of the world. It is influenced by external events and has an impact on what takes place beyond its boundaries.

Researching classroom dynamics is crucial because it can reveal how teachers view and interact in that social and cultural context, establish norms for classroom conduct, and serve as a guiding principle for both teachers and students regarding appropriate behaviour (Tudor, 1996). Despite classroom culture reflecting broader societal and cultural views and attitudes, the way in which a given set of teachers perceives and experiences the classroom is unique to them (Tudor, 1996). Based on the literature examined here, it is important to examine how teachers perceive and interact with the university cultural context when communicating with their students and colleagues from diverse backgrounds. This exploration sheds light on how teachers understand and adapt to the cultural and social context of their workplace, particularly in a new setting such

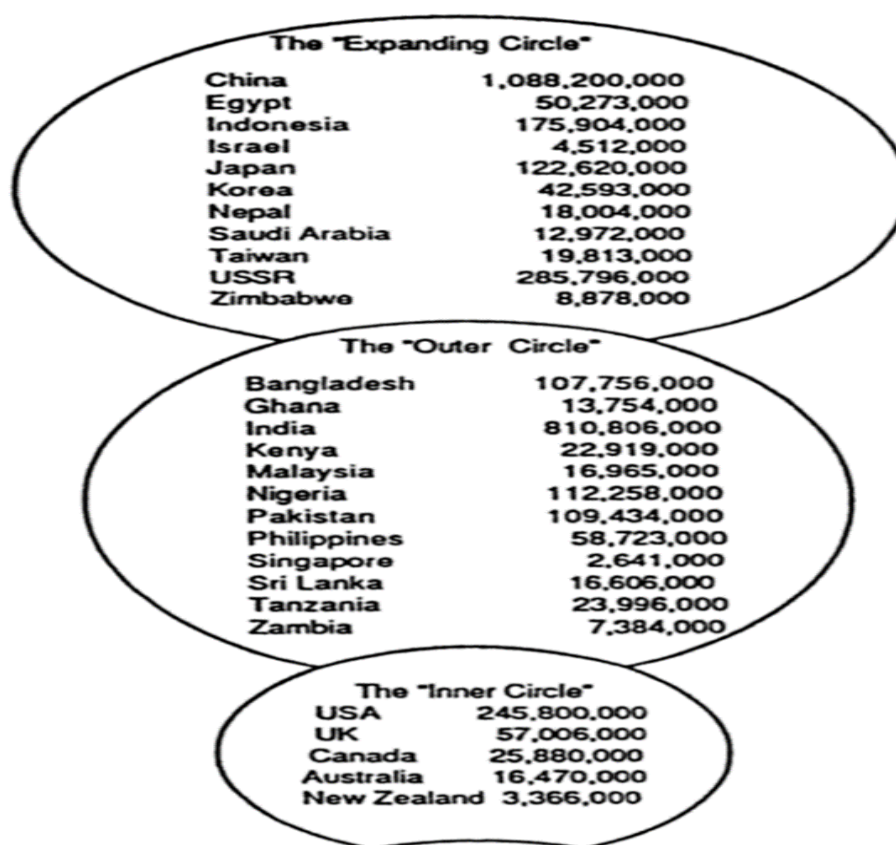
as SQU. By examining these factors, this research can gain insight into how successful teachers are in adapting themselves culturally to their new working environment.

By conducting interviews and observing classes, I can explore to what extent teachers are culturally responsive to the socio-cultural context at the CPS. This will be reflected in their practices and exposed by their perspectives. Furthermore, I investigate the extent to which the cultural context influences their teaching, social and cultural practices, and interactions with students both inside and outside the classroom.

#### **4.9. The importance of Intercultural Communication in ELT**

The proliferation of the English language over the world and the development of digital means of communication and information exchange (Salih & Omar, 2021) has also resulted in user communities that are rich in cultural and linguistic diversity, each with their own unique set of requirements and priorities (Crystal, 2002; Cook, 2003). This has prompted studies into the best practices for language instruction and developing pedagogical materials. Because of this, the teaching of intercultural understanding or intercultural communication (IC) has become not only a pressing necessity but also a significant goal that must be considered and promoted within the context of ELT pedagogical practice (Salih & Omar, 2021). Indeed, in view of the growing phenomena of globalised English, interculturality in ELT is an integral part that requires greater time and attention (Crystal, 2002; Cook, 2003; Galloway & Rose, 2015).

There is a useful model by Kachru (1992) (see Figure 3 below) that outlines the globalisation and dissemination of the English language around the world, comprising three overlapping circles. The inner circle includes countries where English is the official and first language, the middle circle comprises countries where English is recognised as an official or de facto language in several contexts, and the exterior circle consists of countries where English is used as a second language in a variety of fields and industries. It is important to highlight that the internationalised status of English as a *lingua franca* has led to the decline of the native speaker model in a globalised context, and the demand for teaching EFL/ESL has become increasingly universal (Fareh, 2010).



**Figure 3: Kachru's Model (1992, p.356)**

The population of English language teachers represents a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Due to English's global position, it is not conceivable for a single group of English teachers to meet the burgeoning demand for EFL/ESL instructors globally. Thus, the need for qualified individuals with a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds to teach English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) has increased. According to Young and Sachdev (2011), there has been a steady increase in the percentage of ELT teachers who are second-language learners themselves, not native speakers of English. As the size of the third circle (Kachru, 1992) continues to increase, the importance of IC for those who speak English as a second or additional language has become apparent (Jenkins, 2006). In this regard, interculturality in ELT has become an integral part of ELT that requires greater attention due to the growing phenomenon of globalised English (Crystal, 2002; Cook, 2003; McKay, 2003; Galloway & Rose, 2015).

Since the world has become more like a global village and there is a need for a common language for communication between people from diverse backgrounds, the learning of foreign languages has become more of a necessity. The objective of this learning has expanded from mere language acquisition to the improvement of intercultural understanding and tolerance (Al Seyabi, 2010).



This is known as intercultural awareness or competence. Although intercultural awareness/competence (IC) originated with research into the experiences of westerners working abroad, the idea has expanded to include a wider range of people such as those "studying abroad, international business, cross-cultural training, and expatriates living overseas and immigrant acculturation" (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2007, p. 2).

There has been a recent surge of interest in enhancing language instructors' and students' capacity to communicate across cultural boundaries and to help students negotiate meaning. Doing so presents difficulties. Because English serves as a *lingua franca* in so many different types of IC, the task of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is complex and challenging. This has led to the adoption of an intercultural approach to teaching English as a global language. The concept of intercultural competence, often referred to as Intercultural Communication (IC) or Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), was first introduced by Hall in 1959 in his book '*The Silent Language*'. It emerged because of the growing recognition of the importance of culture within and across nations in the world, as noted by Shuter (2014). It also includes that idea that intercultural language instruction must be integrated into the educational programmes of a rapidly globalising world (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Byram, 1989; 1997; 2006; Cetinavci, 2012; Gu, 2016; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018; Romanowski, 2017).

In terms of teaching practices, there was a merging of the intercultural and communicative approaches into language instruction (Byram, 1997; Byram *et al.*, 2013), conforming to the ICC format. The integration of the communicative approach to language teaching and the intercultural approach then led to the development of ICC (Byram, 1997; Byram *et al.*, 2013).

According to Deardorff (2011), the term 'intercultural competency' has varying definitions depending on the field of study. According to his definition of intercultural competence, it is not enough to have a surface-level awareness of cultural components like food, values, social customs, and others. By contrast, one must instead focus on a deeper comprehension of cultural paradigms in socio-cultural situations. Intercultural competence has been alternatively defined by Fantini (2006) as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 12). A number of researchers around the globe have advocated the inclusion of intercultural competence skills as part of language learning to aid awareness among students and teachers that there are multiple ways of viewing the world (Godwin-Jones, 2013; Zlomislić *et. al*, 2016; Fantini, 2020).

It has been shown that learners and teachers cannot separate themselves from the cultural context that shapes their identity (O'Sullivan, 2009; Mansour, 2011). Rather, they carry with them into

the classroom what their society has constructed and what they have inherited from it including all previous knowledge, beliefs, values, and attitudes (Al Seyabi, 2010). All these affect the way they see things, understand, interpret and interact with the world around them. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) note that what constitutes one's identity is an understanding of the self in relation to others. Ford and Trotman (2001) argue that teachers must be culturally responsive by "seeking educational and cultural opportunities that strengthen one's cultural sensitivity, knowledge and skills" (p. 239). They add that a teacher can become culturally responsive by understanding some basic knowledge of "the general beliefs, values, traditions, and norms diverse groups hold" (p. 239).

Clearly then, culture is part of our life that shapes our views and perceptions, our behaviour and our identity. Therefore, the social, religious and cultural settings we grow up in shape our philosophy of life. When we encounter other views that are different from our own and which may challenge our own, the experience can be positive if a sense of tolerance is developed to accept others' cultures while retaining one's own culture. On the other hand, it can be negative too. Some might, on the other hand, reject other cultures or completely abandon his/her own culture because he/she finds another culture superior. Tuzlukova and Al-Mahrooqi (2010) assert that an "objective examination of our views and the similarities and differences between our cultures and others is essential for maintaining equilibrium, harmony and peace among world cultures" (p. 37). Based on this idea, intercultural competence has emerged as a regular concept in ELT literature with the aim of solving the problem of cultural intolerance that teachers and students may encounter in some educational settings. This shows the importance of ICC to ELT, which is discussed in the following section.

#### **4.10. The importance of Intercultural Communication to ELT teachers**

Intercultural communication is a relevant and important topic in ELT because effective IC skills are necessary for successful cross-cultural interactions in today's globalised world (Deardorff, 2011). English as a global language has brought people from different cultures together, making IC an important aspect of English language education. Indeed, ICC has been emphasised in ELT classrooms since the turn of the millennium in places like America and Europe, where there is inherent ethnic and cultural diversity. Therefore, educators have long realised the importance of embracing this diversity, especially in contexts of intercultural language instruction (Strugielska & Pitkowska, 2016). The principal reason for adopting intercultural language teaching has been to employ culturally responsive pedagogical (CRP) strategies in culturally heterogeneous learning

environments (Miravet & Garcia, 2013; Bastos & Araujo, 2014; Civitillo *et al.*, 2019). However, implementing ICC in TEFL/TESL has been overlooked in language courses where intercultural variance is less apparent (Salih & Omar, 2022).

According to Salih and Omar (2022), one factor that has led to the marginalisation of the intercultural approach to education in the Gulf region is the lack of linguistic and ethnic diversity among students at universities in the Gulf countries and elsewhere in the Middle East. Regardless of whether there is cultural variety or not in any particular context, Valdivia and Montoto (2018) insist that it is crucial to strengthen instructors' understanding and application of intercultural teaching. According to Cetinavci (2012), ICC is largely dependent on instructors and teacher education, both of which merit careful consideration and investigation. It appears that English language teachers in the Gulf region come from a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds. For this reason, it is not uncommon for EFL teachers in these nations to be native speakers of a language other than English who have earned degrees in a related field, such as English literature or linguistics. This facet of ICC research in the ESL/EFL context should not be overlooked because previous studies have shown that differences in the academic backgrounds of EFL/ ESL instructors might potentially influence how those instructors approach intercultural education in the classroom (Strugielska & Piątkowska, 2016).

Salih and Omar (2022) argue that the simple fact that teachers of EFL are actively engaged in the process of educating their students makes intercultural teaching a vital component of any EFL classroom. They insist that teachers should be introduced to ICC even if there is not any real diversity in the classroom. This is because establishing ICC through language instruction is crucial in today's increasingly worldwide educational landscape if we want to develop people (global citizens) who are functioning well with people of different backgrounds. This expectation has become more prevalent in recent years due to the growth of online education and the increasing use of technology in language teaching. According to Byram (1997), ICC is most commonly learned and taught in formal educational settings. However, in light of the apparent divide between theory and application, Byram *et al.* (2013) critique the dearth of research into the implementation of intercultural education in language classrooms. According to Zhang (2017), fostering ICC among educators is necessary for the successful implementation of IC in classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language. He argues that professional development should now emphasise developing ESL instructors' ICC. Like their students, most ESL/EFL teachers learn languages by interacting with diverse cultures and languages.

#### **4.11. The importance of English Language Teachers' perspectives and pedagogical methods in the intercultural context**

For the purpose of investigating language instructors' awareness of ICC, it is necessary to have an understanding of both their perspectives and the pedagogical methods that they employ when teaching interculturally within the classroom context. According to Estaji and Jahanshiri (2022), teachers of foreign languages do not generally differ in their pedagogical approach based on their nationality. More importantly, it appears that educators' pedagogical knowledge and the efforts they make to practise successful teaching of English as an international language are what shape educators' pedagogical approaches. A study by Lee and Van Den Berg (2019) agrees with the findings of Estaji and Jahanshiri (2022), as they found that teachers' ICC is shaped by their personal experiences, cultural background, and beliefs about language teaching and learning. Furthermore, the study showed that teachers who possess a high degree of ICC are better equipped to create a positive learning environment for students from diverse cultural backgrounds as they are more aware of their own cultural biases and have a greater understanding of IC. Similarly, Lin and Chen (2021) conducted a study that explored the impact of intercultural training on ELT teachers' ICC. The results indicated that intercultural training can have a significant positive impact on teachers' ICC. This is because it helps them to better understand the cultural differences and similarities among their students and so they develop more effective IC skills. This, in turn, can lead to a more inclusive classroom environment where students feel respected and valued, regardless of their cultural background.

In particular educational contexts, the above-mentioned effects on the difference in instructors' backgrounds and the lack of diversity in terms of culture within the student body exacerbate the constraints imposed by the classroom environment. For instance, language instructors from vastly different educational and cultural backgrounds may have trouble adapting to the sudden move from traditional to intercultural language instruction. For intercultural ELT, suitable curriculum, materials, and teaching strategy are required (Mighani & Moghadam, 2019). In addition, it is possible that ICC is not currently being stressed in language classes because it is not an official part of the curriculum. According to Czura (2018), recognising the significance of cultivating ICC in the language classroom has become one of the most crucial qualities that must be possessed by those who teach foreign languages. However, the author conducted her research on this topic from the vantage point of a stereotypical group of EFL teachers: those who have completed formal language education programmes. This condition is not met in a large number of cases for those

who teach foreign languages, especially in countries located in the Middle East, as they often lack formal training.

Bringing to light the dearth of research conducted from the perspective of working language instructors on how culture is taught and learned in the classroom, Young and Sachdev (2011) notes that educators in the field of language education tend to view intercultural competence as a hindrance to effective language instruction rather than a catalyst for it. This perspective stems from factors identified in the study, such as teachers' concerns about addressing politically or religiously charged topics in the classroom, which hinder the practice of intercultural language teaching. This causes a lack of assessment of ICC and a focus on superficial cultural content in EFL materials. In addition to the emphasis placed on superficial forms of cultural content in EFL instructional materials, there is also a concentration on the most surface-level aspects of various cultures such as cuisine, holidays, celebrations, geographical locations, and so on (Deardorff, 2011).

Salih and Omar (2022) conducted a study to investigate how instructors in an EFL context view and practice interculturality. Sixteen English lecturers at Omani universities participated in the research: eight women and eight men, all between the ages of 35 and 50, and all of whom held a doctoral degree in English. They found that seven respondents (43.75%) only partially supported intercultural education, indicating that IC is a sensitive topic that must be handled with care to prevent student discord or misunderstanding. Salih and Omar (2022) concluded that some teachers hold that perspective based on several critical factors, including the importance of a teacher's familiarity with the classroom setting, the students' prior knowledge and experiences, and the goals and requirements of the course. Clearly then, teachers of a foreign language must not only focus on the linguistic components of their students' progress, but also on helping them become more culturally aware and aware of how their own background influences their understanding of the target culture. As a final conclusion, Salih and Omar (2022) noted that there is a higher likelihood of misunderstanding and cultural sensitivity in contexts where there is no framework for fostering intercultural learning and teaching in multicultural settings.

The literature on ICC highlights its importance for EFL teachers (Byram *et al.*, 2013; Brodmann, 2019). Consequently, the field of ELT has prioritised the acquisition of linguistic and pedagogical skills to improve students' educational experiences. However, limited research exists on the ways in which teachers and students from diverse cultural backgrounds interact and learn from one another. Particularly in Gulf countries, including Oman, there has been a neglect of the

intercultural perspectives and experiences of ELT expatriate teachers, as well as the absence of intercultural instruction in the EFL curriculum.

Research on intercultural education has several essential goals, one of the most important of which is to lay the groundwork for innovative, effective, and appropriate teaching methods in the classroom. This idea has prompted this present study, which investigates whether participants had taken any IC courses before arriving in Oman, and how this influences their IC while in Oman. This focus is intended to determine whether having prior experience or knowledge of IC has any impact on teachers' ability to engage in intercultural interactions effectively. Another important point related to this is to see if the induction programme at the institution for new teachers is of any help (professional development) to expatriate teachers in improving their IC skills or raising their intercultural awareness and understanding.

To address these gaps, this current study aimed to specifically investigate the perspectives and practices of EFL teachers toward IC in the context of ELT practice. This current study explored the extent to which EFL teachers at the CPS are aware of IC when interacting with the cultural context at SQU. Additionally, the study examined the degree to which expatriate teachers are culturally responsive to the context in which they teach. By shedding light on these issues, this study seeks to contribute to the development of effective IC awareness and strategies for EFL teachers.

#### **4.12. Cultural Issues and factors influencing ELT in the Middle East and Gulf region**

Even though EFL teachers often have extensive teaching qualifications and experiences, they may still feel inadequately prepared to deal with specific pedagogical and socio-cultural challenges that arise while teaching (Shah, Hussain, & Nasseef, 2013). Jukes *et al.*, (2021) emphasizes that the socio-cultural context plays a vital role in shaping both the teacher-learner relationship and the overall effectiveness of the teaching process. To create an effective learning environment in an EFL classroom, it is essential to acknowledge the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of the teacher, learner, and course materials. This requires teachers to engage with learners within a wider social context and cater to individual needs while considering the local cultural context (Johnston, 2003). Furthermore, teachers must possess ICC to promote mutual understanding and respect among learners and facilitate communication across cultures (Hall, 2011).

A study by Shah, Hussain and Nasseef (2013) aimed to explore the factors that impact EFL teaching in the Saudi Arabia context and identify teaching techniques that can address these

factors. The study used semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data from five EFL teachers. They found that three major factors, (1. social, cultural, and religious sensitivities, 2. lack of learner motivation, and 3. unfavourable institutional policies and procedures) presented as challenges to EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia. However, with an understanding of Saudi culture, learners' needs, and professional competence, the negative effects of these factors can be minimised.

In the UAE context, Palmer (2013) investigated the clashes in culture between EFL instructors who were native English speakers from Western countries and their Arab students in two UAE universities. The primary objective of the study was to scrutinise the cultural disparities between these two groups, the instructors' comprehension of these differences, the particular cultural challenges that emerged in the classroom, and the attitudes of both instructors and students towards understanding different cultures. The study revealed that there were differences in culture between Western instructors and Arab students concerning aspects such as religion, family, and the preferred classroom ambience. Experienced instructors tended to understand these cultural differences. Usefully, the study identified nine categories of cultural conflicts that occur in the classroom, such as the use of inappropriate materials, mixed-gender concerns, and disrespect for religious traditions. A final finding was that despite these disparities and conflicts, both instructors and students exhibited positive attitudes towards cultural understanding in the classroom.

Regarding the socio-religious context in Oman, there are a number of areas that should be taken into account. Based on his teaching experience, Swetnam (2010), who was an EFL teacher at the CPS and SQU, lists "[a]ppropriate dress in public, alcohol consumption, obscene words and gestures, inappropriate topics of discussion, behaviour during the holy month of Ramadan" (p. 116). He describes the majority of Arab people as "deeply conservative" (p. 117).

Then, Swetnam (2010) lists other considerations that teachers need to be aware of while being in the classroom; he calls them "classroom do's and don'ts". These can be summarised to include not mixing male and female students in class activities, avoiding commenting on students' dress especially a male teacher to a female student, avoiding disparaging remarks in class, maintaining personal space especially male teachers towards female students, avoiding criticising students in front of others, avoiding sensitive topics such as sex, politics and religion in classroom discussion and as writing topics, and avoiding inappropriate materials such as "dating, alcohol, girlfriends/boyfriends, unmarried men, and women living together" (p. 117). He describes these topics as being "taboo to conservative cultures" (p. 118) but he also notes that Oman is less conservative than Saudi Arabia in terms of being tolerant to some of these topics. He gives the

example of "a woman wearing a short-sleeved shirt" (p. 118), which he said "would be intolerable [in Saudi Arabia] – the offending bare arms would have to be blacked out with a permanent marker" (p. 118).

It should be noted that Swetnam's characterisation of Omanis as being less conservative than Saudis may be oversimplified and influenced by his outsider perspective (non-Omani). It is important to also recognise that generalisations about Omani culture may not apply to other Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which have distinct cultural, religious, and political perspectives. The interpretation of Islamic issues can also vary, leading to differences in social norms and practices. Expatriate teachers should be mindful of these nuances and avoid conflating distinct cultural identities. For example, historically, women in Oman were not religiously or officially banned from driving, unlike in Saudi Arabia where the ban was only lifted on June 24th, 2018 (BBC, 2019). It is only by understanding these cultural, religious, and political subtleties that educators can foster an inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.

Swetnam (2010) concludes that materials must be selected with great care before using them in the classroom. He presents an example of what might look like a good textbook but has content that is not appropriate to the Gulf context. He mentions a textbook of "a popular ESL reader written by a well-known media mogul, [where] the author narrates details about how he built his business empire, but [...] also includes details of his personal sex, life and about how he once got an abortion for a girlfriend when she became pregnant by him" (p. 118). The example that he mentioned is too sensitive to be discussed in a coeducational class in Oman, where male and female students would feel this was a wrong act and not appropriate to discuss in a co-educational class.

To have an effective working relationship with the learners, Swetnam (2010) urges ELT teachers to exert effort to be aware of the cultural sensitivities of their students. Although Swetnam (2010) has addressed an important topic in his article, it should be noted that his views were based solely on his personal views and not on empirical research. Moreover, it can be noticed that his views are generalised to the Arab world which may perpetuate stereotypes. Many scholars, both from within and outside the Arab world, challenge the idea that the Arab world is a monolithic entity with a single culture (e.g., Ayish, 2003; Feghali, 1997; Zahrana, 2009). Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying Swetnam's views to the broader context of the Arab world.

In addition, Swetnam's article does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the sensitivity of these issues or offer insights into how he addressed them based on his personal experience. By contrast, this current qualitative study employed a case study approach of five expatriate EFL teachers from



whom data was collected them using semi-structured interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall discussions to gain in-depth insights into the perspectives, practices, and experiences. By examining how these teachers navigate the impact of sociocultural factors in the context, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of these issues and how EFL expatriate teachers perceive and interact with the complexity of the cultural aspect of the teaching environment in the context under study.

#### **4.13. Expatriate EFL teachers and sociocultural-political religious appropriacy**

Expatriates are defined by McNulty and Brewster (2017) as "legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by an organisation or by self-initiation, or directly employed within the host country" (p. 46). As a result of their upbringings, expatriate English language teachers often bring with them preconceived notions of what constitutes acceptable behaviour when they move to a new society. Hudson (2012) contends that this can lead to difficult circumstances in the classroom, as Western instructors may feel pressured to convey their own ideas of gender relations as normal and sensible, which may offend students. This mode of thinking has been suggested by Hudson (2012) as possibly originating from the Western ideal of equality, which has evolved over time to the point where it is now widely accepted that all members of society, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or, more recently, sexual orientation, should be treated with a particular definition of equal respect and rights. It could be argued that the particular concept of equality developed in the Anglophone West, is a strongly held cultural conviction, and that many people view it as a universal human right. However, bringing or promoting this Western conception of equality to communities where it is not widely held or shared similarly can cause friction and trouble.

Teachers may, therefore, find it difficult to reconcile their own values with those of the communities in which they are employed. In such communities, the concept of gender equality may be understood very differently and practices that would be considered 'sexual discrimination' in the West may actually be required by law or religious dogma.

In her auto-ethnographic study, Rhodenizer (2011) expresses her challenges as a Western post-colonial feminist EFL teacher in Oman. As a feminist, she brings her feminist identity into the classroom and initiates feminist-related issues with Omani students. She believes that as a feminist teacher, she must change students' minds. She admits that:

It is vital for me as a Westerner to open my mind to the variety of ways of understanding and living in the world, but it is equally important for me as a feminist teacher to open the minds of my students to a similar experience (p.18-19).

To truly be a feminist teacher, one must engage her students in questions of women's rights, women's lives and women's histories (p.20).

Feminism is really about changing minds and it is important to remember that individual everyday acts are essential to this process (p.22).

Some of the questions she addressed as a feminist were:

How can a Western feminist English teacher facilitate discussions of Islamic (or Western) social inequalities, or take part in defining them in conjunction with students? How can a teacher actively work against social inequalities in the imaginations of her students through her pedagogy, or is it neo-colonial to do so? Is it even possible to deliver ELT by a Western feminist teacher without colonizing students and what do some influential post-colonial feminists have to say about that? (p.14).

Rhodenizer is one example of teachers who come to Oman for the sake of liberating people from their own culture. She uses her Western feminism through her profession to spread her view of social justice:

To instigate/invite/engage with challenges to dominant social norms in the context of a language learning classroom is therefore not neo-colonialist, rather it is social justice pedagogy (p.21)

The message I want to convey then, is that there is a strong imperative for feminism in TESOL and regardless of context it is not colonial or oppressive to engage students in critical discussions of language, their position within language or within their own cultural heritages (p.21).

She was aware that her approach is against the institutional policies in Oman, but she would try to indulge such conversations with students, even privately:

In a private discussion after school, one girl argued that wearing the hijab and veiling is... (p.15).

Philosophically I recognize the danger of taking licence in classrooms to ask students to think critically about their cultural heritage when language teachers are often new residents of a cultural context they may not yet understand or appreciate. This is especially true of some Islamic nations where this kind of thinking is presented by religious leadership as contradictory to the teachings of Islam (p.21).

She was aware that expressing her views might not be welcomed by her students:

For me to describe disappointment or anger with an Omani cultural practice (for example, the dominant girls in my classes who silenced their female peers for volunteering to present a homework assignment), is to open myself to accusations of a lack of understanding of these women's lives based on my outsider status (p.28).

Writing of my perceptions of these events and so many others, I am constantly policing and sometimes silencing myself for fear of the post-colonial retribution that sometimes comes with taking a critical view of other cultures (p.28).

Rhodenizer is also aware of influence of socio-religious powers in the Omani context (such as Islam and social traditions) and how they restrict her feminist practices in the ELT classrooms:

The intersections of tribal and Islamic traditions and professional social justice imperatives placed restrictions on my ability to speak critically or cogently when encountering instances of cultural misalignment (p.30).

She was upset because she could not practise her feminism for the sake of considering 'cultural sensitivity' in Oman, but she had to conform.

I felt terrible because I could not accept suspending my feminist politics in this way, in the interest of "cultural sensitivity" but I thought that I ought to conform to localized dominant norms lest I would be exploiting undeserved Western privilege (p.42).

In terms of the classroom as a platform for open debate, some educators believe that the English language classroom is impartial, and there are instances in which teachers will utilise the classroom as a platform to propagate their thoughts or their ideologies. De Vicenti *et al.* (2007) encourage such an approach to be applied, particularly when they discuss the challenges involved in introducing queer theory to foreign language classrooms. The challenges discussed in the article include the structures of the languages, the socio-cultural context, and the teaching materials used in the classroom. They justify their approach by applying Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis, which emphasises the relationship between language and ideology. De Vicenti *et al.* (2007) highlight that this view has political implications for language teachers, who can either contribute to preserving normative positions or challenge them. They also contend that to promote critical and self-reflective discourse, teachers need to create a classroom environment that encourages discussion and exploration. This practice should be supported by a curriculum and materials that facilitate linguistic and reflective exploration. They also argue that this awareness is relevant for the introduction of any new practices in the language classroom, including the use of a variety of illustrations of different types of couples in the context of queer theory.

Nelson (2004) reported that, in a grammar-based English as a Second Language (ESL) programme at a community college in the United States, one of her instructors incorporated a topic related to homosexuality and gay issues. This indicates that the instructor used this sensitive topic as a teaching tool to help ESL students develop their language skills. Norton and Pavlenko (2004) expressed their appraisal to this approach by saying: "*blending grammar teaching with exploring gay and lesbian issues, Nelson powerfully demonstrates that topics previously seen as taboo have great potential for teaching both linguistic and intercultural competence*" (p. 510). However, according to researchers commenting on Muslim countries, bringing controversial issues to the classroom is likely to clash with the local institutional and country's policies.

Our focus on IC here is because culture plays a significant role in influencing our teachers and students' attitudes, mind-sets, lifestyles, and interactional styles (Kramsch, 2001, p. 204). If we assume teachers hold their own cultures as part of their identity, according to Hall (1976), there are two layers of cultures: an upper (overt) layer and a deeper (covert) layer, the latter of which includes beliefs, traditions, and values which underlie behaviour, and which change more slowly than the upper layer. Mansour (2013) concurs with the argument presented by Olson (1988) who argues, "that teachers tell us about their practice is, most fundamentally, a reflection of their culture and cannot be properly understood without reference to that culture" (p. 169).

In this case, finding out about teachers' cultures, especially the deeper layer, is vital to this study as it can reveal the unseen culture that affects their behaviour and practices. This research has the potential to inform our understanding of why teachers do or do not do certain things or why they have a certain perception towards certain things while teaching in the Omani context. In addition, it seeks to explain why they implement pedagogical strategies or hold particular perspectives. This data is obtained by interviewing teacher participants about their own cultural backgrounds, views and experiences.

### **Gender in the cultural context**

In the past, essentialist, fixed ideas of gender that emphasise distinctions between the genders dominated the academic area investigating the role of gender in ELT. However, this way of thinking has been heavily criticised for being out of date in recent years, "inherently context- and culture-blind because they regard gender as a static, context-free category" (Schmenk, 2004. p. 514). Because of this, more constructivist perspectives have emerged, which recognise the "historical, political, social, and cultural aspects" (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004, p. 383) of the construction of gender roles. The emergence of this later perspective has resulted in the existence of multiple, often conflicting orientations, opinions, and positions that overlap and intersect within the field. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998) sum up this move away from difference-based views of gender and the subsequent call for research that recognises the complexity of the role of gender in ELT by stating, "individuals may experience the language and gender interface differently in the different communities in which they participate at any given time" (p. 486). As a result, while some earlier research into gender differences in language learning focused on things like speech patterns and academic achievement, more current research is instead attempting to place the issue of gender and language learning within its own unique social, cultural, and political contexts.

Educators from predominantly Anglophone countries may find the separation of genders in some higher educational settings in the Gulf region to be baffling, which may colour their interactions with students and the way they instruct them. In the Arabian Gulf countries (GCC), one could argue that gender roles are more strictly established than in other parts of the world. Teachers who base their ideas on appropriate student conduct on their experiences elsewhere may face a difficult transition. This can be especially apparent in English-medium higher education in the GCC, where disparities in the cultural background between instructors and students may lead to conflicts over gender issues.

New ELT professionals need to be aware of the significance of gender roles and their potential impact on higher education institutions because teachers from the West may experience ‘culture shock’ when they compare their views on gender roles to those of their students and society. These conflicts arise because individuals and their host communities may have different ideas about what constitutes a ‘proper’ or ‘accepted’ gender position in society. This cultural divide has been found to be a major source of potential classroom difficulties, and tolerance of divergent views on gender in the workplace is required. Added to this is the fact that the representation of gender relations in the Middle East in Western cultural and political discourse can further complicate understanding local attitudes. The sooner new ELT professionals in the region learn about the local construction of gender and how this affects their work and personal lives, the better prepared they will be to handle any dispute or difficulty that may arise (Hudson, 2012). The appearance of students dressed in all white (males) or all black (females), for example, may draw attention to the societal norm of segregating the genders prevalent in a local society. However, Hudson (2012) argues that orientation sessions provided by mentors or orientation committees and conversations with more experienced workmates can help ELT professionals understand the significance of being aware of gender roles in the region and their potential impact on higher education institutions. This guidance can foster a more inclusive and culturally aware teaching environment, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of ELT professionals in higher education institutions.

#### **4.14. Coeducation in the classrooms**

Teaching mixed genders in one classroom is an issue that has been discussed in ELT literature when discussing teacher-student relationships and when discussing students’ performance and participation in classrooms. In Oman, this issue has not been researched widely (Mackenzie, 2016). Hudson (2012), who has been teaching in some Arabian Gulf countries since 1994, conducted a study that examined western ELT teachers’ perspectives on how they perceive gender roles playing out in UAE where English is the language of instruction at the university level and the way they are perceived to have an impact on the individuals' personal and work lives. He reported teachers who taught in single gender colleges and universities in the UAE encountered negative effects of gender.

When teaching in single-gender higher education classrooms at single-gender institutions, participants in Hudson's (2012) study reported a range of perspectives, some of which were unfavourable and others of which were positive. According to Hudson (2012) many Western educators report feeling less stressed and fearful of their jobs when they taught exclusively male classes in a male institution as opposed to the worry they experienced when teaching female

classes at an all-female university. Even more puzzling to Hudson was the behaviour of female students hiding their faces with files upon seeing a male instructor or male Emirati. On the other hand, these same students would stroll right by men, cleaners, and security guards (most of whom were from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, or Pakistan) without covering their faces. Hudson (2012) also noted that he saw so many variations of wearing habits for the *niqab* (face covers worn by women in some cultures and regions). Hudson concluded that the *niqab* seemed optional and there was no clear consensus among female students.

Despite the fact that the context under study in Oman is coeducational, there are situations in which classes are turned into single-gender settings due to an insufficient number of students of the opposite gender enrolling in a given level of English, for example. Although this is a rare occurrence, it does occur. Therefore, in such circumstances, the instances provided by Hudson (2012) of the experiences and views of Western teachers can be addressed, and they can also be contrasted to the experiences of my participants who had similar experiences while teaching at SQU.

Al-Musalli (2010) conducted a quantitative study in the Omani context to find the factors affecting independent learning in classrooms and found that coeducation was one of the factors. Her participants were asked if they felt relaxed in a coeducational setting and whether this setting affected "the way they behave in class such as taking notes and asking questions" (p. 161). These students came from high schools which did not have coeducation, so she expected them to be challenged when communicating with the opposite gender at university. She reported that 78.57% of her participants found coeducation problematic due to three reasons: (i) they did not feel confident, (ii) they felt uncomfortable asking questions and (iii) they felt unrelaxed talking in the presence of the opposite sex students. When looking at both genders, female students found the coeducation setting was more uncomfortable than their male counterparts did at 88.23% and 63.63% respectively. She explains this result as these students being "the product of a single-education context" (p. 163), which could affect their performance in the classroom. Hence, teachers need to bear co-education in mind when evaluating their students, as it is an important social factor. She views this issue as a limitation that teachers need to consider while dealing with students.

In another college in Oman, Al-Ghafri (2018) conducted a qualitative study on the factors that influence students' participation in English classroom at the college of Applied sciences in Oman. He found that one of the factors affecting Omani students' participation in a mixed gender classes was coeducation. Some of his female student participants reported feeling uncomfortable and

anxious when studying with male students and he attributed these feelings to socio-cultural factors influencing students' behaviour in the classroom.

Although all, except one or two higher education institutions in Oman, apply coeducation, Mackenzi (2016) states that research on this cultural issue has not been researched widely. Based on the previous studies, teaching in a mixed-gender ELT classroom appears to be more complex, so teachers' perspectives need to be explored regarding how they deal with gender dynamics while preparing for class and when teaching topics that consider the cultural and religious background of the students. In this study, I asked teachers how they perceived teaching in mixed-gender classrooms at SQU and how they handled this in practice. The study also explored how this might affect teachers' relationships with their students and how it might affect their teaching practices.

#### **4.15. Cultural issues in ELT materials**

According to Shuter (2014), culture is considered "the heart and soul of intercultural research" (p. 49), and considering culture as an integral part of ELT has been discussed extensively in ELT literature (Kramsch 1993; 1997; 1998; Byrnes, 2002; Lange & Paige, 2003; Risager, 2006; 2007; Awla, 2014; Hassan, 2014; Razi, 2016; Nguyen, 2017; Golshan & Ranjbar, 2017; Motha, 2018; Altun, 2019; Guechi & Krishnasamy, 2020; Almutairi, 2021; Salih & Omar, 2022; Kemalolu-er, 2023). This shows its significance and intertwined nature that cannot be detached completely from language teaching. Culture, according to Säljö (1992), can no longer be seen as merely an external influence on education, as our social interactions, worldviews, and cognitive abilities are all culturally mediated and constituted.

Although Kramsch (2013) argues that culture is more likely to be taught by instructors in literature and not by language teachers, in recent foreign language pedagogy, culture is not viewed as an "ornamental background" (Halliday, 1997, p. 114); it is considered an important component of ELT (Tuzlukova & Al-Mahrooqi, 2010). One commonly reported benefit of teaching culture to students of language learning is that it develops cultural awareness among students and decreases cultural misunderstandings (Abu Jalalah, 1993; Thanasoulas, 2001; Al Seyabi, 2010). Indeed, the inclusion of culture in the language classroom, according to Salih and Omar (2022), is essential for upholding the pedagogical principles of the discipline and should not be viewed as an "ostracising taboo" that should be avoided, suppressed, or disassociated.

Textbooks as part of ELT materials are considered the most important tool to aid teaching (Oakes & Saunders, 2004; Ahmed & Shah, 2014), and they remain an integral part of the curriculum in many educational programmes around the world (Derakhshan, 2018). As a result of today's era of



internationalisation, globalisation, and multilingualism (Matsuda, 2018), experts in the fields of education, researchers, teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum designers have begun to take note of the complexity and hybridity of today's cultures (Risager, 2011) in preparation for potential curriculum restructuring. Despite the need to emphasise a world view of culture in language teaching (Baker, 2015), ELT programmes often fail to adequately incorporate multicultural perspectives (Fang & Baker, 2017; Davidson & Liu, 2018). As a result, many instructors of foreign languages continue to teach from the perspective that culture is a unifying whole in their classrooms (Tseng, 2002).

Another issue that is raised with the ELT curriculum is that the books are not neutral: they carry the ideologies and values of the authorities that decide the content of those textbooks (Grant & Wong, 2018). Indeed, Grant and Wong (2018) contend that “ELT materials are often influenced by the power of countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, who have had long histories of political, economic and military dominance, reflected in the education system, and ELT teaching in particular” (p. 1). This view is supported by findings of Derakshan (2018), who analysed a popular language textbook and found that the teaching “materials are filled with cultural values unique to the Western world, the most prevalent of which include girlfriend-boyfriend relationships, consumerism, lack of studying, Western music, artifacts, lack of trust between couples, rates of divorce and break-up, and inculcation of Western culture” (p. 51).

For this reason, Fareh (2010) suggests that teaching materials and textbooks used in the Gulf region fail to accurately reflect the cultures of the learners. This cultural insensitivity can lead to feelings of disconnection among students and foster a negative attitude towards learning the language. Despite the authors' assertions that their textbooks are tailored to the needs of EFL learners, many still contain obvious cultural biases and cover irrelevant topics. Consequently, EFL teachers who are not familiar with the learners' cultures may encounter unexpected and challenging situations in the classroom. Because of their lack of cultural understanding, these educators also have a hard time adapting their lesson plans and classroom resources to meet the unique requirements of their students (Shah *et al.*, 2013). The discrepancy between the cultural context of commercial textbooks primarily from the US and the UK, and that of the students prompts several researchers (Mahmood, 2015; Alakrash *et al.*, 2021; Romrome & Ena, 2022; Reyes & Vega, 2023) to advocate for the incorporation of the students' local culture into lesson materials.

Mahmood (2015) researched in his article the integration of local culture into the EFL classroom in an Arab Muslim context and argues that

[The] content of EFL texts at Islamic and Arabic schools, institutes, and universities should have cultural relevance to the learners' culture. Curricula designers can be selective, choose topics that do not clash with Islamic Arabic culture, and, at the same time, develop topics that directly tackle various points related to Islamic Arabic culture (p. 70).

Alakrash *et al.* (2021) found that the local culture-based curriculum content helped to improve students' skills as their confidence had increased. Their research recommends using the local culture-based curriculum as a tool to develop EFL student's language learning. According to Romrome and Ena (2022), teachers should use local culture as a teaching content in the ELT classrooms. Reyes and Vega (2023) also found that incorporating students' local culture in class increased their students' speaking, motivation and appreciation of their local cultural topics. López-Gopar (2019) argues that teachers' role is not to view their students as simply receiving objects but as humans whose lives and culture should be acknowledged in their lessons. This is because, as Romrome and Ena (2022) argue, the students' local culture should not be denied as it impacts the way they learn.

Brown and Lee (2015) state that "a language class is an ideal locus for offering information on topics of significance to students. The objectives of a curriculum are not limited to linguistic factors alone, but also include developing the art of critical thinking" (p. 579). According to Brown and Lee (2015), certain controversial topics such as "nonviolence, human rights, gender equality, racial/ethnic discrimination, health issues, environmental action, and political activism" (p. 578) cannot be incorporated into classroom teaching without the risk of students feeling alienated, angry, or resentful. They assert that teachers have a social responsibility to implement critical pedagogy, which involves respecting the values and beliefs of their students. The teaching of English is considered an opportunity to introduce social and ethical issues, as advocated by certain content-based language learning approaches. In terms of specific issues, Hassan (2014) cites difficulties with contextualising some English vocabulary in a Muslim context classroom. He gives the examples that concepts such as 'boyfriend', 'girlfriend', 'gay marriage', 'homosexuality', and 'adoption' are familiar to western students but not the case for Middle Eastern students who rarely encounter these concepts in their surroundings.

From the above literature, it can be noted that ELT materials, which are usually produced in the West, can pose challenges for both teachers and students when introduced to a different context (Non-Westren context) that excludes the students' local culture (Gobert, 2015). It can also be noted from all the above literature that incorporating students' local culture into the ELT classroom has

positive learning outcomes (Gobert, 2015; Alakrash *et al.*, 2021). However, some institutions and teachers are still using Western commercial textbooks in countries that are obviously very different culturally and politically from those in which they are produced. Adopting such teaching materials, regardless of their content, has led some institutions and teachers to either compromise their use or censor them for those who believe this approach should be followed. The following section sheds light on the censorial approach of ELT materials to contextualise ELT to suit the local socio-religious and political agenda of the host country.

#### **4.16. Censorship of ELT materials**

The censorial approach to ELT has been adopted by teachers to avoid any potential clash with local beliefs, values, and cultural norms and even politics. There is no question that governments are worried about the possibility of cultural ‘contamination’ that may be caused by ELT. In certain sensitive contexts, educators and local institutions are expected to remove or modify unwanted materials before they are handed over to students. This level of censorship can vary from one person to another, from one institution to another and from one country to another depending on what other forces (powers and authorities) around them dictate to them. For example, censorship of English-language teaching is more severe in Saudi Arabia than in the other Gulf countries; yet, even in apparently moderate states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), censorship is common (Findlow, 2001; Charise, 2007). Looking at school curricula in Oman for example, it is obvious that they are locally produced to reflect the local culture and countries' policies but there is still a significant reliance on 'foreign' materials in the sphere of tertiary education, with many of these materials coming from the United States and the United Kingdom (Picard, 2007).

There is a lack of studies examining the censorship of ELT materials in Oman. However, studies conducted in neighboring Gulf countries, which are geographically and culturally closer to Oman, indicate that censorship is emphasised, and teachers are required to be aware of it from the outset of their employment (Martin, 2003; Abu Wardeh, 2003; Pazinas, 2021). Censorship of textbooks is a common practice in many Gulf institutions, and Martin (2003) relates how she was initially surprised at this when she was working at a university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). She saw "support staff... diligently and attentively blacking out whole passages and dialogues from familiar ESL texts" (p. 51). According to Elyas (2011), these products often reflect the culture and ideologies of the countries of origin (USA and UK) and may include a number of issues, visual representations, and language elements expressly rejected by Islam. Having such materials in a

country or institution leaves EFL teachers to struggle with things that could potentially cause issues in the classroom.

EL-Sakran and EL-Sakran (2021) investigated the perspectives of secondary school teachers in three private schools in the United Arab Emirates regarding the inclusion of culturally sensitive topics in English language classrooms. They examined the potential career implications for teachers engaging in discussions on such topics and raises questions about the impact of addressing sensitive subjects like sexuality, alcohol use, and teen suicide on students' cognitive abilities. The research collected data through surveys, interviews, and an analysis of teaching materials. Their findings indicate that most teachers tend to avoid discussing culturally sensitive topics, either to prevent potential issues for themselves or their schools or because they believe such discussions have limited positive effects on students' cognitive development. Their study suggests that the broader cultural context of the country influences which topics are included in the curriculum.

The need to censor originates not only from the administration, ministries, and governments of various levels, but can also be from students themselves in the classroom who may criticise the teacher for incorporating materials that are inappropriate or irrelevant. In a qualitative study done by Hudson (2006), students from two universities in the UAE were asked about their perspectives on religion, culture and English instruction. When they were asked if they agree or disagree with the following statement: *"I think English textbooks should be censored before being taught in the Gulf"*, 88% agreed with the statement, while 12% had no opinion. Therefore, it may be argued that it is crucial for ELT teachers in the region to learn what needs to be censored. Elyas (2011), a Saudi researcher, looked at one American produced textbook, *Interactions 1* by Tanaka & Most in 2008, and found that it had included several concerning issues with respect to the context in which he was teaching. These issues included interactions between individuals of different genders, a girl giving a friendly smile to a boy in class, the overrepresentation of female characters, and references to Western holidays like Thanksgiving. Additionally, there are references to several other holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Valentine's Day, Hanukkah, and Passover as well as various foods (including Moo Shu Pork) and sexual behaviours (including men only wearing swimming trunks and women wearing bikinis sharing a Jacuzzi).

In their study mentioned in an earlier section (see page #), Salih and Omar's (2022) respondents said they would only promote debates on the topics explicitly addressed in the handbook and syllabus. They also reported that in the event of a potential conflict or misunderstanding, the most common teaching techniques utilised by participants are forms of 'censorship', including the

avoidance, selectivity, and paraphrase of culturally conflicting notions. According to those who took part in the study, teachers avoid topics that could be interpreted as culturally sensitive or critical, as well as those that present a direct clash with the values of the students.

Gobert (2015) outlined a comprehensive list of topics considered unsuitable for English classes in the Gulf region. These included subjects forbidden by religious beliefs, such as alcohol, pork, immodest attire, and premarital relationships, as well as certain political topics, notably the mention of Israel. All these topics are covered in detail within standard English textbooks that are utilised throughout the region and are therefore not suitable for Arabic nor Islamic culture (Elyas, 2011). With students, governments, and local communities all pushing for different amounts of censoring Western culture in ELT, non-Muslim teachers and non-Omanis in the ELT context in Oman can easily become confused. This can lead to what Picard (2007) calls "an over-censoring of content which is not in fact offensive to the majority of learners, resulting in bland materials with little interest to learners" (p. 28). Picard's research suggests that over-censoring can lead to a state of dilemma in which teachers who choose the safer route of caution end up teaching their students heavily filtered content while lamenting their students' lack of desire, engagement, motivation, enthusiasm, and development. The findings also show that some teachers have different views about censoring materials as it is left to them to decide how to go about it if not asked to skip it or delete it.

Cultural issues can impact communication between teachers who come from different cultural backgrounds relative to their students. This in turn, can affect the effectiveness of language instruction. The literature that focuses on IC in the Gulf region often examines cultural issues when researching culture. This means that previous studies may have already identified and discussed some of the cultural issues that are relevant to ELT teachers. Therefore, by reviewing this literature, the current study can draw on this previous research to highlight the cultural issues that may impact IC in ELT in Oman.

To conclude, given the cultural wealth and diversity of the ELT context, this study is both contemporary and important. This is especially true in the GCC and the Middle East, in which the ELT contexts are culturally distinct from those found in other countries, and where teachers nowadays come from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the context of this study, examining the IC awareness and interaction of expatriate teachers in Oman can provide valuable insights into their ability to interact effectively with their students. By examining their perspectives, practices, and interactions with the cultural context, this study will identify areas for improvement and provide recommendations for further development of IC awareness.

Additionally, incorporating a critical intercultural communication (CIC) perspective into this study can help uncover the underlying cultural assumptions and biases that may influence the way expatriate EFL teachers interact with their students and colleagues. This deeper level of understanding can provide a more nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by expatriate teachers in Oman and inform efforts to promote cultural competence and intercultural understanding in the classroom.

#### **4.17. Summary of the Chapter**

The points discussed in the literature review chapter provide a strong theoretical foundation for the current study. This chapter started by clarifying that teaching is a complex social practice that can be studied from a sociocultural perspective. It then examined the importance of researching teachers' perspectives of the sociocultural context of their work and whether their perspectives influence teaching practices. This chapter also shed light on the importance of the cultural contextual factors that may impact the ELT context and how that can influence EFL teachers within the context of the study. This perspective is informed by a number of researchers who emphasise considering these contextual factors (soci-religious context, political context, institutional cultural context, classroom culture) while studying teachers' perspectives and practices. The discussion delved into the significance of ICC for EFL teachers, emphasising its crucial role in teacher education. Furthermore, it highlighted the unfortunate neglect of ICC within teacher education programmes in Gulf countries. The last part of the chapter shed light on the sensitive cultural issues in the Middle East and the Gulf that EFL teachers need to be aware of. The topics of gender dynamics, coeducation in classrooms, and the impact of censorship on ELT materials have all been discussed and they are integral to the socio-cultural context of the study. This literature review of all these topics highlights the importance of recognising the complexities of the local educational context in shaping the experiences and perspectives of expatriate EFL teachers.

## **Chapter Five: Methodology**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter explains the methodology used to serve the aim of this study which is to explore the expatriate teachers' perspectives and practices in regard to their intercultural interactions while teaching in a university in Oman. The chapter starts with the research design and the overarching philosophical assumptions which affected the whole research design and shaped and influenced all sections of the study. Then, it explains the type of research, the aims of the study and the research questions. This is followed by a description of the research participants, and the method used for data collection. The chapter concludes by explaining how the data were analysed, and finally, the relevant ethical considerations were clarified.

### **5.2. The research design**

In conducting research, the methodology used is determined by the researcher's philosophical assumptions and beliefs (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Sikes, 2010; Creswell, 2013; Wellington, 2015). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), the researcher's paradigm includes the researcher's philosophical and methodological orientation. This means that the researcher's philosophical beliefs or, as some call them, philosophical positions (Sikes, 2010) and worldviews, guide the way they conduct their research. I understand that part of 'positionality' in qualitative research is to express those ontological and epistemological assumptions that affect my chosen ways of approaching and understanding this research. In the following lines, I will explain my philosophical assumptions, how they have guided me to design this research, select the methods and analyse its data.

#### **5.2.1. Philosophical positioning**

Since the scope of this study is not to study philosophical concepts in-depth and how they historically developed, I am going to mention here what I need for the purpose to clarify my philosophical positionality and why I need to do so. In simple terms, ontology is about the basic nature of reality, the "essence of things" (Mason, 2018, p.4), or, perhaps, what things are essential relative to any given discourse. Epistemology is about the nature of knowledge and how to obtain it (Mason, 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2018). It is necessary to clarify and be aware of the assumptions to which a researcher subscribes so that it is known how they can make sense of the world (as stated by Sikes (2010)). Those underlying beliefs (and associated values) can be influenced by factors such as 'religious faith', among others (Sikes, 2010, p.18).

What I need to clarify here is my philosophical stance regarding this educational research, which seeks knowledge from social beings, specifically teachers' perspectives and their teaching practices within a social context (university, classrooms). In other words, I need to elucidate the social reality, representing the ontological assumptions, and delineate the nature of knowledge, which constitutes the epistemological assumptions. I do not want to claim that I am an absolute interpretivist and constructivist as I am neither of these in all aspects of life. Likewise, I am not an absolute positivist who believes that everything has an absolute reality and holds objective views on matters. Rather, my stance depends on the nature of issues being studied.

Therefore, I understand that in respect of the type and nature of reality and knowledge I research, I try to adopt the most suitable paradigm for the problem and thus the subtended methodology, methods and approaches. In short, I need to balance my understanding of reality towards some life issues. Having said that, and referring to the philosophical assumptions discussed in literature, Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that “whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research” (p.15). Therefore, I had to reflect on my own philosophies and compare them to the philosophies in research literature before deciding how to approach my research topic. Holding any position is likely to shape and guide me through all the research procedures and processes (Sikes, 2010; Mason, 2018).

By classifying my research into which type of knowledge and type of reality it falls into, I see myself as both researching teachers' views and practices within a specific cultural context and researching how they interact with it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This can be classified as a constructivist paradigm - to some extent - because the epistemological assumptions view knowledge extracted from teachers as “experiential and subjective” (Sikes, 2010, p.22). This approach allows teachers to experience different realities of that context based on what constitutes their understanding of this context, be that theoretical knowledge or practical knowledge. They can express themselves in a way that takes into account their own realities (partially known from a critical realist view), which may evolve and change, but which inform their stance at the time they are being investigated. Therefore, their knowledge and thus their reality, in my opinion, can be regarded as socially constructed (constructivism). The nature of the sought-after knowledge that I seek to discover entails using this interpretivist approach to gain in-depth knowledge, interpretations and understanding of my participants in that particular context (interpretivism).

Researching what can be called a socially constructed reality among participants entails listening to different views about participants' experiences and perceptions and my role as a researcher is



to uncover these multiple and varied views (Creswell, 2016). Therefore, I have adopted an interpretivist approach that emphasises the participants' experiences within a particular context. This approach is appropriate to my study as it allows for the investigation of the participants' lived experiences and seeks to interpret specific scenarios of the individuals. It also allows for a critique of what is taken for granted and practised as 'normal' and thus can create different meanings of their social reality.

Being an interpretivist in this area of research, I also believe that knowledge in educational settings is socially constructed. Therefore, I have adopted a constructivist view to explore participants' views of the topic, as I believe that every person has his own understanding of the world based on their cultural and background orientations and thus constructs different meanings of the things around him/her (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Being a constructivist in this particular area of research, I believe that each participant develops subjective meanings of what they experience in their world and I need to get as close to them as possible because their views, experiences and perceptions will become key themes for my topic and will be interpreted accordingly (Creswell, 2016). Having this position, I assume that my participants, the expatriate teachers at SQU, might not share the same view of reality (Denicolo *et al.*, 2016) of how contextual factors in Oman have an effect on their professional experiences as English teachers. This may provide insights into, and understanding of, how different individuals adapt themselves and how they have been engaged and are interacting with this particular context. Holding these assumptions has guided me in selecting appropriate methodology and methods that align with them. Conducting interviews, observing teachers' practices in their classes, and discussing with them what I observed through stimulated recall could all serve to manifest the philosophical assumptions I hold.

I can also perceive that the social constructivist view aligns well with the theoretical framework of this study, Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) perspectives, as they collectively aim to achieve several objectives that resonate with the research questions being explored in this study. Firstly, both perspectives emphasise the importance of understanding subjective experiences within specific cultural contexts. The constructivist view highlights that individuals construct their understanding of the world based on their experiences and interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Similarly, the critical intercultural communication perspective acknowledges that cultural contexts shape individuals' perceptions and experiences. Secondly, CIC involves questioning power structures and societal norms. It explores how power influences communication and interactions between different cultural groups. Similarly, a constructivist approach encourages

critical inquiry into how social and cultural factors shape individuals' interpretations and interactions within educational settings. Thirdly, both perspectives recognise the existence of multiple realities and reject a singular, universal truth (pure realism). They acknowledge the complexity of cultures and the diversity of experiences within them. Constructivism emphasises multiple interpretations of reality being available based on individuals' experiences, while the critical intercultural perspective emphasises the importance of recognising diverse cultural norms and values. When exploring expatriate teachers' perspectives and practices within socio-cultural contexts at universities, these perspectives together provide a comprehensive framework. They allow for an in-depth examination of how individuals construct their understanding of cultures, how power dynamics influence these constructions, and how critical inquiry and dialogue can enhance intercultural understanding and effective teaching practices.

### **5.2.2. Research type**

The abovementioned philosophical assumptions propelled me to select a qualitative research design to help me answer the research questions raised in my study. Qualitative research, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), is more concerned with the understanding of a social phenomenon from the participants' perspectives which can be obtained through the researcher's participation and interactions with the participants. "Qualitative research involves report[ing] how people talk about things, how they describe things, and how they see the world" (Creswell, 2016, p.6). Since my participants are ELT teachers, I have carried out multiple interviews with and observed five teachers from different backgrounds and nationalities. This has helped me to explore in-depth their perspectives towards the power dynamics (socio-cultural, socio-political and religious factors) that affected their teaching practices. I would like to hear the voices of teachers at the CPS at SQU on how they perceived this context, how they interacted with it, how they interpreted it and how, if it does, it has an influence on them and in what way.

Exploring this issue through teachers' perspectives and practices reflects my understanding of how reality and knowledge are formed in this particular matter. These teachers have come from different educational and cultural backgrounds and have constructed their own understanding of the world, which would give rise to different opinions and, as a result, various and rich practices that reflect their way of conceptualising this reality. These teachers interact with the context differently because they perceive this complex context differently. Consequently, their construction of reality is expected to be different. I also think that people understand and construct

knowledge based on their understanding of the world (their world views) around them and what affects it. This supports the idea that knowledge is socially constructed.

Therefore, I consider the qualitative approach to be the most suitable to use in this study as it should provide a deeper understanding and investigation of how and why ELT teachers understand, perceive or behave in a certain way. In addition, qualitative research explains the complexity of social reality by interpreting it through the eyes of its participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

### **5.2.3. Objectives of the study and research questions**

Since qualitative research helps to explore issues in depth (Patton, 2015), my research is exploratory rather than proving or disproving any prior assumptions. It explores how expatriate teachers view both global (macro) culture, Omani culture and how educational policies (micro) have affected their professional practices. In detail, I needed to investigate in depth how they viewed this context, how they interacted interculturally with Omani students at SQU, what socio-cultural challenges, if any, they faced, how they prepared or dealt with cultural teaching materials to fit this particular context, and how they became familiar with socio-cultural guidelines and expectations that were concerned with these issues. This study also aims to better understand how they interacted with the complexity of context and how they negotiated their intercultural understanding to fit well into this particular culture at the CPS.

This study, then, aimed to investigate expatriate English teachers' intercultural interactions that took place while teaching in a higher education institution in Oman. The study, therefore; attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- To what extent do intercultural backgrounds/knowledge/training/experiences contribute to the development of expatriate teachers' intercultural communication while teaching at the CPS in Oman?
- 2- What are the expatriate teachers' intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the institutional culture of the CPS at SQU?
- 3- What are the expatriate teachers' intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the contextual factors in the classroom?

### **5.3. A case study approach**

Utilising case study research is a prevalent approach for undertaking qualitative investigations (Stake, 2005). I will treat this study as a case study since it focuses on expatriate teachers in a particular university in Oman, SQU, and a particular English language teaching centre, the CPS. I consider the expatriate five teachers teaching in the CPS as cases that are different from each other as they are from different nationalities and religions yet at the same time similar in that they are all native speakers of English and they teach English in the same institution (SQU) in Oman. Therefore, a case study approach in qualitative research allows me to study the case in detail (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007) in this cultural context. Dornyei (2011) argues that a case study provides a detailed “description of a complex social issue embedded within a cultural context” (p.155). Therefore, in my case study, I will provide enough details of the cultural context to understand the complexity of the topic.

A case study allows me to gain a comprehensive understanding of actual events related to the intercultural perspectives and teaching practices of expatriate EFL teachers in a university setting. This approach involves handling a wide range of evidence, documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations to explore the topic thoroughly (Yin, 2014).

Seeking questions that seek to answer ‘how’ is my interest. Yin (2018) and Hammond and Wellington (2013) explain that a case study approach serves research that poses questions such as ‘how’ or ‘why’. This case study helped me to explore the context in depth to understand the nature of ELT in Oman and how the Omani context has an influence on the system of ELT and teachers who are teaching English in the CPS. This is revealed through studying the teachers as individual cases at the CPS who are expected to express their perceptions, and how the ELT system has an influence on the context as they live it in their professional lives at SQU in particular and in Oman in general. It is expected that each teacher has different ways to adapt and interact with this particular context in negotiating their own cultural and professional identity.

The nature of ELT as a foreign language is associated with several powerful factors that can be cultural, social, religious, ideological, and political (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1999; 2001; McKernan, 2008). These factors can affect its implementation in a particular context which makes ELT at SQU a phenomenon that can be addressed differently from other, even similar, contexts. Therefore, I argue that qualitative case study research is going to be applicable and feasible for collecting data from my participants and eliciting their views and perceptions about teaching the English language in the Omani cultural context. Having said that, however, one of the drawbacks of having a small number of examples in case studies is that it might not be helpful when

generalising the findings. This study, however, is not intended to be generalised; rather, it aims to provide reliable findings that examine a certain context to understand its nature and take action accordingly. To assure the reliability of this study, a variety of methods such as initial interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall discussions have been used.

Since I have selected five different cases who are teacher participants, a collective case study that deals with multiple cases can help “to investigate a phenomenon, population, or a general condition” (Stake, 2005, p.445) so different perspectives can be looked at on this issue (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

According to Flyvbjerg (2006), research on social sciences can be a considerable contribution to knowledge through appropriate case study selection, since case studies can yield context-dependent knowledge based on the “closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223). Therefore, I focus on cases with multicultural backgrounds to gain insight into how they interact interculturally with the context in Oman. Additionally, carefully chosen cases that reflect critical theoretical frameworks that tackle a particular issue can contribute to the development of scientific knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Moreover, case studies are usually based on in-depth observations, so they are close to reality and can lead to advanced insights. Furthermore, case studies can provide an opportunity to discuss and examine in depth specific details that make up a real-life narrative, which can be hard to investigate via scientific formulas. Cohen *et al.* (2013, p. 256) point out several advantages of case study methods, including the fact that case study data can be viewed as “strong in reality” because they offer a window into the actual experiences of participants.

Further, the use of case studies enables participants' viewpoints to be represented as they draw on multiple sources of data such as observations and interviews. Additionally, case studies make use of multiple means of data collected to examine participants' attitudes and viewpoints about the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2013).

#### **5.4. Study site**

The study site was explained in Chapter Two. I also clarified my positionality and why I conducted this research. There were a number of reasons why I selected my participants from the CPS at Sultan Qaboos University. As a staff member of the institution (an insider), I recognise the crucial significance of socio-cultural issues pertaining to the educational context at this university. I was a student for four years and later a teacher for 12 years so I am familiar with the CPS's culture,

policies and administrative rules and expectations when conducting research. Comprehending the context holds importance in the research process (Seidman, 2006), while the selection of a representative sample is not crucial. The crucial aspect involves selecting a location that provides the researcher with insider knowledge and familiarity, facilitating the effective conduct of the study and enabling them to be a recognisable presence among the participants (Burgess, 2002). Secondly, the university culture in this university is quite different from other educational institutions in Oman as some of its aspects are described in Chapter Two. Thirdly, this site (CPS) has the biggest and the oldest foundation programme in Oman and it has the biggest number of EFL expatriate teachers from around 30 nationalities among 240 teachers. Therefore, I hoped to involve a variety of teachers from different nationalities in order to enrich the data with different perspectives.

The table below shows the number of teachers and their nationalities at the CPS in Fall 2023 (September 2023).

**Table 2: shows the number of teachers and their nationalities at the CPS in Fall 2023 (September 2023).**

No	Nationality of teachers at the CPS	Numbers
1	American	26
2	British	12
3	Algerians	2
4	Australian	2
5	Armenians	6
6	Canadian	7
7	Colombian	1
8	Belarusian	1
9	Egyptian	4
10	Filipino	6

11	French	1
12	Indian	27
13	Iranian	11
14	Iraqi	1
15	Jordanian	11
16	Lebanese	1
17	Macedonian	1
18	Malaysian	1
19	Netherlands	1
20	New Zealand	3
21	Omani	43
22	Pakistani	8
23	Portuguese	1
24	Romanian	1
25	Russian	3
26	Serbian	1
27	South African	2
28	South Sudan	1
29	Sri Lankan	2
30	Sudanese	6
31	Syrian	1

32	Tunisian	13
33	Turkish	7
34	Ugandan	1
35	Ukrainian	2
Total		218

### 5.5. Recruitment strategy and procedures

In qualitative research, it is more fitting to refer to the selected participants as 'a group' or 'individuals' rather than a 'sample' (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.223). This is because much of qualitative research aims not to study a sample that represents a group for generalisation purposes, but to explore and present a specific group that has its unique value (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Therefore this study involved five English language teachers teaching at the CPS of SQU. These teachers were teaching the English language and they were from different nationalities, mainly American and British. The rationale for selecting teachers from different backgrounds was to find out how they perceived their cultural factors at the educational environment and how they taught the English language in the specific cultural context at the CPS, SQU. These teachers vary in their teaching experiences in terms of number of years of teaching, qualifications, or teaching backgrounds in other educational institutions whether in Oman or in other countries.

For this study, having teachers from different cultural backgrounds is a key factor in order to enrich data and have a more comprehensive view of the issue under study. This diversity enriches the study by offering multifaceted perspectives on intercultural interactions, teaching methodologies, and understanding cultural nuances within educational settings. It also allows for a more comprehensive analysis. It enables researchers to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in teaching styles, and approaches to intercultural communication. By including teachers from various cultural backgrounds, the study gains a broader understanding of how cultural differences influence teaching approaches, classroom dynamics, and student-teacher interactions. Findings derived from a study involving teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds are often more applicable and transferable to other multicultural educational settings. This enhances the study's potential impact and relevance beyond its immediate context. Thus, I have



used a purposeful sampling strategy to involve teacher participants who meet certain requirements to “acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it” (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 219). Taking Bryman’s (2016) notion of purposeful sampling, teachers who participated in my research were invited to note on the consent form their personal details including their names, emails, and their preferred way to be contacted. Based on the variety of teachers willing to participate, I selected my potential participants. Having different years of experiences in Oman or other countries, having different cultural backgrounds, and having different qualifications may result in having different perspectives and practices when teaching English at SQU in particular. On the other hand, the plan was also to involve teachers who shared similar backgrounds to the students’ culture or even who had taught in similar contexts, such as in the Gulf countries, so the findings could have revealed more comparative data to contribute to a comprehensive and deep understanding and analysis of how the Omani context was similar or different to others. It should also show how teaching ELT in Oman requires negotiating the local educational system and its regulations and policies. This may make it different from other places but identify similar concerns that should be considered when teaching in similar contexts.

To have access to the CPS participants, I contacted the Research and Conference Committee in the CPS at SQU through an email attaching the Information Sheet about my research. The sheet clarified that I intended to conduct my study with the CPS and that I would like to have ELT teachers as participants in my study. The Research Committee dealt with my application and they treated me the same as they would to an outside researcher not as a member of that institution. This meant I had to get a specific ethical approval (as rigorous as the one I did at the University of Sheffield) to conduct the study at the CPS. Then, the Research Committee were expected to circulate my email to all the CPS teachers. Teachers who were willing to participate, would contact me by my email. My plan was, based on the responses I received, to ask them to fill in a form asking their personal details and why they wanted to participate in this study. I then would review the forms and based on the diversity of participants, I would select those who would serve as good samples for my study. After obtaining the approval from the research committee and thinking of contacting teachers, I had to secure permission from the Head of Departments (Humanities and Sciences) at the CPS (gate keepers) who were in charge of the teachers. Although the Heads of Departments suggested some names of teachers they believed might be interested in participating, they also allowed me to select other participants by providing a list of all teachers (over 200) and their contact information. Accordingly, I contacted a number of teachers (15 teachers) by email and sent them the Information Sheet. Initially, seven teachers showed interest and accepted to

participate: 3 males and 4 females. Two female teachers withdrew: one after the first interview and the other before starting the interview.

Ensuring the anonymity of participants was a priority throughout the research process, supported by several measures. First, the initial list provided by the Head of Department (HoD) included approximately 200 teachers. This large pool of participants significantly reduced the likelihood of individual identification, as only a subset of this extensive group was involved in the study. The list of teachers was also dynamic and constantly evolving, as teachers frequently transferred between departments or left the institution. The regular updates to this list further obscured the identification of any specific individual within the dataset.

Anonymisation and confidentiality measures were implemented to safeguard participant privacy. Nationalities were mentioned for analytical purposes, but no personal identifiers, such as names or specific job titles, were included in the data.

It is also noteworthy that the institution employs a diverse international faculty, often with multiple individuals sharing similar demographic profiles, such as teachers from the same country. This natural overlap added another layer of anonymity, making it highly unlikely to isolate or identify a specific participant.

To enhance the anonymity of my participants, I have removed the names of the universities they attended from their profiles, as well as the names of the colleges or institutions where they taught in Oman before joining SQU.

## **5.6. Participants' profiles**

This section is intended to present profiles of participants, offering insights into their educational and professional backgrounds. Additionally, it aims to establish a comprehensive context for the forthcoming data analysis and discussion. This data was taken generally from interviews when participants were asked first to talk about their previous educational qualifications and professional experiences.

### **5.6.1. Profile of Rose**

Rose was born in the USA. Since 1993, Rose has been a teacher of English as a foreign language (at least 27 years of teaching experience). She had training in poetry, music, and drama and had

earned a history degree as an undergraduate. However, Rose frankly stated that she embarked on her career in English language instruction with the primary intention of pursuing her passion for travel. Her teaching career has taken her all over the world, including Europe and the Middle East. She began her teaching career by enrolling in a San Francisco certificate programme that concentrated on teaching in ESL and EFL contexts. She had a strong desire to travel and she was motivated to do so during her college years when she took part in a programme for international students studying abroad in the UK. She started her teaching career when she landed her first job in Europe, which served as her first exposure to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). She toured widely over Europe and the Soviet Union while she was away. She obtained her certification, which enabled her to obtain her first teaching position in Prague, Czechia. She pursued a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) which enabled her to teach both ESL and EFL. She later relocated to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where she carried on her teaching career in a Muslim country. She taught in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates for a decade. She eventually settled in Oman, where she has spent the past six years instructing.

Teaching in a variety of ethnic settings has broadened her perspective and informed her approach to the classroom. Rose faced new obstacles and gained new experiences as a result of her teaching in Muslim Arab countries like the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Rose expressed her preference for teaching in Oman, emphasising that it ranks very high among her teaching experiences. She mentioned that in her previous experiences in the UAE, she had encountered management problems, behavioural issues, and low levels of student motivation. Oman, in contrast, provided a more favourable teaching environment for her.

### **5.6.2. Profile of Laura**

Born into a very conservative religious family in the United States, her upbringing instilled strict values and beliefs. Her upbringing, as she described it, was akin to the constraints often seen in conservative Islamic cultures, characterised by a commitment to adhering to specific religious guidelines and practices.

Her academic journey began with a Bachelor's degree in English, where she studied general English studies, literature, and language. During this time, Laura's started to question and scrutinise critically her own personal beliefs with what she was brought up. In 2015, she pursued

a Master's degree in secondary education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. As part of her Master's degree programme, Laura gained classroom experience in various settings. She served as a teaching assistant and taught specialised lessons in ESL and remedial literacy classes. She improved her teaching skills as a graduate assistant at the XY University's English Language Institute (in the US). She worked with classroom teachers, taught students, and was the conditional admissions programme assistant coordinator. This programme helped students provisionally admitted to the university who had to achieve English language requirements within a certain timeframe. In recognition that academic success went beyond academics, Laura and her team created a programme to help these students adjust to American university culture. Eastern students often struggled with strange cultural standards, making this project crucial.

Throughout her career, Laura served as an adjunct professor at various universities, each offering unique challenges and opportunities. At X College, she taught remedial English to native speakers, assisting students in improving their literacy skills. At X1 University, her entire class comprised students from India preparing for graduate-level programs, requiring her to gain expertise in research writing. In ELS, she primarily worked with students from Korea, Japan, and Mexico, aiding them in their English language acquisition. At X, she taught American students who needed literacy support, and at the University of X2, she worked with a diverse group of Chinese and Saudi students, as well as students from various other countries. Oman was the first Middle Eastern country where she experienced teaching abroad. This move expanded her cultural experiences and exposed her to an entirely new environment and further enriched her understanding of intercultural dynamics.

### **5.6.3. Profile of Leo**

Leo is from England, UK and has been teaching for 11 years (started in 2008). He embarked on his educational journey by pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing at the Arts School in the UK. After graduation, he became a language teacher after taking a pre-teaching course (a four-week) similar to CELTA for a month before going to Indonesia to teach for two years. Upon returning to the UK, he supported foreign students in a secondary school and saved money to pursue a Master's degree. He completed his first MA in English Language Teaching, which included the DELTA qualification. Then he got his second MA from a UK university at the Department of Education. In 2013, with these qualifications, he travelled to Oman and taught English for two years at a college (one of the Applied Sciences colleges in Oman) in a small city

far away from the capital (Muscat). Then, he returned to England where he worked as a part-time carer and started his second Master's degree, an MSc in Linguistics focused on teaching English in university settings. After that, he returned to work in Oman again, but taught at a different institution which is SQU.

He had not taught in the Middle East region before Oman but he mentioned teaching Arabic-speaking students in the UK. Starting in 2008, he taught in a Muslim context in Indonesia for two years. His experience of teaching Muslim and Arab students in the UK included working both in adult education and as a volunteer with a local charity with a small number of students who were refugees. The charity involvement was more informal. He also taught a pre-sessional course in Leeds, where the cohort was a mix of Arab and Chinese students.

#### **5.6.4. Profile of Sam**

Sam was born and educated in the United Kingdom. His first job was a sports instructor with a degree in sports. However, his career path changed when he discovered his passion for English instruction. He earned a master's degree in TESOL from a UK university and a postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning in higher education from another UK university. His TEFL certification signalled the beginning of his career as an English instructor.

He has been teaching English as a second language for about 23 years, teaching students from varied cultural backgrounds. From the United Kingdom, his travels have taken him to Poland, Spain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman, among other places. Sam gained an early affinity for many cultures and experiences as a result of hearing stories from his father, who spent eight years in the British Navy. Sam began his teaching career in 1997 after earning his TEFL certification. He began working as a teacher in the UK, where he did so for a short while before moving abroad to teach. In 2000, after initially teaching English in Poland for a year, Spain for another year, and finally the UAE for six months, he set out on his first adventure. However, he and his family had to return to the UK as a result of the 9/11 attacks in the US.

Back in the UK, Sam worked for seven years at a college for adults where he mostly taught refugees and people seeking protection. As he got more and more experience, he became even more committed to teaching and leading. In 2008, he made a big change and moved to Oman. For the past 12 years, he has been teaching English at the CPS, SQU.

### 5.6.5. Profile of Malcolm

Malcolm was born and raised in the USA. He holds a teaching certificate as well as a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). His teaching career began in the United States, where he predominantly taught English as a second language to elementary and secondary students. In 2004, he began his teaching career at the secondary level in the United States, focusing on teaching non-native English speakers. Primarily, he provided supplementary materials and one-on-one instruction to help these students overcome language barriers. However, this teaching environment was more inclusive, as it involved native English speakers alongside non-native speakers.

Malcolm's journey in international teaching began in 2007 when he ventured to Oman, specifically teaching in a college. He taught there for six years up to 2013. His teaching experience in Oman differed from his earlier experiences, as he was now in a non-native English-speaking environment, focusing on teaching ESL to a more diverse group of students. He returned to Oman in 2019 after completing his Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language and started teaching at SQU.

The following table shows the participants' gender, nationality, religion, qualifications, and teaching experiences.

**Table 3: Participants' information**

Participant	Gender	Nationality	Religion	Qualification	Teaching experience before joining SQU	Years of experience
Leo	M	British	Christian	MA in ELT,	England, Oman and East Timor	11
Sam	M	British	Christian	MA	England, Poland, Spain and the UAE	22
Rose	F	American	Christian	MA in TESOL	USA, Ukraine, Czech Republic, East Timor, and UAE.	15
Laura	F	American	Liberal Christian	MA in ESL	USA	5

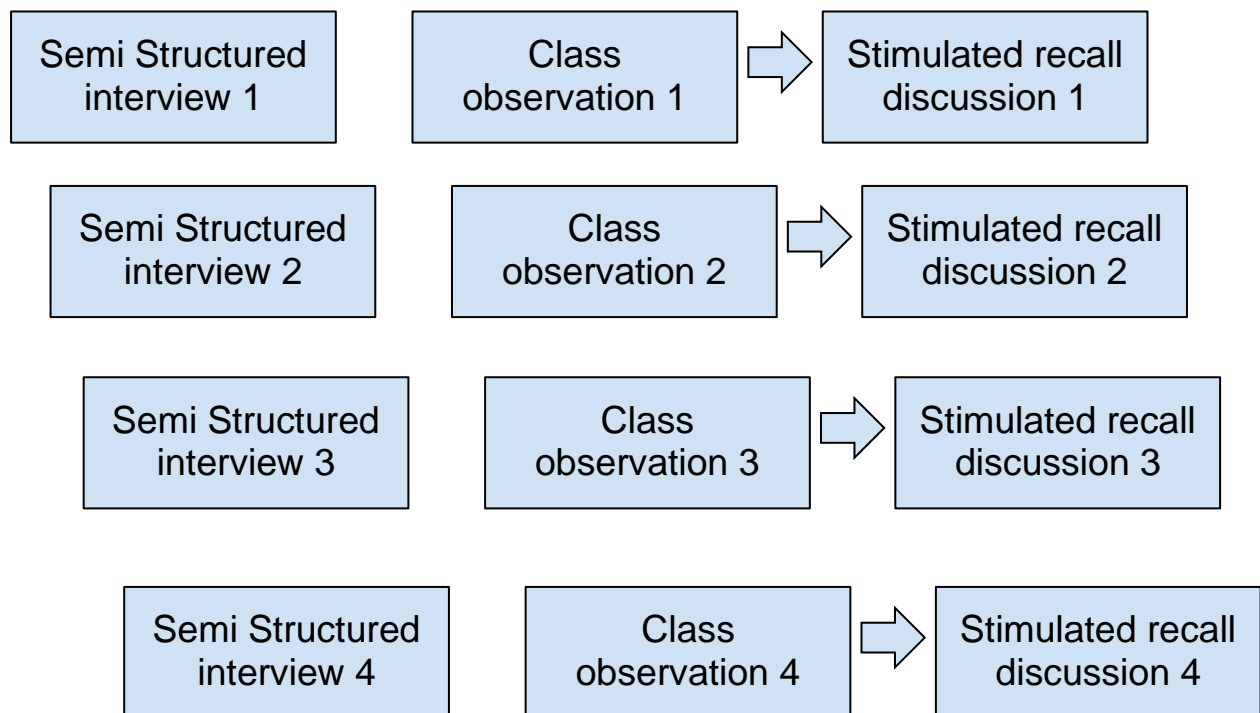
Malcolm	M	American	Muslim convert	MA in TESOL	USA, Oman	16
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In the following section, I discuss the methods I used to collect data for this study.

### 5.7. Data collection methods

Since this study is qualitative in nature, qualitative methods were used for collecting and analysing data. The methods that were used in this study were interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall discussions. Using more than one method in research can support the idea of triangulation which is recommended by researchers as it enhances the validity of the research and helps to understand the issue studied in-depth (Kelliny, 1994; Patton, 2015).

These methods are sequentially conducted as follows:



**Figure 8: Research methods**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at different times during the study and they were not followed sequentially by class observations. class observations were immediately followed by a stimulated recall discussion. While the semi-structured interviews are not directly linked to the class observations in terms of content, they were divided into four sessions. This division aimed to prevent participants from feeling overwhelmed and to establish an organised and manageable pattern for the interviews.

### 5.7.1. Interviews

The interview was one of the methods selected to collect data from the participants in this research for the following reasons. Interviews allow the researcher to enter the participants' world and understand their perspectives (Patton, 2015). Interviews are a good technique to find out more about participants' thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives (Wellington, 2015, p.137). By conducting interviews, teachers, firstly, reveal, through their words, perspectives, experiences, and practices in this context. Secondly, they could share how they have engaged, adapted themselves, or challenged this context with their own understanding of the local culture. Finally, they could show how they have been affected by the regulations and educational policies of this institution. In addition, I could communicate and interact well with them and, through the mutual conversation, I could elicit meanings and their perspectives were clearly teased out. This would inevitably result in different perspectives as every person has constructed different realities of the truth (Wellington, 2015) and thus it results in multiple realities.

There are usually three main kinds of interviews identified in qualitative research: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews (Punch, 2013; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). In the first one, researchers prepare a fixed set of questions, while in the second one, researchers make use of a flexibly defined number of questions, and in the last type researchers do not prepare questions before the interview but they generate them and note them down during the interviews. I decided that semi-structured interviews would be suitable for this research to allow for more flexibility for both the researcher and participants to explore around the issue. As I planned, I conducted four interviews for each participant and each interview focused on one or two topics to be explored (refer to the table for interview topics). I had pre-prepared a guiding set of questions to direct the conversation, but I also raised other unprepared (follow up) questions during the interview based on the participants' contributions.

One flexible feature of semi-structured interviews is that the researcher may change the order or the structure of the questions if needed during the interview depending on the responses from the participants (Wellington, 2015). Since the participants are native speakers of English and English language teachers, and as English is the language of the institution (CPS), the interviews were conducted in English; however, the participants sometimes used some Arabic phrases while speaking such as "*in sha' Allah*" (God willing), "*Alhamdulillah*" (Praise be to Allah). These short



phrases did not disrupt the interview; rather, they were integrated spontaneously in context and within their English expressions. These expressions are also used widely in Oman.

Although interviews are a very good tool to collect data, there are some limitations. Qualitative interviewing as Mason (2018) notes, “requires a great deal of planning” and “requires much preparation and honing of skills on the part of the researcher” (p.116). Patton (2015) remarks that the quality of the interview depends very much on the interviewer. A researcher has to think about the types of questions and the researcher’s interviewing skills such as asking the right questions, in the right way at the right time. Mason (2018) further adds that in case the prepared questions are found to be unsatisfactory during the interview, that researchers “must develop a rather specific set of intellectual and social skills to enable them to create the investigative dynamics that will help to yield the best possible data” (p.116). Furthermore, using interviews may result in interviewing a small number of participants (Creswell, 2007) which requires the researcher to have lengthy interviews to obtain enough data for analysis. This might be considered a time-consuming process. Moreover, these long interviews have to be transcribed as the participants’ words are the principal data in many forms of qualitative research. Transcription itself is exhausting and time-consuming as well. In my research, although I had five participants, I transcribed around 30 hours of audio files (a sample is provided in the appendices).

#### **5.7.1.1. The pilot study of the interview**

Testing my interview questions was very important before going into the field and collecting data, so I carried out pilot interviews with three teachers from the CPS. This helped me to anticipate the relevance of the questions asked and identify if there were any ethical issues I needed to consider or other problems in forming those questions. In case of any issues raised during the pilots, I would work on them before conducting the actual interviews.

I piloted the first one with a teacher who had taught English in the CPS for about 15 years. I selected him first because he had taught and worked in the centre in different positions. He was a programme coordinator and a teacher. As he was a Muslim Arab, I thought he would also be aware of the cultural issues pertaining to Oman. He commented on a number of questions he thought were not clear. I rewrote them to express them in a way the participants could better understand. One example is that the concept ‘intercultural competence’ might not be understood by all

participants so I could not just use it without making sure that a participant knew exactly what I meant by it.

The other person I did the pilot study with was an American female teacher who had taught in the CPS for 8 years. I selected her because she was a member of the induction committee and she would have first-hand knowledge of how to help new teachers who come to work in the CPS. She was aware of Omani culture and she would help to guide the newcomers to settle down in Oman.

By having the pilot study, I anticipated how I should ask certain questions and how much time they would take. I could; therefore, tell each participant how long the interview would last and they could decide how much time they needed to spare for me on that day. It was very important to me to know the expected duration of the interview as I needed to complete each section of the interview completely in one interview session. The questions were interconnected and evolved progressively from general to specific. At times, there was overlap, but this was my intentional approach aimed to maintain coherence. Asking related questions in one setting allowed participants to express their thoughts more effectively. The nature of my topics may not have aligned with their immediate concerns, and some questions were more prompts than inquiries.

Regarding the observation phase, I did not pilot any observations because of prior experiences where I had both observed a class and been observed myself (by others) for different purposes. This familiarity allowed me to anticipate potential challenges related to class observation and understand teachers' possible reluctance to undergo observations. May and Perry (2022) mention some challenges related to observation access, including the sensitivity of the topic and the security of relationships between the researcher and participants, especially when there is less personal affinity. In my case, the topic of this study is quite sensitive to some teachers as it involves socio-religious and socio-cultural issues. Unlike the formal consent for class observation, the involvement details became clearer when teachers read the information sheet, which explicitly states that participation in this study involves class observations. Secondly, I consider myself an insider as I have a deep understanding of the institution's settings, the student demographics, and the overall system as I spent approximately 12 years working there, preceded by a five-year period as a student within that same institution (SQU).

#### **5.7.1.2. Conducting interviews**

In this study the four interviews lasted between forty minutes to two hours each. I interviewed the participants when it was convenient for them and for some of them, I only managed to finish the

first part of the interview questions. Participants were given enough time to express themselves without interruptions. I was concerned to get as much as possible of their original thoughts and frank opinions of their experiences and perceptions of the studied issue. On some occasions, I would prompt them to justify or explain certain responses on why they thought something or believed something. Such perceptions, justifications, attitudes would be the core data that I had to deal with for this study. On other occasions, since I was an insider researcher, some participants would think that I knew the answer, but I emphasised that I wanted them to consider me as someone who did not know, that I needed their own articulations of their own words. I clarified that I was a researcher who was looking for their views and answers rather than mine (the researcher). For some questions, I had to justify the question if the participant felt it was unexpected. I wanted them to express themselves and answer me more fully.

The interview questions were categorised into a number of broad themes (see the table below):

- Background and qualifications, previous teaching experience, IC experiences.
- Institutional culture: CPS cultural context,
- Classroom culture: Teacher-student relationships and materials.

**Table 4: Interview topics**

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
<b>Topics</b>	Background and qualifications, previous teaching experience, IC experiences.	Institutional culture: CPS policies and cultural context,	Classroom culture: Teacher-students relationships	ELT materials

### 5.7.2. Observation

Classroom observation in qualitative research is seen as one of the methods to collect rich data. It enables the researcher to have access to ‘first-hand ‘live’ data’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). I used classroom observation as a tool to collect data for my research because I wanted to collect “live data from naturally occurring social situations” (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.542). To support the

interview as a method, observation is considered a complementary method and *vice versa*. This can help the researcher to collect and triangulate data to get “different perspectives on [the] issue [of this] study or to answer the research questions” (Flick, 2020, p.187). The key value of observation, according to Wellington (2015), is that it “deals with behaviour rather than reported behaviour” (p.247). It is also important to observe how teachers dealt with cultural issues that might arise in the real context. Hennink *et al.* (2013) also clarify that observation “allows researchers to obtain a detailed description of social settings or events in order to situate people’s behaviour within socio-cultural context” (p.170). Tarusha and Bushi (2024) found in their study that “classroom observation tools offer a good understanding of classroom culture” (p.722). This method; therefore; aligns with the principles of CIC which emphasise the importance of understanding the specific circumstances and contextual factors influencing educational practices. Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) emphasises understanding intercultural interactions through the lens of power dynamics and social relations. By employing classroom observation, I could directly engage with the environment, gaining deeper insights into the socio-cultural factors that influence teaching and learning. This approach ensures that research findings are grounded in the actual experiences and interactions within the classroom and this leading to more accurate and applicable conclusions.

In practice, classroom observations were conducted as a crucial component of the data collection process to explore the cultural dynamics within the educational setting. These observations focused on both the physical and social aspects of the learning environment, specifically examining the cultural expressions of teachers and students, including dress codes, seating arrangements, classroom entrances, corridors, and other gender-related elements. Such observations were essential for understanding how cultural norms and institutional structures influence teachers’ interactions, learning practices, and classroom behaviour. This approach was part of a broader triangulation strategy, where multiple data sources, including interviews and stimulated recall discussions, were combined to enhance the rigour and reliability of the findings. By triangulating observational data with other research methods, a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the classroom context was achieved to reinforce the validity of the study's conclusions.

According to Hammond and Wellington (2013), intention cannot be ascribed to a person entirely on the basis of observed behaviour: “we can only suggest possible motives and ideally seek clarification and confirmation from those being observed” (p.114). That is why I planned to have the Stimulated Recall Discussions (SRD) take place after observation to ask my participants about

some practices observed (visible) in the classroom and try to understand their intentions (invisible) rather than interpreting their behaviours and practices from my own understanding only.

#### **5.7.2.1. Procedures of classroom observation**

I used a non-structured observation model to jot down whatever I observed without a predetermined list of prepared themes to observe. By following this way, I ended up having different points to discuss with different teachers. Using this method, I tried to document teachers' practices with regards to how they interacted with any relevant cultural issues. I refrained from interacting or consciously reacting to anything that happened in the classroom.

In the observations, I observed how teachers from different cultural backgrounds started their classes, how they dealt with Omani students, males and females, how they dealt with cultural materials, how they discussed them with students, and how they dealt with any situations when they arose during their teaching. I also attended at different times of the day and observed how students also dealt with different teachers in the classroom. I also observed how participants' professional and personal identities were negotiated or asserted.

Regarding the number of classroom observations a qualitative researcher should conduct, Borg contends that there is "no 'correct' figure to aim for in making decisions about the number of observations" (Borg, 2006, p. 246). After getting the teachers' permission, I observed about four classes for each teacher throughout the semester and observed full sessions which lasted one hour and forty minutes each in the face-to-face (in-person classroom) and fifty minutes in the online classes during COVID-19.

The number of sessions to be observed depended on the teachers' permission though I thought a single session would not be enough to reflect the teacher's practice adequately, so I planned to observe at least two to three sessions per teacher. I chose this number because it was convenient for both the participants and for myself, the researcher. For me, I would need sufficient data to manage and analyse besides interview data. Having one observation would not be enough to look at any pattern that teachers may show over several occasions nor enough to see consistently repeated practices that teachers employed. Observing in more than one classroom might show varying patterns and practices that teachers exhibit. They might do something in one classroom but not in another. Moreover, I could miss certain details while taking notes or may be unable to observe multiple events occurring simultaneously in a given setting. Some aspects that went

unnoticed during the initial observation were noticed during subsequent observations, which did occur on several occasions.

While observing the class, I noted points about teachers' and students' words, the classroom setting and seating, the teacher's interaction and relationship with students, student-students' interactions and relationships with specific emphasis on the cultural issues discussed or tackled by the teachers. Classroom observation allowed me to observe teachers in a live environment with the real cultural context they have in their teaching of Omani students.

Although classroom observations are a good instrument for qualitative data collection, there are some limitations that have been noted. One of the drawbacks of having observation as a method is the 'observer effect': the participants being observed may be distracted or affected by the presence of the researcher (Cohen *et al.*, 2005) and they 'may behave in some atypical fashion' (Patton, 2002, p.306). Being observed may not be preferred by many especially in the participants' 'territorial' space which is their classroom. (Flick, 2020). To minimise this limitation, I followed a number of procedures. I tried to assure teachers that they should act naturally and I was not there to evaluate, criticise or give judgments. Thus, to minimise stress, I explained to them the role that I would be taking in their classroom (McKenney and Reeves, 2013) and I would be silent sitting at the back of the classroom to minimise the possible distractions that could be caused. In addition, although the students had been informed of my coming to the class by their teacher who had got the students' consent for me to observe their class, I reassured students and spoke to them at the beginning of the class time and made it very clear the reason why I was there and I requested them to act naturally as other normal days as if I was not there. I also assured both the teachers and students that I would not record the class or use any device to record the sessions or take screenshots in the online classes. I kept silent and busy taking notes and minimised eye contact with the teacher and his/her students. I also assured participants that these class observations were confidential and were for the purpose of my research and were not to be seen by the CPS administration. Behaving in this way should have contributed to my securing reliable research findings.

Another criticism of using classroom observation is that it could be considered biased (Ya-nan, 2023) if the researcher takes part in the classroom activities. This type of observation is called participant observation according to Cohen *et al.*, (2018) who argue that researchers might be direct players in the investigation context which results in data being biased and subjective (Cohen

*et al.*, 2017). To avoid this criticism, I adopted the role of non-participant observer (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). I did not participate in any activity in the classroom; rather, I was just a silent observer sitting at the back taking notes (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). I also kept myself away from any interaction with the teacher and his/her student throughout the duration of the class time.

### **5.7.3. Stimulated Recall Discussions (SRD)**

According to Ryan and Gass (2012) a stimulated recall is an “introspective research methodology” (p. 1) and is a qualitative research method that has gained prominence in various fields for collecting data and gaining insights into participants' thoughts, actions, and experiences (Gass & Mackey, 2017). It is an approach that involves the retrospective recall of participants' experiences, actions, and thought processes during a specific event or activity in real-world settings. This method requires participants to justify and explain their behaviours and decisions made during the observed time (Sanchez & Grimshaw, 2019). Researchers use various stimuli, such as videos, audio recordings, or written prompts, to trigger participants' memories and reflections on their actions and decisions during the event. This method is often employed to uncover the hidden or subconscious aspects of participants' behaviours and thought patterns (Gass & Mackey, 2017). This depth of information can be challenging to obtain through observation only which can cause bias as the researcher would use his own interpretations without being certain about the intentions behind the observed actions and behaviours. Therefore, it can be understood that SRD enhances the validity of research findings by allowing participants to reflect on their actions immediately after the event, reducing recall bias and improving the accuracy of responses. Additionally, by doing so, SRD addresses ethical concerns, as it allows participants to offer retrospective accounts of their experiences and decisions without the pressure of making real-time judgments. This feature is particularly valuable when studying sensitive or complex topics.

For this study, stimulated recall discussions provided more details as they proceeded, and the research explored other relevant points which might not have been clear during the observation process. The purpose of conducting a stimulated discussion was to understand better teachers' behaviours and actions observed in the classroom, gain more data from participants' responses, interpretations and discuss the practical side of their experiences in depth. Through SRD, expatriate teachers could articulate the challenges they face in the classroom due to cultural differences. They could also discuss potential solutions or strategies they have developed to address these challenges, contributing to the development of best practices in ICC and CIC.

Conducting SRD is to some extent similar to conducting interviews in terms of asking the participants questions and this can be a reason why some researchers call it “Stimulated Recall Interview” (Dempsey, 2010; Schindler & Lilienthal, 2020; Zainil & Arsyad, 2021). However, Gass and Mackey (2017) view stimulated recall as a distinctive method rather than a traditional interview technique for it is distinctive in its procedures and aims. First, SRD involves revisiting a specific task or event (often through video/audio recordings or other cues) to prompt participants to reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and decision-making processes during that task. This method aims to uncover subconscious or implicit knowledge that might not surface in a typical interview setting. Instead of solely relying on direct questioning, stimulated recall uses triggers or cues to elicit more nuanced and detailed responses from participants.

While SRD is a powerful method, it is not without limitations. It relies on participants' ability to recall and articulate their thoughts accurately, which may be subject to bias or memory limitations. Researchers should consider these potential limitations and address them through well-designed protocols. Another drawback of observing their class and having SRD afterwards was that when I raised certain points, teachers might have perceived them as case-specific or culturally sensitive, potentially assuming I was touching upon a personal issue they believed I had identified. They might, for example, do something that was not culturally acceptable and assume that I would comment on it, perceiving it as criticism. Thus, it was important that they were reminded of the purpose of the research and the researcher who was an insider was not judging them or questioning them by raising that point for clarifications not for criticism or legal investigation.

The following section explains the phases these methods were employed:

#### **5.7.3.1. Preparation phase**

To prepare participants, reassure them about the procedure, and familiarize them with the topic, I conducted introductory interviews. During these sessions, I presented the study's topic and research objectives, explained how the observations would be conducted, and discussed suitable observation dates with them for the academic semester.



### **5.7.3.2. Conducting the SRD phase**

After the first interview and classroom observation, a Stimulated Recall Discussion (SRD) was conducted to reflect on and discuss the initial classroom observation. The semi-structured interview schedule was divided into different sections as some participant teachers preferred shorter meetings. Conversely, it helped me and the participants to reflect more on the topic and gave us time to get more engaged with the issue. I was cautious to make it very clear that they did not feel they were under pressure in any way by participating in my research, so I would not push them to meet. The same thing I followed with class observation; I would leave it to them when it was convenient to attend their classroom. They were aware of which days were more suitable for observation, considering various factors. Since they understood my research topic and objectives, some participants postponed their class observations, believing those classes might not be as beneficial for my study. On some occasions, where they expressed their opinion about the nature of the class, they left it to me if I would attend. For example, one teacher thought that the writing class would not be of benefit to me as there would be less interactions and students would be busy all the time writing their essays. In that case, I clarified to them that I could attend as I was also observing not only materials used but to observe the setting of the classroom and other cultural elements that might arise at any time. It could be the way (route) to the classroom the participant used, the stairs/lifts he/she was using, greetings with students, or any form of intercultural interactions between the participant and the students or the overall setting.

For SRD, I prepared questions by referring to the observational notes I had taken during class observations. I just noted down the things that I thought were worth discussing that fell under my research topic so teachers at the SRD stage could clarify them and I could obtain their views, attitudes, justifications and opinions about them. The notes taken during these observations allowed me to investigate in depth the participants' reasons and clarifications about specific actions and practices that helped me to understand their standpoint and how they considered some cultural, political and religious issues while teaching in Oman and interacting with the cultural context at SQU.

I discussed those points, one by one and emphasised to the participants that I needed their perceptions and insights about what I had observed. Those unplanned questions about issues at the time of observing contributed to the unfolding/'unpacking' of participants' views and explanations to me about their intentions and reasons why certain actions had taken place. That discussion with teachers helped me to explore the "aspects of cognition that lie behind the participants' decisions and actions" (Barnard and Burns, 2012, p. 145).

Having the SRD soon after the classroom observation was recommended by Gass and Mackey (2017). I was concerned to have the SRD immediately after the classroom or when it was convenient as soon as possible in order to avoid a time gap that could result in teachers' forgetting about the observed class, to avoid mixing the class observed with other later classes or indulging in retrospective rationalisations of what had happened. Some teachers have to teach more than one section on the same day. This promptness of the SRD sessions means the participants were better able to comment and can give more accurate feedback about the observed class. Although I believed in conducting them on the same day preferably after the class observation, I had also to accept the fact that some teachers are too busy after the class or too exhausted from work. Hence, in such cases, I would look for the nearest time to hold the meeting. Normally, the SRD took place in a booked room at the CPS with which the participants were familiar and were similar to where we held the semi-structured interviews. Due to Covid constraints at the time, where the teaching had taken place online, we did the SRD online.

These SRDs were in the form of interviews, but they were semi-structured. I did not prepare questions, but I would mention what I observed and then ask them to comment, justify, clarify, or what they understood from it. On other occasions, other questions would be raised to understand the teachers' personal philosophies, reasons, or perspectives. I also sought their interpretations from a cultural perspective and sometimes asked them to elaborate on some points.

To me, some points were worth discussing as it was the first time I had observed them. This was especially true with the online classes where the entire context was new to me. Thus, introducing those new topics for discussion was both engaging and valuable, providing an opportunity for all of us to reflect on them. These SRDs also helped the teachers to reflect deeply on some aspects that they had not thought about before. It was hard to raise some points as some teachers thought that there was some sort of implied criticism where I was only looking for a justification. That resulted in my interlocutors asking me about my opinion regarding such topics. During these discussions some participants forgot that I was the researcher and would ask me 'policy' questions, seeking my opinion regarding an issue such as allowing students to use mobile phones in the classroom.

#### **5.7.4. Face-to-face and online interviews during the pandemic of Covid-19**

In February 2020, the health situation in Oman was stable, allowing me to commence participant recruitment, conduct interviews, class observations, and arrange SRD with selected participants. I successfully conducted three interviews (out of 4) with four participants (out of five), carried out two class observations (out of four), and implemented SRD for each of those four participants. Afterwards, I had to pause for a week due to mid-term exams. Subsequently, the Covid-19 pandemic escalated, leading to widespread closures which stopped my data collection completely. It resulted in two of my participants withdrawing, as they found it overwhelming at that time.

The other practical research challenge was the shift to online. Initially, the transition was far from smooth—it did not even resemble a real shift. People were not prepared for it, lacking the necessary technical skills and facilities to support a complete online system. Many teachers had not taught online before. Conducting an empirical study when they were not confident about what they were doing would not be fair to them or to the study, which was not designed for that context. Therefore, I resumed data collection online in the subsequent academic year when the online system at SQU improved.

Most face-to-face interviews were conducted in a booked room (CPS meeting rooms) with the exception that later some were in a laboratory that was empty at all times during the Covid-19 pandemic because teaching was online and labs were not used. Labs were chosen because they were spacious and participants felt more comfortable there. The first and second rounds of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while the second, third, and fourth class observations were online because teaching was online during the whole of academic year 2020/2021.

I had to conduct online interviews for SRD through ‘Google Meet’ because teaching during the pandemic was all performed through ‘Google Meet’. SQU did not allow the use of other online software for security reasons and SQU emails were also linked to the Google system so the participants were familiar with it. Using Google Meet was new for me to use. I had also had no experience, myself, of teaching online using Google Meet.

In Oman, I struggled with unstable internet, so I conducted sessions in places with strong Wi-Fi, like the CPS itself or in a relative's home. However, video caused disconnections due to weak signals, so I used only audio to prevent such interruptions. The technical drawbacks of online interviewing are outlined by Cohen *et al.*, (2018) who state that “online interviewing is susceptible to technological problems (e.g. unstable connectivity, slow connections (particularly in video-

conferencing), mailbox being full), and these must be explored before the online interview is conducted” (p.540).

On the other hand, having the interviews online was, somehow, convenient to some participants as they could wear casual clothes and be at a convenient place at a time convenient for them. This meant they did not have to travel or worry about the place they were in. Some of them had tea and even had their pets around them: dogs and cats would often pass by!

Using Google Meet allowed me to record each entire interview and send it to my email. The recording was clear, but the size of the files was often quite high because it recorded it as a video, not a sound file.

The table below shows the number of interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall discussions conducted with each participant. Leo, Laura, Malcolm, Rose, and Sam were each involved in four interviews, four class observations, and four stimulated recall discussions.

**Table 5: the number of interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall discussions conducted with each participant**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>Number of class observations</b>	<b>Number of stimulated recall discussion</b>
Leo	Interview 1, 20/02/2020  Interview 2, 21/12/2020  Interview 3, 21/12/2020  Interview 4, 24/01/2021	4	4  1-3-2020  27-2-2020  27-10-2020  8-12-2020 online
Laura	Interview 1, 1/3/2020  Interview2, 20/12/2020	4	4    3-3-2020

	Interview 3, 27/1/2021  Interview 4, 27/1/2021		4-3-2020  21-10-2020  8-12-2020 Online
Malcolm	Interview 1, 27/2/2020  Interview2, 14/1/2021  Interview 3, 26/1/2021  Interview 4, 26/1/2021	3	3  27-2-2020  8-12-2020 Online  19-10-2020 Online
Rose	Interview 1, 3/3/2020  Interview2, 4/3/2020  Interview 3, 22/12/2020  Interview 4, 17/1/2021	3	3  3/3/2020  4-3-2020  27-10-2020 Online
Sam	Interview 1, 27/2/2020  Interview 2, 18/1/2021  Interview 3, 18/1/2021	3	3  5-3-2020  22-1-2021 Online  25-1-2021

	Interview 4, 25/1/2021		
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## 5.8. Data analysis

In the context provided, after gathering the data, the focus shifts to the organisation, analysis and interpretation of the data phase which is done by selecting a suitable method. The data analysis process could have commenced during the data collection phase. The subsequent step, before selecting the method for analysis, was to transcribe the data, as discussed in the upcoming section.

### 5.8.1. Ways used to transcribe the data for analysis

Interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent. They were not immediately transcribed due to time constraints. I started transcribing the first one, but it took me a long time. Instead, I looked for other options to transcribe my data as the recordings made up over 30 hours of material. I tried a number of types of auto transcription software (Such as Microsoft Word) but most of them had drawbacks. There are different ways and softwares that can assist in managing big data and analysing them such as NVivo, MAXQDA, and ATLAS.ti

Although I had decided, since the start of the research, to use Nvivo to analyse data, I could not use it at the beginning because there were technical issues with my Sheffield email while I was away during Covid-19. The Nvivo software had a transcription feature but unfortunately the University of Sheffield did not subscribe to it and it was expensive so I could not use it to transcribe my data. Rather I transcribed the data manually, as if taking secretarial dictation, which was a very time-consuming process. After having transcribed the data, I started reading and analysing it in the manual traditional way, which was to go through the transcribed data on paper. That was because I had no access to the Nvivo software while I was away as mentioned above. Then, I thought of using a software that would enable the highlighted text to be moved when I got access to the Nvivo system. I used the Microsoft Word feature of comment-writing on the side of the document texts of the scripts. When I returned to the UK and managed to activate the Nvivo system *via* the University of Sheffield, I started using Nvivo for two of my participants and I started analysing the data. While engaging in this process, I made myself already familiar with Microsoft Word and went back to finish the rest of the interviews via Microsoft Word. Eventually, I ended

up analysing my data being analysed on three different ways which improved my facility with all of them!

### 5.8.2. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA)

Selecting a suitable method has to align with the research objectives and the overall research methodology (Levitt *et al.*, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, I chose the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, which Joy, Braun and Clarke (2023) define shortly as “an accessible, robust method for exploring and developing understanding of patterned meaning across a qualitative dataset (p.155). Braun and Clarke (2006) defined Thematic Analysis (TA) as,

a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently, it goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic (p.79).

Reflexive TA was selected because it is a type of and an updated form of Thematic Analysis (TA) discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in an early work. Moreover, Reflexive TA is associated with critical qualitative research and it emphasises the subjectivity of the researcher and their active involvement in the whole process as a contributor to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Joy, *et al.*, 2023). Braun and Clarke (2019) contend that themes in RTA “do not passively emerge from either data or coding; they are not ‘in’ the data, waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher” (p.594) but the researcher contributes to creating them. Braun and Clarke (2019) clarify the role of the researcher in data analysis and in creating themes: “themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves (p.594).

To analyse the data of this study, I followed the flexible steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022) which are “1) **familiarising yourself with the dataset; 2) coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing up**” (p.35-36). Braun and Clarke (2019) also clarify that these steps are not meant to be followed rigidly. Rather, the “process can be more recursive than linear; sometimes you may go back and forth between phases rather than strictly progressing from one to the next” (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p.90). In the cases of researchers “with more analytic experience, some phases may blur into each other” (p.90). As they clarify: “is not about following procedures ‘correctly’ (or

about ‘accurate’ and ‘reliable’ coding, or achieving consensus between coders), but about the researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process” (p.594). These steps provided a systematic and rigorous process for identifying recurring themes, patterns, or concepts within the data. The goals of this approach are to detect and uncover underlying meanings and to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

It is important to note that the process of thematic analysis can be done through both inductive (data driven) and deductive approaches (theory driven). Clarke and Braun (2016) contend that ‘pure induction’ is not achievable since qualitative analysis is invariably influenced by overarching ontological and epistemological frameworks, as well as the researcher’s standpoint. Nevertheless, the analysis can be primarily grounded in the data. On the other hand, analysis can take a deductive approach where pre-existing theories and concepts serve as a framework for reading and interpreting the data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). In this current study, the data were analysed inductively and deductively which I explained in the procedures further in the Analysis and Discussion Chapter.

Starting the data analysis involved a deliberate process of immersing myself in the data: i.e., **‘familiarisation’**. Part of this familiarisation started during the transcribing process where I listened to the audio recordings to transcribe them manually. Although transcription is time-consuming, frustrating, and occasionally tedious, it can serve as a valuable method for initiating familiarity with the data (Riessman, 1993, cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006). This immersion was not just a surface-level glance; it required a thorough exploration of the huge amount of data set to grasp the full scope and intricacies of the content. By engaging deeply with the data, I aimed to comprehend its breadth (the range of information it covered) and depth (the level of detail and complexity present) as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) before proceeding to the next step, which involved coding and further analysis. This initial familiarisation stage was crucial as it laid the groundwork for a later more informed and effective analysis of the data. I had to read, reread, listen multiple times, rewind, check the scripts, and revisit the content to look for meanings and patterns. After a while, I realised that my understanding of the topic had evolved through further reading of literature and reflection on the data provided by other participants. The data were in a form of transcribed scripts and comments in the margins of the scripts.



These comments represent the second step which is called '**coding**'. In RTA, codes highlight an aspect within the data either through 'semantic codes' ("explicit or surface meaning") or 'latent codes' ("more conceptual and implicit meaning") that intrigue the analyst because of their relevance to the research questions (Braun & Clark, 2022, p.35). While reading the scripts I looked for meaning and patterns which I noted or highlighted by hand on the hard copy. Then I coded words, phrases, sentences I came across whether semantic or latent. It is important to note that the initial codes could be driven by the content of the data, the data providing direction, or the coding was guided by theory with the use of predefined questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process continued throughout the whole dataset. In the phase of generating codes, I re-examined the research questions based on my interpretation of what the dataset was indicating. I could notice that the codes were so detailed with issues and examples that I needed to collate them under bigger categories which led into the next third phase of the data analysis: '**generating initial themes**'.

The third phase in RTA entails '**generating initial themes**', previously termed as 'searching for themes' in Braun and Clarke's (2006) earlier work. In a later publication in 2019, Braun and Clarke have renamed this phase as 'generating initial themes' (Braun & Clarke, 2019). They argue that the themes are not laying there needing to be merely uncovered but the themes have to be developed and constructed through an active process based on the "researcher's insights and knowledge" about both the data and "the research questions" (Braun & Clark, 2022, p.35). Developing themes is not an easy process as well as distinguishing between themes and codes. "Where codes capture a specific or a particular meaning, themes describe broader, shared meanings" (Braun & Clark, 2022, p.35) "with a central organising concept" (Braun and Clarke, 2022 b, p.77). Those codes need to be clustered together to generate initial themes and subthemes that are driven by the research questions, the theoretical framework of the study and the researcher's knowledge around the topic as the RTA suggested above (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

After generating themes, these themes and sub-themes underwent a review process by cross-referencing ('**developing and reviewing themes**') to ensure that the compiled excerpts and codes under each theme aligned with the constructed, developing and reviewing themes. This evaluation ensured that the created themes and the evolving thematic map accurately represented the dataset, thereby, enabling the initiation of the next phase of analysis.

In this stage of analysis which is the fifth stage, '**refining, defining and naming themes**', the researcher navigates between the data and the recognised themes iteratively to structure the

narrative into a “coherent and internally consistent account” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). For every identified theme, the researcher develops an elaborate analysis that extends beyond mere data description or rephrasing (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involves delineating the narrative within each theme and illustrating how this narrative and theme contribute to the overarching storyline of the dataset concerning the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During this phase, themes are reorganised, and some are merged with others. The process of naming the themes persists until the final phase, which is the subsequent writing up stage.

**The sixth stage is the ‘writing up phase’** where the generated reports should present a brief and engaging narrative of the story conveyed by the data, encompassing both individual themes and their connections (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It “is to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93). “It is important that the analysis (the write-up of it, including data extracts) provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell / within and across themes” (p.93). In the analysis, I provided ample evidence of the data's themes, presenting a number of data excerpts to showcase the prevalence of each theme. I also selected notably vivid examples from the extracts that encapsulated the core of the points being illustrated, avoiding unnecessary intricacy.

Examples of the codes and generated themes for analysis are seen in the **Table below**.

**Table 6: Codes, sub-themes and themes**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>category</b>	<b>Sub sub themes</b>	<b>sub-themes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Not aware of any written rules.		Guidelines in the institutions	<b>Institutional</b>	
No criticism of national beliefs, celebrations, government’s system, political system				
politics, sex, criticising the government,	Topics to avoid	Socio-cultural considerations		

Religion, pork,  Prayer times	Importance of religion  Teachers' reactions to policies and guidelines  Obvious assumptions  Common sense		<b>culture</b>	<b>Cultural context</b>
- Wearing -Omani clothes -SQU uniform policy -Appearance	Religious and cultural practices	Dress Code	<b>Religion and Culture</b>	
Single and mixed classrooms  His mother time and a Catholic School in the UK	Segregation  Effects of the presence of both genders	Personal space	<b>Co-education</b>	<b>Classroom Culture</b>
Sensitive to gender interaction  Male and female students in the classroom  Class activities	Gender differences  Both genders' voices and behaviour	Student-student interaction	<b>Gender dynamics</b>	
Different ways of teaching  Unsuitable activities	Teaching methods	CLT ELT materials	<b>ELT Methods and Materials</b>	

Relevant topics				
Evaluating CLT				
Defining materials				
Commercial textbooks				
Skipping units	Types of materials used in the CPS			
Gender topics	Appropriate and Inappropriate materials to the Omani cultural context			
Fashion, exposing women's body in the textbooks				
Sensitivities of female	Omani culture in the textbooks			
Islamic ethics	Integrating Omani culture into the classroom and materials			
Lack of local culture				
Showed interest in other cultures			<b>Intercultural communication (IC)</b>	
Took some courses about Islam (Introduction to Islam)	Teaching experience in different Muslim contexts			
Studied Arabic and possess some Arabic-spoken skills				
Worked in Oman before ( in a college)				

Mingled with Muslim neighbours in the UK.				
New teachers at the CPS				
Challenges of teachers		Induction Committee		
Changing,	Orientation			
Censoring				
Skipping some topics and pages of the textbooks (at the CPS)	Adapting materials to suit his students			
Different teaching contexts				
	Self-awareness			
	Adapt to the teaching context	Adaptability and flexibility		

## 5.9. Research quality

The question of 'quality' in qualitative research is embedded in a broader and disputed discussion regarding the nature of knowledge generated through qualitative research (Tracy, 2010; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). It involves deliberation on whether its quality can be appropriately assessed using a singular set of universal principles and, if so, the method by which such evaluations should occur (Seale, 2018). A problem occurs when researchers attempt to apply quantitative criteria into qualitative research, despite the fundamental differences between the two types of research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Tracy, 2010; Flick, 2018; Seale, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2013) discuss the main criteria used to evaluate quantitative research which are 'reliability', 'validity', and

‘generalisability’ in relation to the applicability of those criteria to qualitative research. They conclude that the criteria used for quantitative research are not appropriate to assess the quality of qualitative research. That is because the “criteria [of the quantitative research] presuppose that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible” (Bryman, 2016, p.384). Alternatively, qualitative researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013) and Tracy (2010) developed other quality criteria for qualitative research. For example, Tracy proposes eight “key markers of quality in qualitative research including (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (p.838). I found these criteria are many and some of them are criteria for any type of research including quantitative such as “(a) worthy topic, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence”. For this reason, I used the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) which are ‘member checking’, ‘triangulation’ and ‘relatability and transferability’. I also added one more criterion, ‘reflexivity’, which is suggested by Willig (2013). These criteria are used to assess the quality of the current study.

### **5.9.1. Member checking**

Member checking is known as the “practice of checking your analysis with your participants. It typically involves presenting a draft written or oral report of the research, or just of the analysis, to some or all participants, and asking them to comment on the trustworthiness or authenticity of what has been produced” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.282).

Being an ethical researcher as stated by Marshall and Rossman (2011), a researcher “does not grab the data and run” (p.130). After several interviews and classroom observations with the participants, I built up a friendly relationship with all of them that did not end in the last meeting with them. I used emails and WhatsApp to contact them. Although I made it very clear in the last meeting with each teacher participant that it was the end of their formal involvement, I also asked participants if it was possible if I could refer to them for clarification, if needed, and they all cordially agreed. I sent two unclear auditory sections of their interview through WhatsApp & the teachers helped me with that. I also asked the participants that if time allowed to check my grasp of their profiles and intercultural experience, as summarised by me, from all interviews, class observations and stimulated recall discussions. To this end, I shared drafts of their individual profiles and the section on intercultural communication with those participants I could reach to ensure that their views were accurately represented and interpreted. Other social interactions also

happened. Some of them would send me messages asking me about my study and how the research was going and I would reply to them and thanking them again for their interest.

This criterion helped me add some missing information, enabled participants to review the written content about them, and offered an opportunity for them to share ideas post data collection. Personally, I was unable to reach all participants, as three of them departed from the CPS soon after my data collection. I lost their contact information because they changed their WhatsApp numbers, and their university email addresses became inactive after they left SQU. Having said that, this criteria, member checking, as stated above and by McLeod (2001) does not require the researcher to ask all participants to check the draft.

### **5.9.2. Triangulation**

Triangulation “refers to the use of more than one method or source of data to study a social phenomenon” (Clark *et al.*, 2021, p.364). Triangulation is marked as a way to show credibility of the research (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017) by cross-referencing one method or data source with another. This approach broadens the researcher's field of vision and validates findings through multiple perspectives (Clark *et al.*, 2021). I triangulated methods in this current study by using three different methods for data collection which were: semi-structured interviews, class observations, and stimulated recall discussion. They were meant to produce rich data that came at different settings of the same case at different times. The interviews unveiled the participants' perspectives on intercultural communication and awareness, as well as how they perceived the cultural contexts at the CPS and SQU. The class observations depicted their actual intercultural interactions within the classroom's cultural context. However, solely observing their intercultural practices was not sufficient; the researcher sought the participants' justifications for their behaviours and teaching practices within the classroom. Therefore, utilising stimulated recall discussions as a third method to collect data was crucial, as it allowed for the inclusion of participants' intentions and justifications. This approach prevented the exclusion of their intentions, thereby avoiding the researcher's sole reliance on assumptions or interpretations based just on observations.

### **5.9.3. Relatability and transferability**

By providing a detailed description of the study's context and participants, this research will enable others to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to different educational contexts and teachers. Different researchers have referred to it as 'relatability' (Opie, 2010a; Opie, 2010b; Willig, 2013; Wellington, 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2022) and others as 'transferability' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Willig, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Relatability refers to the ability to connect a piece of qualitative educational research with what occurs in a comparable context elsewhere (Opie, 2010a). The value and quality of educational research lies in the adequacy and relevance of details for a researcher in a similar situation to connect their decision-making to the described scenario (Opie, 2010a). Therefore, Opie (2010a) contends that a work's relatability holds more significance than its capacity for generalisation. The qualitative researcher can improve the transferability of their study by providing a comprehensive description of the research context and outlining the core assumptions that guided the research. In this present study, I have provided sufficient background information about the context of the study. Additionally, I employed three research methods to collect data, resulting in a substantial dataset spanning approximately 30 hours. This dataset provided sufficient information about the participants and their perspectives and practices. All of this information can aid other researchers in assessing the potential relatability and transferability of this study to their own contexts.

#### **5.9.4. Reflexivity**

An important aspect of the nature of qualitative research is that the researcher's individual experiences, viewpoints, and predispositions can impact the research design, data collection, interpretation and analysis of data (Bryman, 2022). Therefore, reflexivity prompts qualitative researchers to be attentive and aware of "the researcher's cultural, political, and social context" (Bryman, 2016, p.388), "linguistic, and economic origins of one's own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those interviews and those of whom one reports" (Patton, 2015, p.70). To address these constraints, it is crucial for the researcher to uphold reflexivity and consistently document their 'positionality' throughout the research process (Bryman, 2022). The researcher's personal 'projections' onto the work can affect qualitative research. Although this is generally recognised, it must be consciously acknowledged. This is being reflexive. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that reflexivity requires that the researchers,

reflect about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they



advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data. This aspect of the methods is more than merely advancing biases and values in the study, but how the background of the researchers actually may shape the direction of the study (p.182).

Through reflexivity, I came to understand that in conducting qualitative research, it is impossible to entirely avoid subjectivity throughout the research process. However, maintaining reflexivity consistently helped mitigate biases, particularly those stemming from my role as an insider researcher. For example, during interviews, certain participants assumed I had prior knowledge of CPS and SQU issues because of my insider status. Therefore, I explicitly had to ask them to consider me as an outsider with no prior knowledge of the institution. Another reflective approach that helped balance my subjectivity in this research involved being open-minded to alternative perspectives, particularly those provided by my supervisor, whether through discussions or comments on the drafts of this study. Additionally, I carefully considered the feedback received from seminars and conferences where I presented my study. Actively seeking and valuing others' comments and feedback prompted me to reflect on their perspectives.

### **5.10. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations constitute a fundamental aspect of the research process, and adhering to principles of ethical conduct directs decisions regarding acceptable and unacceptable researcher behaviour (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Throughout the research journey, from defining the issues and formulating research questions to gathering and analysing data, and finally, composing the conclusions, researchers must consistently reflect on ethical practices (Creswell, 2009). The core concepts linked with research ethics include anonymity, confidentiality, potential harm, and the consent process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Ethical considerations are important in my research as I involved teachers as participants. Ensuring the privacy of participants, providing transparency on data management, informing them about potential risks associated with participation and confirming the voluntary and willing nature of their involvement are essential considerations before initiating any research (Creswell, 2009). For example, I followed the appropriate procedures before, during and after their participation in my study. I had to apply for the ethical approval from the University of Sheffield to permit me to conduct this study with the potential participants. I also clarified every aspect of my research and explained how it would be conducted to them.

The CPS research committee at SQU required another ethical approval to gain access to the participants. That committee has strict ethical standards very similar to the ones at the University

of Sheffield. Therefore, I applied for ethical approval to get access to participants from the CPS and I followed these ethical guidelines closely. Even though the information sheet sent to all my participants explained everything about the ethical considerations they needed to be aware of, I also made it clear to the teachers that this research was not to evaluate them or write reports about them or their teaching; it was to explore their perceptions and how they dealt with this context. Participants had been provided with a consent form prior to their decision to participate and they had been informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time without presenting any reason as their participation was entirely voluntary. Three participants did actually withdraw at different stages of my research as they felt that they could not be committed to it in that particular semester especially during the pandemic of Covid-19. Two of them withdrew after they had signed the consent form and before starting the interviews. The third one withdrew after the first interview when Covid-19 interrupted. I had a plan to have 4-5 female teachers and 4-5 male teachers but eventually I ended up with five teachers: two female teachers and three male teachers.

This research also sought participants' experiences, challenges, and interactions with the cultural context so privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were guaranteed. I have assured the participants that their names would not be used and pseudonyms would be used instead and they would remain anonymous at all times during and after this research. I also made it very clear that the information I would collect from them whether from the interview, the class observation and SRD would not be shared with anyone and would be confidential. All of that made it clear that they could speak freely and express their opinions, perceptions and views regarding the socio-cultural and religious context at the CPS and SQU and/or about their personal life.

Part of this anonymisation is to avoid information about the participants being used to potentially identify them individually. Ensuring the protection of my participants is a top priority. Although I mentioned their actual nationalities, it was highly unlikely that this information could lead to their identification in any way. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that researchers discuss with their participants pseudonyms and if possible allow them to choose their own pseudonyms to assure anonymity. I followed this suggestion with my participants by sharing a section of data analysis with them- including their profiles- for validation (member checking), which included pseudonyms, nationalities, qualifications, and work experience. None of the participants expressed concerns about being identified based on the information recorded. One participant was even pleased with the pseudonym I assigned. I received their approval to include this information as they were confident it would not lead to their identification. My participants were aware of the

large number of CPS staff members and the wide distribution of programmes, making it challenging for individuals to be familiar with everyone and so identify ‘faces in the crowd’. Additionally, there is a high turnover of staff in the expatriate teacher community. Staff regularly leave their positions and get replaced by new teachers. Therefore, it was very unlikely for someone to be identified solely based on their nationalities, qualifications, and previous work locations. For example, three of my participants are no longer working in the CPS and have left the country at different times since the research took place. Another factor ensuring their anonymity is that the participants in this study belonged to nationalities (Americans and British) that have been consistently prevalent in significant numbers since the establishment of the CPS. I would not have disclosed their nationalities if the participants had been part of a group of teachers representing only 1-4 nationalities at the CPS, including Algerians, Colombians, Belarusians, French, and others (refer to the table of teachers’ nationalities for more details). As of September 2023, there were approximately 26 American and 12 British teachers. This figure varies with each semester. While I lack the precise figures for Spring and Fall 2020, during Fall 2021—when the study was conducted—I was directly aware of a larger presence of Americans and British within the CPS. Many among them had departed due to factors primarily related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the financial crisis that Oman experienced just before the outbreak.

Regarding the physical and digital data collected, I made sure that they were safely kept and protected from the reach of others. This data would be used and later destroyed to comply with the legal requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) (BERA, 2018).

A potential limitation could stem from my position as an insider (having worked within this institution for approximately 12 years). This might have influenced the responses of one participant who was already familiar with me compared to the others who were not (as they were quite new and I did not know any of them from before). This was evident in the familiar participant’s reluctance to elaborate on his answers to some questions during the interviews, assuming I already knew the situation. To mitigate this, I made a concerted effort to emphasise and verbally remind participants to assume that I had no prior knowledge about the questioned point. This limitation of being an insider also created prior assumptions which might have affected the overall study starting from thinking about the topic all the way through data collection, forming interview questions, data analysis and discussion.

## **5.11. Summary of the chapter**

This chapter presented the methodology employed for this research. It began by outlining the research design, philosophical underpinnings, study objectives, and the research questions it aimed to address. Subsequently, it introduced the study site. The chapter gravitated towards a qualitative approach due to its resonance with the intricate nature of the study, which centred on exploring expatriate English teachers' intercultural interactions within the cultural context at university in Oman. The qualitative methodology aids in comprehensively understanding the impact of diverse cultural backgrounds, institutional norms, and socio-cultural factors on the teaching practices of these educators. The chapter then articulated the rationale for the sampling strategy and the procedures for recruiting participants, aimed at ensuring the selection of a diverse pool of educators from the CPS at SQU. Next, the data collection methods and the pilot study employed were discussed followed by how these methods were conducted. Moving to the data analysis section, the chapter clarified how data were analysed using reflexive TA approach. The study's insider researcher status is highlighted, emphasising a deep understanding of the institution's settings and the cultural context. Additionally, ethical considerations linked to each data collection method were addressed. Finally, the chapter concluded by outlining the criteria employed to augment the research quality.

## **Data Analysis and Discussion Chapters: Six and Seven**

### **Introduction to the chapters**

These two chapters focus on an in-depth analysis and discussion of the data collected from interviews with expatriate teachers, classroom observations, and stimulated recall discussions. My main goal was to explore as much as I could about the unique perspectives and rich experiences of these teachers in regard to the intercultural interactions within the cultural context of SQU. This work was meant to develop a nuanced comprehension of the interplay between cultural influences, the viewpoints and practices of teachers, and the classroom environment.

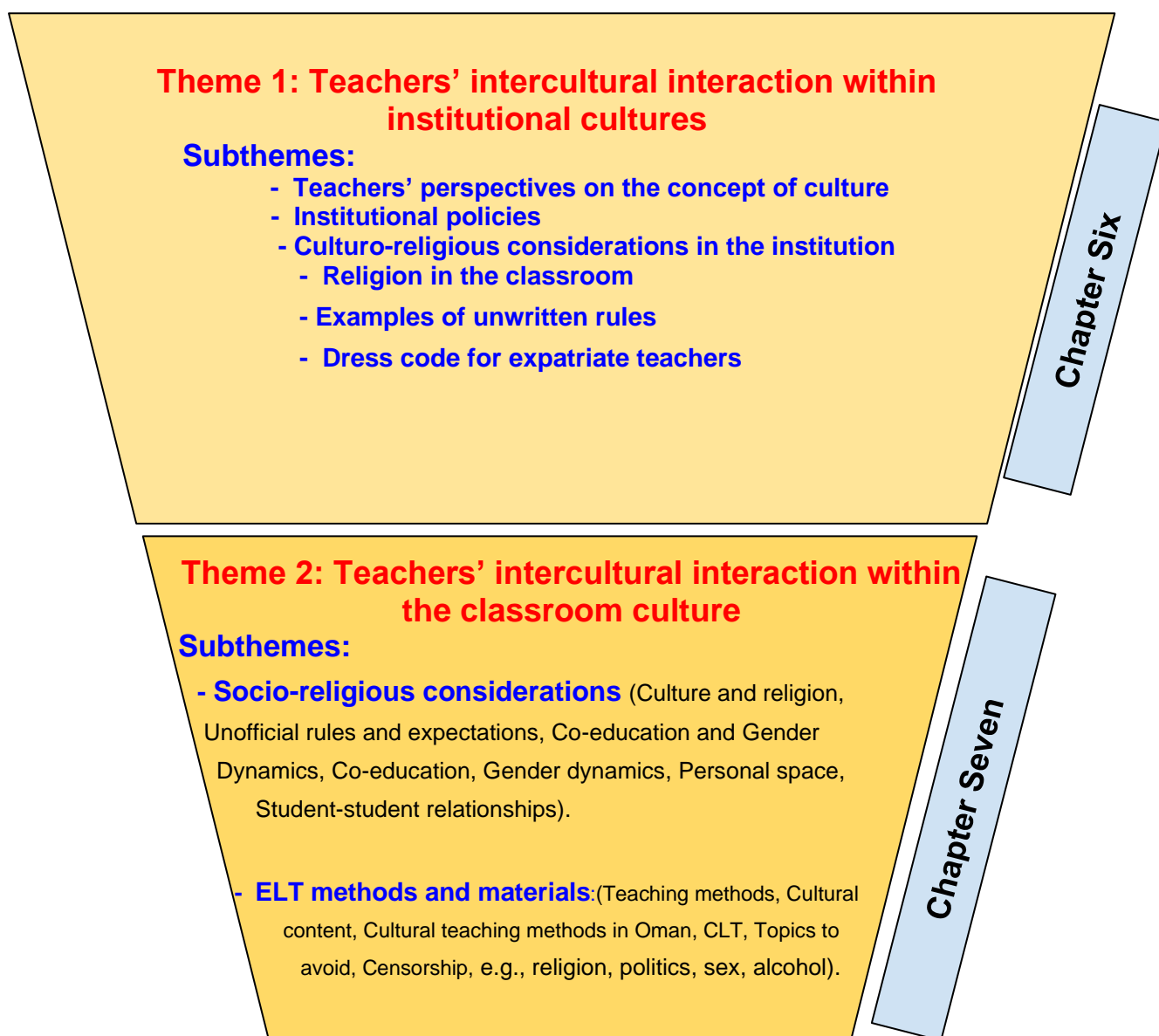
In these chapters, I have employed a holistic and complex approach to analysing data. To ensure a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the data, I used a combination of inductive and deductive methods guided by the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) proposed by Clarke and Braun (2019; 2021; 2022). This variety of approaches helped me to recognise connections between ideas that might otherwise go unnoticed. Each theme reflected an important aspect of this investigation and using this approach has helped present the findings in a logical and informative fashion. Using this systemisation, I hope to give a better understanding of the complex dynamics of the SQU cultural setting from the perspective of expatriate teachers.

### **The structure of these chapters**

The structure of these chapters has evolved significantly throughout the process of analysis and discussion. Their final form is the result of several factors, including my deepening (ongoing) understanding of the topic and my ability to discern the intricate interconnections between the topics' ideas, codes, subthemes, and themes. Undoubtedly, the utilisation of a reflexive thematic analysis approach to scrutinise the data played a pivotal role in establishing systematic procedures to follow, the details of which are presented in the Methodology Chapter (see pages 163-169). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these emergent themes and subthemes were also profoundly influenced by the conceptual and theoretical framework that underpinned this study (see pages 83-128). For instance, embracing the Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) perspective inherently involves an exploration of power dynamics and contextual factors such as those involving religion and politics. These power dynamics are integral components in shaping not only the overarching institutional culture but also the various microcultures and subcultures that thrive within the institution such as the culture within the individual classroom. This has led me, when interviewing the participants, to inquire about sociocultural power dynamics and socio-cultural and religious factors affecting their teaching practices from a cultural perspective

(deductive). This approach aligns with CIC's emphasis on exploring the broader contextual factors, including culture, politics, macro contexts and other pertinent influences that shape interactions between host and hosted individual cultures, as discussed in the Literature Review Chapter (see pages 43-58). As a result, certain themes and lines of questioning were already determined during the Literature Review phase, shaping those themes used in both the Literature Review itself and the interview questions. However, additional themes organically surfaced throughout the data collection process, with some even emerging during the subsequent reflective considerations and in-depth analysis (inductive).

The current sequence of this chapter, **as shown in Figure 9 below**, has been structured to facilitate a systematic exploration of participant teachers' intercultural interactions within the institutional and classroom cultures. The sequence maintains the logical progression from the general to the specific while ensuring that it provides a strong contextual understanding before delving into the finer details of the institutional and classroom cultures. It also allows for a more seamless flow of ideas and connections between themes and subthemes. Every theme and subtheme adds depth to the understanding of the topic, ensuring a smooth and cohesive narrative. To gain a thorough insight into the culture of an educational institution, it is essential to examine both the broader, institution-wide elements (macro-level) and the more specific, classroom-level dynamics (micro-level).



**Figure 9: The structure and sequence of themes and subthemes**

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## **Chapter Six: Analysing and discussing Theme 1**

### **6.1 Theme 1: Teachers' intercultural perspectives and practices within the institutional culture**

One of the major elements that affect teachers' intercultural perspectives and practices is the institutional culture (Brown, 2001). In order to gain insight into the perspectives of teachers regarding the ways in which the institutional culture at SQU has shaped or influenced their teaching practices and the ways in which they interact with the various cultural features of the institution, teachers were asked what cultural characteristics distinguished this institution from others. The participants could see certain cultural aspects related to teachers themselves, their students, and the institution's policies.

It is important to start this section by exploring how the teachers conceptualised culture. This fundamental grasp of culture serves as a cornerstone for delving into institutional culture. By initially establishing a precise definition of culture, I lay the groundwork for a robust framework to understand how culture functions within institutions to shape teachers' perspectives and practices. The next part of the section explores the sociocultural and religious factors that should be taken into account by CPS teachers. These factors occur in the form of unwritten policies or in the form of informal 'guidelines' that are expected to be understood by staff. Examples of the informal guidelines will be discussed, and finally, this section concludes with how teachers adapt to this institutional culture.

#### **6.1.1. Teachers' perspectives on the concept of culture**

The participants were asked about their perspectives on the concept of culture, and the findings revealed both commonalities and differences, reflecting their individual viewpoints and experiences. The teachers' views of culture encompass a range of perspectives and ideas, all of which are connected to existing literature and scholarly discussions on culture. While the teachers' definitions of culture vary, they also share common themes. The following sections will present the sub-themes that have emerged regarding how they conceptualised culture and will discuss these findings in the context of relevant literature.



### 6.1.1.1. Macro and Micro cultures

One feature of culture the participants shared is that culture could be classified as ‘macro and micro’ as expressed by Malcolm, ‘small and big’, ‘personal level’, ‘family level’, ‘country level’ as expressed by Laura, and ‘formal and informal’ as expressed by Leo.

Malcolm referred to well-known concepts or terms in literature such as ‘*macro culture*’ and ‘*micro-culture*’ showing that he was aware of these concepts and that they can be attributed to particular organisations. As he stated,

I mean, because culture changes, right, you have like, **a macro culture**, and then you have **a micro culture**, so and then even a culture within a particular organisation (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

He also mentioned these technical terms when he discussed the impact of culture on learning, thus, showing how he viewed culture in terms of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’.

I mean, that culture is basically just **a way of thinking**. And that's something that is normal, culture does have a play, when it comes to learning or how you engage in a classroom or within a working place, the way you interact with people, culture does definitely impact that in a different way. So, it depends on if you're talking about **micro culture**, or **macro culture** (Malcolm, interview 2, 14/1/2021).

Laura viewed culture as including different levels, ranging from a small level to the country level.

And those [beliefs, value systems, costumes) can be **small**, they can be personal, they can be family, like at **the family level**, and then they can be **more global** at the like, at **the country level and everything in between** (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Leo clearly stated that he viewed culture from anthropological perspective.

[T]here's like, **formal culture** like music and art and stuff, but I tend to see it more as a **kind of anthropological thing** (Leo, interview 1, 20/02/2020).

The teachers’ recognition of the concepts of ‘macro’ and ‘micro-cultures’, ‘big and small’, ‘formal and informal’, ‘personal level’, ‘family level’, ‘country level’ demonstrates their

awareness of the different levels at which culture operates. These terms are commonly used in literature to describe the broader inter/national or regional culture (macro) and the more specific culture within smaller groups or organisations (micro) (Erez & Gati, 2004; Neuliep, 2018; Rings & Rasinger, 2023). These teachers' acknowledgement of these levels suggests a more than superficial understanding of cultural dynamics.

Furthermore, Leo's inclusion of 'formal culture', like music and art, correlates with the distinction between "big C culture" and "little C culture" discussed by Kramsch and Zhu Hua (2016). They describe "big C culture" as literature and the arts, and "little C culture" as daily behaviours and communication practices. Leo's reference to formal aspects aligns with "big C culture", while his focus on patterns in thoughts and behaviour corresponds with "little C culture".

#### **6.1.1.2. Culture as man-made and dynamic**

Participants also described culture as human made so it is changing and not static. Malcolm said that,

culture is definitely something that is **man-made**, and it's just based on a **particular set of rules that a group of people decided to stick with** or to kind of continue to do in a particular way (Malcolm, Interview 1, 27/2/2020).

Malcolm also described culture as something that 'changes' and which is 'malleable' because of its 'man-made' nature. Malcolm's view resonates with the idea that cultures adapt and transform in response to shifting circumstances. This view is stated by researchers such as Agudelo (2007), Martin and Nakayama (2010), Nakayama and Martin (2017) and Rings and Rasinger (2023) who consider culture to be not static but something which keeps changing. Malcolm stated,

So it kind of changes. So, it may be based on a certain set of rules, and then how they actually apply those. So, then from there, you can be able to culture as far as that, but it's definitely something that is malleable and is definitely manmade (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

#### **6.1.1.3. Culture as tangible and intangible**

Malcolm added the notion of '*ways of thinking*' to his perception of culture,

[S]o in some cases, it has nothing to do with language. It has nothing to do with the way you particularly ... like the type of dress you may wear or something like that. But it's really based on **rules of engagement when interacting with people**, I will say, a lot of that has to do heavily more on that particular culture, and **the ways of thinking** as far as how the interaction is being carried out (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

Malcolm's insight that culture is fundamentally about "ways of thinking" and "rules of engagement" reflects an understanding that culture encompasses not only visible elements like language or clothing but also deeply ingrained cognitive and behavioural patterns (Hall, 1976; Moore, 1996; Seelye, 1997). His emphasis on how culture impacts interactions aligns with the notion that culture influences communication styles, social norms, and interpersonal relationships (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Malcolm's perspectives on culture show a strong alignment with existing literature and theories. His recognition of culture as both a product of human decisions and a dynamic, malleable force reflects contemporary CIC studies (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Nakayama & Martin, 2017). Additionally, his understanding of the hierarchical nature of culture and its influence on behaviour and interactions demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of the complexities inherent in the concept of culture.

#### **6.1.1.4. Culture as complex and multifaceted**

Rose, Leo, and Laura acknowledged the complexity of culture. They all recognised that culture is multifaceted and cannot be easily defined in simple terms. This recognition aligns with various cultural studies scholars that highlight the intricate and layered nature of culture, as discussed by authors such as Hall (1976), Byram (2008), Kramsch and Zhu Hua (2016), and Neuliep (2018). **Rose** viewed culture as follows:

I view culture as it has so **many different aspects**, things that go into it, I mean, **religion, politics, race, it's just everything about your environment and about the society in which you live**, and how it shapes the people within it, and how they **act**, and how they **feel and believe** about things. I hope that was simple. I mean, but **it's very complex**. It is you talk about saying it in a simple way, **but it's such a complex thing** (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

Rose's view is more inclusive as she defines 'culture' as something that includes everything in the environment and society a person lives in and everything that shapes a person's personality whether feelings, behaviour, or beliefs. She also described it as something that is very complex although defining it can seem simple. In her view, it is clear that she included both tangible and abstract aspects of culture such as religion, race and politics. She considered the context that a person lives in is constituting the culture as she said: "*everything about your environment and about the society in which you live*".

Rose's assertion that culture shapes how people act, feel, and believe about things corresponds with the sociocultural perspective on culture. Cultural psychologists like Vygotsky emphasise how culture influences cognitive development, socialisation, and individual behaviours (Vygotsky, 1978). Rose's perspective underscores the profound impact of culture on human behaviour and identity. Rose's perspective shows that religion is included as a constituent element of culture. However, the way she described culture can denote the concept of religion as well. Many researchers such as Geertz (1973), Durkheim (1982), Brown and Lee (2015), Casewell (2022) and Siregar *et al.* (2023) describe religion as a way of life which matches how Brown and Lee (2015) define culture as "a way of life" (p.155). That is because it affects almost every aspect of people's life. This makes more sense when we consider that in Muslim dominant countries 'religion' and 'culture' are very much seen as one. In more secular countries, where religion has been relegated to the private domain, religion can easily be seen as only a part of 'culture'. This can explain why some individuals may use the terms "culture" and "religion" interchangeably. It highlights the potential for confusion because people from diverse backgrounds may have varying views of these terms. These differences in interpretation can stem from their prior knowledge, educational backgrounds, or the societal norms prevalent in their respective cultural or social contexts. Since this area is worth exploring, there will be more discussion on these two concepts: religion and culture.

#### **6.1.1.5. Culture as set of rules and beliefs that influence people's thinking and behaviour**

**Laura's, Sam's, and Leo's** views on culture revolve around a combination of beliefs, values, customs, and traditions that influence day-to-day life.

**Laura** viewed culture as

I think culture is **a combination of beliefs and value systems** and that can be **religious** or not. And then customs. And those can be **small**, they can be personal, they can be family,

like at **the family level**, and then they can be **more global** at the like, at **the country level and everything in between** (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

But I think it's the culture **is what happens when your beliefs and your values and your traditions influence your day to day** (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

**Sam** defined it as,

the behaviour and attitudes have a certain environment. So whether it be a country or a family or anything is the behaviour and **the ideas that drive that behaviour**, and those attitudes in an institution of CPS or a family, the culture of a family or anything, **it's the ideas and the behaviour is dictated from that** (Sam, interview 2, 18/01/2021).

**Sam's and Leo's** view of culture aligns with common sociological and anthropological perspectives on culture, which emphasise the role of shared beliefs, customs, and behaviours within a group or society (Hall, 1976). It suggests that culture is a dynamic force that moulds and is moulded by the individuals and groups that make up a particular social context.

**Leo** defined culture as follows:

I see culture as the **shared kind of patterns and traits in our thoughts and behaviour, which unite people who have a similar background**, often like, including patterns of how we interact, how we think, how we interpret things. On top of that, there's like, **formal culture** like music and art and stuff, but I tend to see it more as a **kind of anthropological thing** (Leo, interview 1, 20/02/2020).

For **Laura, Leo, and Sam**, culture is shaped by common experiences, values, and perspectives that are shared by people who share similar backgrounds. By emphasising the role of behaviour and thinking, they recognise that culture influences various aspects of individuals' lives and can shape their perceptions and interactions. Their views on culture aligns with the perspectives of various authors discussed in the literature (Hall, 1976; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Byram, 2008; Neuliep, 2018). For instance, Byram's (2008) and Neuliep's (2018) description of culture as an accumulation of values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a specific group with a common history resonates with their notion of shared patterns and traits. Neuliep (2018) emphasises that culture is rooted in historical experiences and it influences how individuals think and interact.

Similarly, Laura's and Leo's emphasis on shared background and commonalities among people finds a parallel in the concept of micro-cultural groups discussed by Neuliep (2018), where smaller subsets within a larger culture possess distinct characteristics based on language, ethnicity, or other factors.

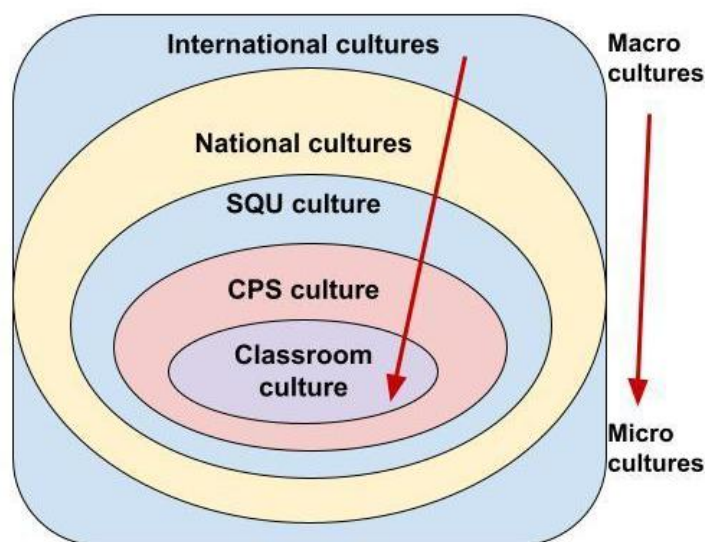
The participants' holistic view of culture aligns with Rings and Rasinger's (2023) stance, which presents culture as a learned system encompassing values, beliefs, and norms expressed through behaviours, rituals, artefacts, and institutions. The participants' views also align with CIC scholars such as Agudelo (2007), Nakayama and Martin (2017) and Rings and Rasinger (2023) who emphasise the dynamic, evolving nature of culture through interactions and negotiations in contrast to the traditional static outlook.

In conclusion, while the teachers shared some common ground in their understanding of culture, they also brought their unique experiences and perspectives to the table. There are recurring themes in the viewpoints of Rose, Laura, Leo, Sam, and Malcolm concerning the complexity of culture, its influence on behaviour, its dynamic character, and the significance of shared values and beliefs. They did, however, focus on different levels of culture, such as how inclusive culture is, whether they stress tangible or intangible aspects and how well they aligned with critical views towards culture. All these views align with existing literature and highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of culture. They also show that individuals may define culture differently based on individual backgrounds, educational influences, and societal norms. These variations highlight the subjectivity and complexity of the concept of culture and underscore the importance of considering multiple perspectives when examining cultural phenomena. This conclusion also aligns with the CIC perspective (Nakayama & Martin, 2017) on how culture is conceptualised as a struggle, non-regional, and dynamic. The critical analysis of these definitions highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of culture that takes into account its multifaceted and evolving nature, as discussed by Nakayama and Martin (2017) and Rings and Rasinger (2023).

Exploring their perspectives on the concept of culture, has paved the way to discuss the following section which is the cultural context at the CPS and SQU.

### **6.1.2. Macro and Micro influence on the cultural context at SQU and the CPS**

As this study takes place at the CPS at SQU, understanding both of these settings is vital according to CIC principles. The purpose is to understand what constructed or shaped these cultures and subcultures and how they in turn affected teachers' intercultural communication perspectives and teaching practices. I have referred in this study to SQU culture and, at other times, I have referred to CPS culture as separate entities which exist in one educational institution. SQU culture is the broader (macro) culture of the university while CPS culture is the relatively 'micro' culture to some extent and the classroom culture is the micro culture which is enfolded by both the university (SQU) and the CPS culture (see Figure 10). The CPS culture may have some specificities that, in the discussion, does not involve the whole university (SQU) cultural context. Discussing the cultural context at the CPS is looking at what constitutes this cultural context as perceived by these participants. It included both the 'guidelines' that the CPS expected teachers to abide by and the assumptions and perceptions that these teachers had and made about this cultural context. Therefore, the participants were asked about the sort of culture that existed at the CPS to explore how they viewed it and later how that shaped their intercultural communication, interaction, and teaching in this institution.



**Figure 10: Macro and Micro cultures within the institution**

This question was raised since this institution had more than thirty nationalities, and although Omani staff constituted the largest nationality group, they were not the numerical majority, with about 240 staff in total. Another question raised was 'how do other cultures influence/shape the institutional culture?'

**Sam, Rose and Malcolm** perceived the cultural context at the CPS as a work environment which was affected by the surrounding Omani culture (national culture, micro culture), yet they also noted that CPS staff come from all over the world (international cultures, macro cultures) and therefore create a work culture that makes it interesting and positive to work in because of its diversity. As Sam described it,

I find that [CPS] a very positive place to work. I think that's driven by the Omanis and the international staff. Well, the international staff bring their own kind of things to the table. And I think that Omanis also bring other things to the table, because most of you, if I'm not mistaken, you've all studied abroad. So, you've all been to different countries and you've all brought different little things. So, you have quite Western ideas as well in a lot of respects, so that we, but we also have people from Asia, people from Eastern Europe and they all bring this to their ideas and their pedagogical methodologies to the table. And we have to build one place. It's where one place that we all work (Sam, interview 2, 18/01/2021).

It has a lot of much more international foreign flavour to it (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

Within this work environment (CPS), there is a multiculturalism which sits within a broader Omani culture and Rose's words suggest that these two cultural settings interact.

Obviously, culture has a much bigger impact here, because you have so many different cultures working together, as opposed to if you worked in a place that was mostly one nationality (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

**Laura** stated that every institution has its own culture,

Anywhere you go, any organisation that you're a part of is going to have its own culture, it's going to have its own expectations (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

It can be concluded that all participants viewed the CPS had a unique and distinctive culture that has important implications for both teaching and learning. It means that the CPS cannot be treated as interchangeable entities, but rather must be understood and approached on their own terms. It



also means that teachers must be sensitive to the particular cultural context of the CPS in which they work, and work collaboratively with the broader CPS community to create a positive and effective learning environment. By recognising the traditions and values that are central to a CPS's culture, individuals can work to maintain those that are positive while also identifying and addressing areas that may need improvement. This finding mirrors the notion that organisational culture, shaped by both external and internal forces, defines how work is conducted and how individuals interact (Schein, 2017). Therefore, the CPS embodies a complex interaction of national and international cultural influences, creating a work environment where diverse cultural perspectives are integrated into the educational process, offering both opportunities and challenges for staff.

#### **6.1.2.1. Omani culture's influence on the university guidelines**

When participants were asked if the Omani culture had any influence on guidelines at the workplace (CPS), Sam and Rose reflected that there was a kind of Omani way in how such guidelines should be understood and they implied that guidelines were not clearly dictated or directly imposed on staff.

Rose and Sam mentioned that the CPS had an expectation that its teachers should have cultural awareness and conduct themselves in line with it. They believed that the CPS reflected the Omani policy, which doesn't enforce strict rules on its staff. This was in contrast to other countries they were familiar with, where guidelines were considerably stricter. As they reported,

Yeah, saying that and plus, there was also the sense of, we know that if we don't tell you this, you're going to be bad, you're going to misbehave, and you're not going to behave accordingly. Therefore, that's why we are telling you to do this and not do that. But here [at the CPS, SQU] there's just this sense of we're going to assume that you will do right by us in our cultural context. And I mean this about Omanis. Until heaven forbid, you show us that we do have to make these strict guidelines (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

Oman does things in a very clever way. It's not 'oh oh oh' [he made this sound]. You learn with the behaviour and I think that's a very clever thing. You learn very quickly, that's not the norm, it's not imposed on you (Sam, interview 2, 18/01/2021).

Laura believed that the culture at the CPS has British (Macro, international) influence along with Omani (national, micro) culture influence. As she reported,

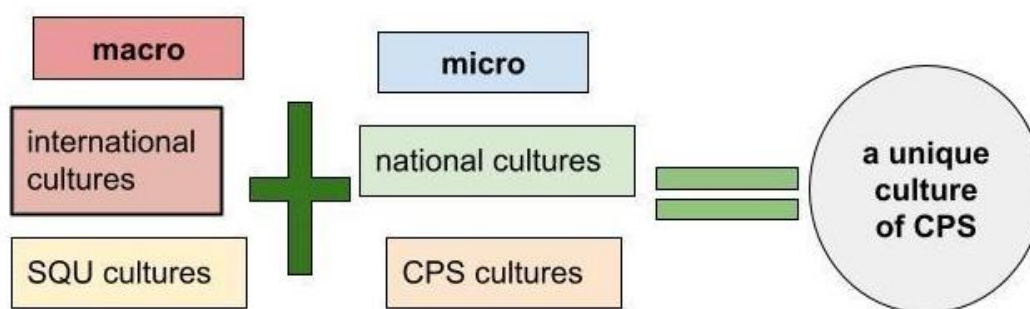
I think it's both. I think it's Omani and British. Because the British got here first [she meant historically, the British came to Oman before the Americans, so they influenced the system], and they made all the decisions about how things are going to be. Um, no. I mean, I think that there is, there's the Omani influence of like work life balance, and respecting family time and personal time and flexibility with (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Leo's keen attention to institutional policies highlighted the influence of a global corporate culture on the institution. As he stated,

They're kind of like a corporate culture, global corporate culture (Leo, interview 1, 20/2/2020).

He noted that the language and tone of these guidelines reflect a broader corporate perspective rather than being specifically rooted in Omani cultural nuances. This reflects the influence of international culture on the institutional culture (SQU and CPS). See Figure 10 above (Macro and Micro cultures within the institution) which illustrates the influence of macro cultures (international and national cultures) on micro cultures (SQU and CPS cultures). This observation is in harmony with the notion that institutions often adopt standardised policies that align with broader organisational values while potentially downplaying the local cultural context (Halualani, 2022; Martin & Nakayama, 2019). This finding also confirms the CIC principles to explore macro contexts and power dynamics that influence micro contexts.

Based on the preceding discussion, participants reported that the CPS has cultivated a unique culture. This distinctive culture is a result of a fusion of international, national, and local influences stemming from teachers' diverse experiences and backgrounds, combined with both international and national cultures and policies (of both SQU and CPS). The following diagram illustrates this conclusion.



**Figure 11: A unique culture is formed by a combination of other cultures that exist in the CPS**

This unique culture of the CPS that has been formed by several different combinations of other factors can be considered a ‘third space’ or a ‘third culture’ as termed by Bhabha (1994). He argues that interactions of different cultures would form a new distinctive culture (third culture) which is not purely rooted in one tradition or another.

SQU and the CPS cultures are unique and have their own particular cultures. That makes it well worth considering while teaching in there. This conclusion also gives significance to this current study as it aims to explore how this culture affected expatriate teachers and, reciprocally, how they engaged with it. The following section explores some aspects of this cultural context which can be manifested in its guidelines and other factors that contribute to constitute the institutional culture of SQU and CPS culture.

### **6.1.3. University cultural guidelines**

Having guidelines in any context results in a particular perception towards them and results in certain behaviours. Considering these contexts, cultural or religious, requires an awareness of the cultural and religious guidelines pertaining to this particular culture. These guidelines would form a distinct culture, identifiable by the unique aspects that set it apart from others. As discussed in the literature, policies are a critical component of any institution, serving not only to differentiate one institution from another but also to influence teachers’ practices within the organisation (Holliday, 1994; Miller, *et al*; 2013; Shah *et al*., 2013; Puzio *et al*., 2017). Designating a subtheme, therefore, enables a thorough examination of its influence on the institution's culture. Additionally, it was crucial to investigate how expatriate teachers perceived and interacted with the institutional

socio-cultural guidelines and values as well as how these aspects shaped their perspectives and teaching practices.

The data from the study demonstrates that these guidelines are pivotal in shaping the institution's culture. Consequently, the following subthemes will investigate their influence, importance in the institutional culture, and teachers' perceptions and practices, illustrated with specific examples.

#### **6.1.3.1. Unofficial guidelines and expectations**

When these EFL teachers were asked if they were aware of any cultural and religious guidelines set by SQU or CPS, that guidelines should abide by, their responses were rather vague. Some of them could not remember if there were any written guidelines, while others stated that there were none. In general, they reported that they were not official and there were not any in the working contract. However, they reported that teachers were expected to be aware of these cultural norms, whether through their knowledge of Omani culture, familiarity with SQU guidelines, or actual advice from experienced colleagues at the centre (CPS). This is particularly important for new teachers who may be unfamiliar with these norms due to their recent arrival in Oman.

When Malcolm was asked about whether the CPS socio-cultural guidelines affected his teaching in any way, he said that the CPS had its own culture with its own regulations and he had to abide by them in the same way that any person who worked in a company had to adapt to its rules. He described himself as being able to adapt to different scenarios.

Um, it doesn't, I don't see it as affecting my teaching negatively. I mean, it's just more about this, this is the environment, this is the scenario. So we have to teach within that. And that's pretty much it. That's how I see it because I do have a consulting background as well. So even when I go to different companies and different companies have different cultures, so you also have to adapt to that, so I'm used to adapting to different scenarios (Malcolm, interview 2, 14/1/2021).

Malcolm mentioned that he could not recall hearing any specific guidelines from SQU since he started teaching in Oman. He emphasised that the leads instructed new teachers not to discuss sensitive topics like religion and politics in the classroom. Malcolm followed the curriculum closely and only deviated from it when sharing his workplace experiences. This suggests that while

there might not be explicit written policies, there were informal expectations regarding classroom discussions.

I cannot recall hearing SQU [guidelines] specifically from the very beginning when I started teaching here, in Oman. It's coming from the leads don't discuss too much religion and politics in the classroom and that's why I said, whatever is in the curriculum, I go, I deliver what's in a curriculum and I don't deviate too much from that, unless I want to discuss something about from my experience of like working in the workplace (Malcolm, interview 2, 14/1/2021).

I don't think that there is anything official when I talk about guidelines, I mean, all-encompassing ones, which deal with prayer time, the way you dress, these kinds of things. I don't think that there's anything official (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

The following quote shows how Malcolm could not recall where he read or saw the suggested socio-cultural guidelines.

Yeah, I believe I saw that somewhere. I cannot really tell you exactly. It was something that was given out. I do remember reading that somewhere. That was early on, like, the first weeks maybe the one by the induction committee or something (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

They all agree there were no official guidelines. Both Malcolm and Rose emphasised that there were no official guidelines shared with new teachers except the ones shared by the Induction Committee which could be seen as unofficial. If some teachers missed the induction week for whatever reason they might not be able to get such tips elsewhere. This had happened to Leo who started work a few weeks later and missed the induction sessions.

On the other hand, Rose and Laura mentioned that although they could not remember if the guidelines mentioned the specific topics they should avoid, there was a mention of considering certain aspects, even if they were not officially designated.

Well, I can't remember if this was mentioned but as regarding policies, I know, I was talking about it, because we have our guidelines that we put together in the induction committee, the guidebook, and it's not official too (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

I never saw anything explicitly written down. There were some suggestions like here's what oh, Omani culture is like, here's some ways that you might, like, here's some things to think about, here are some suggestions, but I never saw it. It might have been something just that the induction committee sent. I don't remember, honestly. [...] it was more like, these are some suggestions, these are some, like, observations that we've got free to share with you take them or leave them as you will. I don't remember seeing any sort of, like actual policy documents regarding this (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Laura reported that she knew about some of socio-cultural considerations by asking Omanis:

Some of it I just learned from like, talking with people and asking my Omani friends. Obviously, my first year, I didn't know people super well. But like, once I got to know some Omanis. I'm like, What about this? And they're like, oh, and gave me some tips and suggestions (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Leo noted that there were unofficial rules that govern their behaviour in the classroom. He also mentioned the '**unwritten guidelines**' and cultural norms that influence teaching decisions and interactions with students in and outside the classrooms. As he explained it,

Similarly, the unwritten but tacitly accepted guidelines on what is and isn't appropriate in this culture also shape how we teach in the classroom (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

I haven't seen it written down. But it's been suggested that we've been told about the attitude or the policy, but I'm not sure if it's ever a written policy (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

The reference to tacitly accepted guidelines unveils hidden cultural norms affecting behaviour in education. Critical intercultural communication (Martin & Nakayama, 2019) advocates delving into these underlying forces to prevent the reinforcing of stereotypes or biases. The participants' recognition of such guidelines within the CPS culture highlights the importance of context-specific norms and values. In intercultural communication, vigilance toward unspoken guidelines shaping

interactions is essential because such rules profoundly affect the outcomes of intercultural exchanges (Zen *et al.*, 2010). It also highlights the power of the implicit culture that influence or shape the explicit (outward) practices.

Moreover, participants' sensitivity towards cultural differences is evident in their approach to classroom activities. For example, the participants recognised the need to avoid certain activities that might be considered inappropriate or uncomfortable in the Omani context, such as having boys and girls sit next to each other in a circle. Leo discussed the issue of gender segregation in the classroom. He mentioned a case where a teacher lost their job (not at SQU) for imposing a seating arrangement that alternated between male and female students. This anecdote highlights the importance of considering socio-cultural norms of their students and institutional expectations regarding gender interactions in the classroom. As Leo recalled,

I think the biggest consideration is gender. I heard about a teacher in a college [in Oman, not at SQU] who lost their job for seating male and female students in a circle. It was considered an obligation to respect in-class semi-segregation. Teachers must consider what the students are comfortable with and what is perceived as appropriate by the management (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Furthermore, Leo's reference to the management's expectations reinforces the idea that teachers must navigate a complex interplay between classroom practices and institutional guidelines. This aligns with the literature's recognition of the importance of institutional, socio-political, and socio-cultural contexts as factors influencing teaching strategies and intercultural communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This demonstrates teachers' respect for cultural boundaries and their commitment to creating a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students which aligns with the CRP (Gay, 2018) as well as preserving their employment and protecting their career.

The participants' comments shed light on the implicit guidelines and unwritten rules regarding what can and cannot be discussed in the classroom, particularly in the context of teaching in Oman. While there might not be explicit, formal policies regarding these matters, it is evident that there are shared understandings and cultural norms that guide teachers' behaviour. Their perspectives on this particular institutional culture highlight an important aspect of teaching in a foreign and culturally different environment. It appears that their institution provided more suggestions and

guidelines rather than explicit, written policies on classroom content. This approach reflects the adaptability and cultural responsiveness required of teachers in diverse settings.

However, the absence of formal, written policies can pose challenges for teachers, especially newcomers, who may not be aware of these unwritten and implicit guidelines. The participants pointed out that some information might be shared by the Induction Committee or through various documents, but it could be scattered and not explicit. Teachers were expected to educate themselves by seeking information from colleagues, Omani friends, and by engaging in conversations to better understand the local culture and expectations.

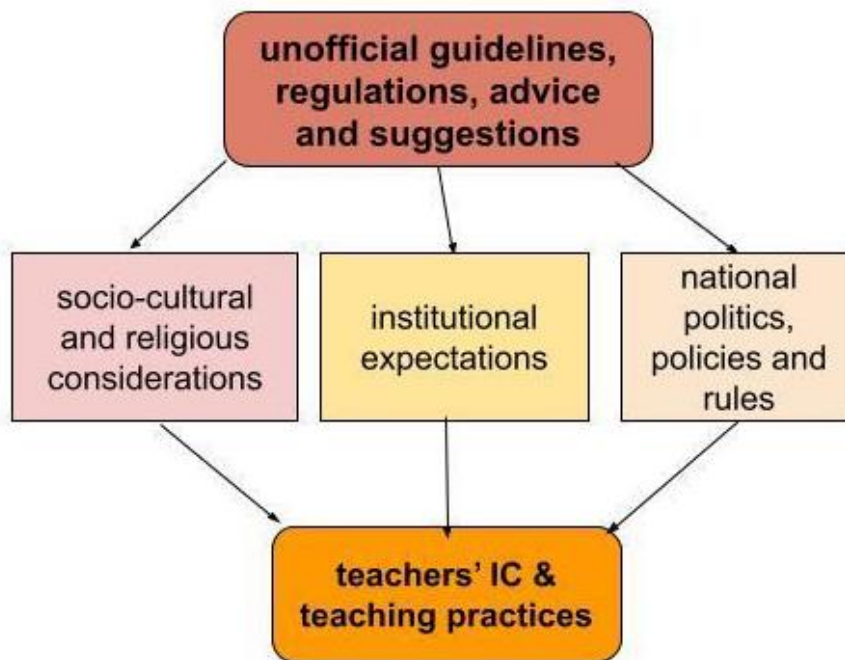
The recognition of unwritten guidelines and cultural norms as influential factors in shaping teaching decisions and interactions echoes the works of scholars who have investigated the intricate relationship between pedagogy and socio-cultural contexts such as (Byram, 2008; Holliday, 1997; McKay, 2003). These unspoken rules are reflective of the broader educational and societal milieu, influencing both the formal and informal aspects of classroom dynamics within the institution (Brown & Lee, 2015; Rind & Kadiwal, 2016).

The teachers' responses demonstrate their understanding of the importance of context in shaping interactions and teaching practices in a diverse cultural setting. This also aligns with the principles of the contextual approach to intercultural communication (CAIC) (Neuliep, 2018) which emphasises the importance of various contexts (macro and micro) in intercultural communication.

The convergence of formal pedagogical guidelines with these unwritten norms resonates with the observations made by Allwright (2003), who argues that teaching practices are not solely determined by official curricular guidelines but are deeply embedded in local cultures and practices. This interplay between the prescribed and the implicit guides educators in crafting teaching approaches that are contextually relevant and conducive to effective learning as dictated by the CRP principles (Gay, 2018).

Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that the intercultural interactions and practices of teachers at SQU are influenced by the various rules, policies, and guidelines whether they are implicit or explicit. These regulations take diverse forms, encompassing sociocultural and religious considerations, institutional policies and expectations, as well as political rules and policies. The following figure illustrates the categories of rules and regulations that impact teachers' practices and intercultural interactions in Oman.





**Figure 12: Categories of rules, regulations and guidelines that affect teachers' IC and teaching practices**

#### **6.1.4. Religio-cultural influence on the institutional culture**

Being informed by the CIC, exploring what the contextual factors that influence teachers' IC in the teaching environment was essential. Therefore, this sub-theme explores the influence of religion on the university's (institutional) culture and its effects on teachers' teaching practices. Since religion in Oman is a significant aspect of the institutional culture, designating a separate sub-theme allows for a comprehensive examination of how religious and cultural values intersect within the institution.

This sub-theme holds significant importance as participants often conflated culture and religion. They occasionally used the terms "religion" and "culture" interchangeably, leading to potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations. These concepts can be difficult to distinguish as they interplay and are intertwined in many aspects of people's lives. This issue has been addressed in the Literature Review when delineating the concept of culture. In certain regions and societies, religion plays a governing role in people's social and cultural lives, influencing their actions and decisions (Geertz, 1973; Al-Harthi & Al-Harthi, 2013; Mowlana, 2014). For this reason, the participants in this study were investigated which is analysed and discussed in the following section.

#### **6.1.4.1. Distinguishing between religion and culture**

During the interviews, teacher participants were asked about their ability to differentiate between what Hall (1976) refers to as the overt, visible aspects, or the "tip of the iceberg" (Ting-Toomey, 1999), representing culture or religion. This inquiry was prompted by the need to distinguish between the political, religious, cultural, and social dimensions, which can facilitate enhanced intercultural communication skills within the host context. When asked if they could distinguish religious practices from cultural practices of students, the teachers acknowledged that it could be challenging for expatriate teachers to distinguish between cultural practices from religious practices. Rose admitted that they could often overlap and be confused. She also stated that there were times when you could separate them whilst at others you could not. Rose gave examples of how she perceived certain cultural aspects in Oman, such as the helpfulness and friendliness of Omani people, which she attributed to culture rather than religion.

I feel that there are times when you can separate them and there are times when they cannot be separated (Rose, interview 2, 4/03/2020).

They overlap, they overlap a lot. ... When we talk about Omani people and how helpful and friendly, they are, to me, it's about a different culture. It's not about religion, but it's still a part of the culture and who Omani people are, the things that they value about themselves and about their communities (Rose, interview 2, 4/03/2020).

Leo described it as a blurred area that is difficult to distinguish between them,

There's definitely a blur between the two. I consider that an area where it's blurred (Leo, interview 1, 20/2/2020).

Malcolm drew a comparison between American Muslim culture that he belonged to and Omani Muslim culture. Although he shared the religion, Islam, with most Omanis, culture played a role in some social practices. He gave examples of cultural differences on 'handshaking' and 'interaction between genders. He also mentioned that the American context was different in terms of 'freedom of speech' when it comes to politics. He ended by saying these two contexts (America and Oman) were different.

So like, when it comes to gender, specifically, like they are not too rigid on some Southern American Muslims [Southern states of America]. And there's a lot more interaction, there's a lot more dialogue. I mean, even this thing of shaking hands and stuff, like that is not an issue. Because that's about as much that you can go to, as far as the shaking hands, and sharing ideas, expressing politics or religion is not in specifically, like different *madhhabs* [Islamic schools of thoughts] and these separate things. So, that can openly be discussed and talked about everything. So it's just, it's different. It's a little bit different (Malcolm, interview 2, 14/1/2021).

Malcolm's observation of the flexibility among Muslims in the southern states of the USA (not the people from South America) indicates an adaptability of Islamic practices within diverse cultural contexts (Abu-Rabi, 1995).

Leo highlighted the importance of diverse perspectives in understanding cultural and religious practices. His observations were based on his experiences in an 'Introduction to Islam' and 'Middle Eastern studies' course at university in the UK, where the concept of gender in Islam was examined and how interpretations of the scripture and cultural influences shape practices like dressing modestly. Therefore, Malcolm's and Leo's perspectives highlight the nuanced relationship between religion and culture. This challenge is further supported by the works of Gudykunst and Kim (2003) and Abu-Lughod (2013) who emphasise the interplay between cultural, social, and religious factors in intercultural interactions. Their perspective also aligns with the findings of Abu-Lughod (2002), who explores how cultural norms and religious interpretations intersect and shape individuals' lives. Abu-Lughod (2013) also discusses how interpretations of Islamic practices can vary and are influenced by cultural contexts. This explains that although Islamic practices are different from cultural entities, cultural practices can influence what can be seen as Islamic practices. All of these reciprocal interactions between religion and culture can cause confusion among people whether they are outsiders (expatriates) or even insiders (nationals). This is another aspect of the complexity of studying IC that makes it difficult to understand if it is merely studied from one perspective such as macro or micro level (Jiang, 2004). Acknowledging the heterogeneity within the Muslim community and understanding the local cultural context can contribute to more successful intercultural communication in the host country.

#### **6.1.4.2. Role of religion and culture as a power dynamic in Oman**

The influence of religion and culture on daily life in Oman has been widely recognised (Al-Harthi & Al-Harthi, 2013). These elements were mentioned as influential factors that shape societal norms, values, and interpersonal interactions, making them integral to understanding Omani society. Within this context, participants acknowledged the necessity for expatriate teachers to familiarise themselves with Islamic principles and Omani cultural norms to foster mutual understanding and professional effectiveness.

Rose and Malcolm emphasised that teaching in a Muslim country requires awareness of the religious and cultural fabric of society in the host country. Rose, despite her long tenure in Oman, admitted that she was still learning about Islam and its role in shaping societal behaviours.

Yes, obviously, you have to know that this is a Muslim country... I do think that not everyone has much understanding of what Islam is. Even I mean, I've been here a long time and I'm still learning little things here and there. And so I do believe that it's a prerequisite they have to know something about their culture, their religion, specifically (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

This shows how she looked at Islam as a system that affected people's community and how they lived.

Malcolm, a Muslim himself, believed that Oman should take a more proactive role in educating expatriates about Islam and local culture. He observed that many expatriates, even after years in the country, remained unaware of fundamental cultural and religious practices, which could lead to misunderstandings in the workplace.

Generally speaking, for someone who is not a Muslim, they should be a little bit more familiar with Islam... I think that one of the things Oman needs is a better effort in educating people on the basics of culture and Islam—not to convert them, but so they understand (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

Laura offered valuable insights into the interplay between culture and religion in Oman. She pointed out that Omani culture is significantly centred around religion, primarily Islam, which has a substantial impact on daily life (Al-Harthi & Al-Harthi, 2013). As she stated,

The culture is very, very centred around religion, whether people are very devout, or not, they're still culturally Muslim, and so I knew coming in that would have a big impact on day to day life. I knew I wouldn't have to change a whole lot of myself, but just that I would need to be observant and respectful (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

She also suggested that the practice of Islam in Oman was distinct from other regions in the Middle East, emphasising the role of culture in shaping religious practices (Abu Lughod, 2013).

One of Laura's significant observations was the personal flexibility that Omanis had in choosing the extent to which they observed their faith. She noted that while some Omanis were devout in their religious practices, others might identify as Muslims but allowed a less overt influence of religion on their daily lives. This observation underscores the cultural and individual variations in the relationship between religion and culture in Oman. She thought that Omanis had more personal choices:

I was surprised to find that while many people are deeply devout, there are also those for whom religion is more of a cultural identity rather than a daily practice (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Regarding religion, the discussion highlights the centrality of religious beliefs and practices in Omani society. For expatriate ELT teachers, it is vital to respect and accommodate these beliefs while delivering language instruction. Being sensitive to students' religious practices and incorporating relevant cultural elements into the classroom can foster a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment (Gay, 2018). This point is further discussed when discussing teachers' teaching practices in the following chapter.

Rose's reflections underscore the intricate interplay between religion and culture. She highlighted that while religion, in this case, Islam, can influence the values and behaviours of a society, it is not the sole determinant of cultural differences. This perspective aligns with scholarly discussions that emphasise the multifaceted nature of culture, shaped by various factors, including historical, economic, and social contexts (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Smith, 2004). Rose's questioning of what makes Omanis different from Emiratis, despite their shared religious background, prompts a critical examination of the role of culture in shaping the behaviours and values of individuals within a religious context.

The role of Islam in Omani institutions is not limited to personal beliefs but extends to broader societal structures, including governance and education (Al-Hamadi et al., 2007; Hassan et al., 2022). The influence of religion in the academic setting means that teachers must recognise and respect religious practices while ensuring culturally responsive pedagogy.

What this study aims to address is not only to find definitive answers regarding the observations of how Omanis differ from others, but also to emphasise that adopting a critical perspective when exploring this cultural issue is essential for viewing it from various angles and expanding one's understanding of the topic. This conclusion confirms the decision to use the CIC perspective as an effective and suitable analytical approach for studying this subject.

#### **6.1.4.3. Intersection between institutional regulations and religious practices**

The participants observed that the presence and influence of religion in Oman on the educational institutional culture is significant. The university aims to encourage behaviours that align with the country's religious teachings (Islam). Leo's insight into the influence of religion on the university culture at SQU is aligned with the concept of institutional values and the role of religion in shaping organisational norms (Kabir, 2011). Leo stated it as follows:

Well, we have a Charter about the aims of SQU and to develop ethical moral citizens of a country that's placed somewhere in the CPS, that ethics which here is tied to religious, ethical principles, are supposed to be something that's encouraged by the university (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

The reference to the university's Charter aligns with the work of Schein (2017), who emphasises that an institution's core values and beliefs shape its culture. In this case, the aim of developing ethical and moral citizens reflects the institution's commitment to aligning its culture with religious principles. This concurs with the idea of values-driven organisations, where religious and ethical values guide decision-making and behaviour (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). It is an expected policy within a Muslim country. It shows how the overall state religion of the country (Islam) is influencing the core values of this university. Scholars such as Deal and Kennedy (2000) and Schein (2017) argue that organisations develop specific norms and values that align with their core beliefs, and certain behaviours that contradict these values are discouraged. Leo's observation supports the notion that organisational culture is shaped by accepted shared values and that behaviours inconsistent with those values are typically discouraged.

This influence of religion on the institutional culture and system is exemplified by Leo and Sam, who pointed out that the university's policies (SQU) allocated times for prayers between classes during the day. This demonstrates a clear intersection between institutional regulations and religious practices. As expatriate teachers, it is incumbent to recognise and respect this intersection, as it plays a pivotal role in maintaining harmony and cultural sensitivity in the educational environment. In Leo's own words,

Religion plays a significant role in daily life here. Understanding SQU policies, such as allowing students to leave and pray, is crucial. As a foreign teacher, it's important to abide by these policies (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Recognising the influence of religion on Oman's educational system, particularly in structuring daily schedules, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) ensures that its academic activities align with cultural and religious practices. As part of this commitment, the university integrates prayer times into lecture schedules, allowing students and educators to fulfil their religious obligations without academic conflicts. This accommodation reflects SQU's dedication to fostering an inclusive and culturally sensitive environment. More broadly, it exemplifies principles of cultural inclusivity in communication, as discussed by scholars such as Martin and Nakayama (2019).

The above discussion on the influence of religion of the country on university (institution) culture, and consequently, on teachers' practices can be summarised in the following diagram:



**Figure 13: Influence of religion on institution (university) culture and teachers' teaching practices**

### **6.1.5. Examples of unofficial socio-cultural considerations**

When teachers were queried about the cultural norms they should be mindful of, they noted that a significant number of these guidelines were informally communicated and existed as unwritten rules. Unwritten rules often carry significant cultural and contextual implications. Therefore, dedicating this sub-theme allows for a detailed examination of these subtle but impactful aspects of institutional culture on teachers' perspectives and practices. The following sections discuss some of these socio-cultural regulations that emerged from the data.

#### **6.1.5.1. Prayer times and lecture times**

Some teachers, such as Sam, Leo, Laura, and Rose mentioned prayer times coinciding with class hours, revealing that the institution has unclear regulations pertaining to prayer times. While the specific policy regarding prayer attendance is not documented, it is communicated to teachers and staff through suggestions and informal discussions. The practice of students being expected to



arrange their prayers before or after class and not being absent or late due to prayer time seems to be ingrained in the institutional culture. This concurs with the concept of "organisational culture" (Schein, 2017) where certain practices are upheld even without explicit documentation.

The table below serves as a template for potential class timings for a teacher at the CPS (taken from the class observation field notes). The academic workweek commences on Sunday and concludes on Thursday. Classes are typically scheduled from 8:00 am to 5:40 pm. SQU staff and students usually have breaks for both lunch and prayers, which generally occur between 12:00 and 3:30 pm throughout most of the year, accounting for the variation in prayer times between winter and summer. Importantly, students and teachers are not assigned back-to-back classes, allowing them to have breaks if they have two lectures or classes in a day. This arrangement enables them to enjoy their lunch and perform their prayers during the other time slot. Specifically, prayer times are allocated between 12:00 and 3:40 pm for the Dhuhr (midday) prayer, and between 3:40 and 5:30 pm for the Asr (late afternoon) prayer. Consequently, in the worst-case scenario, if an individual has back-to-back classes scheduled from 12:00 to 1:40 pm and from 2:00 to 3:40 pm, they still have 20 minutes before the subsequent time slot in which they can perform their prayer. Moreover, prayer rooms are conveniently accessible in all university buildings as well as there being the university mosque which is approximately at the centre of the university campus and easily reached in a few minutes.

**Table 7: A sample of the teaching timetable (Class observation field notes)**

<b>Times/Days</b>	<b>Sunday</b>	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>
<b>8:00-9:50</b>	Listening & Speaking	Listening & Speaking		Programme meeting	Writing
<b>10:00-11:40</b>	Office hours	Office hours	Office hours	Office hours	Reading
<b>12:00-13:40</b>	Writing	Lunch and prayer	Writing	Lunch and prayer	Lunch and prayer
<b>14:00- 15:40</b>	Lunch & prayer	Reading	Lunch and prayer	Listening & Speaking	Professional development
<b>16:00-17:40</b>			Reading		

Although most of the CPS teachers are not Muslims and may not know much about prayer times, Leo (a Christian) explained this shared knowledge about prayer times as follows:

It has been told to me that they [students] can't be absent or late as a result of prayer time, so they should postpone the prayer to the end of class or pray early before the class. Every now and then, teachers will ask about it because there'll be a student who asks permission to go and pray or uses it as an excuse. It gets referred to for those reasons (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

The institution's handling of prayer time exemplifies the interaction between formal policies, cultural norms and the official religion of the country (Islam). Though lacking explicit documentation, Leo's account highlights that this set of regulations is received from informal communication. This practice showcases the institution's intercultural sensitivity by accommodating a specific religious need while upholding a diverse academic environment.

This also illustrates the potency of unwritten rules and socio-religious norms in shaping day-to-day practices and expectations, even without formal policies. The institutional culture tied to prayer time mirrors the institution's values, influencing students' and staff's routines. These rules can be classified as invisible or covert as Hall (1976) and Ting-Toomey, (1999) describe. Leo's insights offer a nuanced view of how informal guidelines and implicit cultural norms intersect within the institution's culture, emphasising the delicate balance between educational goals and cultural awareness.

Leo's description of teachers' inquiries about prayer-related matters "*Every now and then, teachers will ask about it*" indicates a need for clarification and understanding of the unwritten rules. This illustrates the dynamic nature of intercultural interactions, where individuals seek to navigate the cultural nuances that influence institutional and individual practices. Leo's account echoes the notion of "cultural adaptation" wherein individuals modify their behaviours and expectations to align with the cultural context they are in (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002).

According to Rose, the religious issues that students might bring to the class and which may disturb her was when students came to the class late and excused that was because they were praying before they came to the class. However, she did not consider it as a big disruption.

It does a little bit because it got late, and not everybody comes late. So if it were all of them doing it, but it's not. And so, it can be slightly disruptive, but it's just a minor. It's not a big deal. I mean, I don't find it a big deal (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

I've had situations where I'm teaching back-to-back courses in the afternoon in that afternoon time, where I've had students, who came to class a bit late. And it's because they were praying and allowing that, respecting that (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

For the prayer times, Laura would expect her students to adapt themselves to the university system (regulations and expectations).

They're trying to fit into the classroom culture, they're trying to fit into the university culture, they don't have the flexibility. They know, it's expected. If they're in class, they're in class. And until a class is over, like, go pray before or after class and that's the expectation, whereas outside of the university setting, there might be other different expectations. So, the way that they observe things privately and personally, are probably different than the way that they can, then they're able to observe things in the university setting (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Laura recognised that students may come from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. She acknowledged the importance of striking a balance between their religious practices and the expectations within the classroom culture, which might differ from their personal practices outside of the university.

Therefore, the religious life in the university is present and EFL teachers may notice it on a daily basis while teaching and communicating with their students. These students usually bring it to the classroom as it is part of their daily practices such the five daily prayers, some of which are timed during and between classes. In the classroom, the call for prayer from the mosque can be heard from inside the classroom and lesson times are set up to allow time for prayers. In this case, teachers need to understand these well so they can better communicate or deal with them.

As articulated by Schein (2017), organisational (institutional) culture encapsulates the shared values and beliefs that essentially serve as a framework, guiding the actions and interactions of employees. These values and norms play a significant role in shaping how individuals within the institution (organisation) perceive their roles, responsibilities, and the expectations set for them.

#### **6.1.5.2. Dress code for expatriate teachers**

This sub-theme explores the dress code expectations (unofficial rule) for both male and female expatriate teachers and how cultural considerations influence these expectations. Dress code is a specific aspect of institutional culture that merits its own sub-theme. It highlights how cultural norms and expectations are manifested in a tangible way, affecting the daily lives of expatriate teachers.

Seeking to explore the dress code guidelines for teachers, this inquiry arose because of its relevance in a country like Oman, where attire is significantly influenced by religious factors. The dress code subject is particularly significant due to the fact that Omani students and staff are required to adhere to university regulations that encompass a uniform, specifically the official Omani attire dictated by the prevailing mainstream culture. Nonetheless, expatriate staff are expected to conform to a code, different than that of Omanis, while working in Oman, a somewhat ambiguous domain requiring further investigation.

During the class observation, the researcher noted that the participants were wearing non-Omani clothing, which raised a question about the teachers' dress code. Sam and Leo conveyed that it was generally expected that Western teachers would wear Western-style clothing, although they harboured some uncertainty about the precise regulations. Their impression was that the attire should maintain a relatively formal appearance akin to an office setting.

Sam thought that the dress code for Western male teachers was a simple issue compared to the female expatriate teachers. For him as a male expatriate teacher, he would wear what he normally wears for any other offices in other countries, but he would only avoid jeans.

It's no, Ah, no, I don't wear any clothes differently from my other jobs. Maybe as a woman, it's a different thing. But as a man, a Western man, I wear exactly the same clothes that I wore. So, I don't wear jeans when I'm teaching. So, the clothes that I have worn in the 13 years I have been I don't wear jeans, and I think jeans are sloppy. That's my own personal opinion. So I think that the clothes thing, no one ever told me what to wear specifically. But just through experience (Sam, interview 2, 18/01/2021).

Leo mentioned that he might be repeating what he was told in his previous job in an Omani college he worked in when his students asked if he would wear a '*dishdasha*' (male long dress) for the

Omani National Day. There, people (might be some Omanis) had mentioned getting offended if Westerners wore '*dishdashas*', therefore, he believed it was best to stick to Western clothes, as that was the rule (what he thought expected or assumed to be), although not clearly documented, in his previous job (in the college). This incident reflects a complex aspect of intercultural communication and the concept of 'cultural appropriation' discussed by a number of researchers (Cattien & Stopford 2023; Scafidi, 2005; Siems, 2019, Terem, 2023; Young, 2005; Young, 2010). 'Cultural appropriation' is known as "the taking of something produced by members of one culture by members of another" (Young 2005, p.136). Young (2005) argues that "appropriation from another culture can cause profound offense to the members of that culture" (p.135) because the elements are adopted "from other cultures without truly understanding or respecting the original context" (Klyukanov, 2021, p.13). Therefore, 'cultural appropriation' explains that Leo did not want to just to borrow or mimic part of the Omani culture by just wearing a '*dishdasha*' which might be interpreted or looked at as culturally unfit or even legally inappropriate. Therefore, Leo's intercultural sensitivity and carefulness can also be explained by Gudykunst's (2017) emphasis on the importance of being sensitive to cultural norms and adapting behaviour accordingly for effective intercultural communication. His concern about inadvertently offending others by wearing traditional attire highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the subtle nuances of a culture's symbols and practices (Scafidi, 2005; Young, 2010). Leo's choice of attire and his consideration of cultural sensitivities regarding clothing demonstrate his adaptive strategies for successful interaction within the Omani teaching environment (Kim, 2001).

Similarly, Sam reported the same issue of an expatriate teacher who used to wear Omani clothes while going to work. This expatriate teacher, who converted to Islam in Oman, started wearing a '*dishdasha*' when he went to work. People (without mentioning whether they were expatriate or Omanis) instead of appreciating him, made fun of him because it was not expected from him, and he looked amusing to others as he did not wear it properly and could easily be noticed. Thus, his understanding of how to affiliate himself in the Omani culture was not appropriate (Cattien & Stopford, 2023). Neither the Omani government nor Omani people expect expatriates to wear Omani clothes. Therefore, it is essential to recognise that governments and local expectations may vary in their stance on expatriates adopting local clothing. In some regions, it might be seen as a sign of respect and cultural integration, while in others, it might not be expected or even discouraged (Cattien & Stopford, 2023).

For female expatriate teachers and staff, Leo said that they were expected to cover their legs and cleavage, but they were not required to cover their heads. He was uncertain from where or who he learned this. However, it does appear to be another unwritten or informal rule. Having unwritten or unofficial rules or regulations signifies a form of accommodation, wherein individuals adapt their behaviour to align with the cultural norms of the host society and institution (Gudykunst, 2017). This accommodation process showcases the interplay between individual identities and cultural adaptation within the professional context.

Sam mentioned that for female dress code, they used to get a memo through emails reminding them of the dress code and that normally happened just before Ramadhan (the fasting month).

Yeah. I always felt sorry for the woman here as well, because we've not seen this memo for a while, but we used to get a memo about the dress code. And it was not about the men. The women you know what I mean? The women, it's a different (Sam, interview 2, 18/01/2021).

This issue is raised in literature that women might have different cultural attire to what is required or expected in the working environment in Oman. This may cause some female teachers to have to think hard how to adapt with this working environment.

For some participants, like Rose, it was easy to meet the dress code expectations for expatriate teachers at the CPS because she associated wearing modest attire with her cultural identity. She also described herself as 'conservative' based on her country's standards, which reflects how she was perceived within her culture.

I, myself am conservative by my country standards. My friends have always kind of made fun of me, because I cover up. Yeah, I used to wear turtlenecks to work all the time. And they call me the turtle. And why did you do that? Because I'm very modest. And I feel shy. And I don't want people looking at me (Rose, stimulated recall session 2, 2/03/2020).

Rose explained that in her American culture it is seen as very conservative to dress as she described herself and that was how her community saw her. This also reflects how the level of being 'modest' and 'conservative' can be socially constructed. Wearing what she normally wore (in America) in the working environment in Oman was seen as adequately modest and thus acceptable as norms and expectations at that time in Oman.

When Rose was asked if she was conservative from a cultural perspective or a religious perspective, she said it was a mix of a lot of different things. That was her choice but not her sisters who were not like that at all. She said she was not raised in that way, but she chose to be like that. She justified her principle of covering up as she did not want people to perceive her as a sexual person. Although she respected the idea of wearing black '*abayas*' and agreed with the principle behind it, she did not like the black colour because she hated to be hot. Thus, she chose what worked for her and that made her comfortable being respectful to the culture she was in. Her preference for modest clothing was influenced by a mix of personality, previous experiences, cultural norms, and personal comfort. She emphasised the importance of being respectful of the culture she was in while also maintaining her own comfort. Berry (2019) has studied how individuals adjust to a new cultural environment while maintaining aspects of their cultural identity, including clothing preferences.

As an expatriate teacher in Oman and SQU, Rose was not required to wear an '*abayah*' but she expressed frankly that having the black '*abayah*' is the worst choice for female students as it absorbs the heat. Clothing is a form of nonverbal communication, and scholars like Hall (1959, 1976) have explored how nonverbal cues, including attire, can convey cultural information. In intercultural contexts, understanding and interpreting non-verbal cues like clothing is crucial (Hall, 1959).

Malcolm, speaking, as it was, from his Muslim identity, mentioned the dress code saying that female teachers should dress appropriately but not to the extent they should wear *niqab* (face veil) but in a way that respected students' culture.

I think that, especially the way that some dress should be a little bit better, especially for the students here. I'm not saying that teachers need to wear *niqab* or something, but I'm just saying that some of them come straight from it's just really different and they will stick out and I don't think that the students will really be able to what really appreciate that, and then also to provide some understanding of the language the basics just some typical issues that our speakers will face as far as when it comes to the language because this is the way of thinking in Arabic. So, this is why people want to translate is like that (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

### 6.1.5.3. Students' dress code and uniform at SQU

An important aspect when discussing the cultural aspects at SQU is the students' dress code. During class observation, I noted that male students wore a university uniform which was a white '*dishdasha*' with a traditional Omani cap or a turban while the female students wore a black or coloured '*abayah*' and a headscarf (whether black or coloured) (Classroom observation notes, 4/03/2020). It is worth to note that the male students' dress code was not questioned or commented upon by any of the participants. Rather, it was the female students dress code was a theme that emerged from the data when participants were asked about the dress code and students' university uniform. Investigating teachers' perspectives on this cultural aspect of their students and how the university's cultural guidelines were shaped or being influenced by the cultural factors within or outside the educational institution is crucial for understanding their perceptions of this particular cultural difference compared to their own.

Rose initially questioned the dress code of Omani female students at SQU. She decided not to inquire about it until she had established rapport and built trust with them. She expressed her opinion about female Omani students' dress code that was not suitable for the hot weather in Oman and supported that by what science explains that the black colour absorbs heat, so her body and blood get hot. She described it as '*That's the absolutely worst choice in colour*'. However, she could not understand why female students should wear black although she knew that they wore *abayas* to show modesty. As Rose put it,

Well, I can remember thinking that I'm sure they're used to it. I've asked them on occasion, once I have established a rapport is a semblance of trust with them. What do they think of it? I mean, is it too hot? Because I can imagine black were taught, of course, the black absorbs a heat. That's the absolutely worst choice in colour. Why not do another light colour? And to be honest, I still don't get it because they say, oh, we're used to it. But doesn't science say that it absorbs heat to be that dark? So, I just, I imagine that for many of them, it's fine. But then there might be some that like me run hot, the blood, I easily get hot. Not everybody's the same. And so I thought about it like this, and like practical terms (Rose, interview 2, 4/03/2020).

Rose's awareness of the cultural sensitivity made her cautious when discussing this with her female students. I assume she thought of building a rapport beforehand, so her students would not feel degraded or being criticised by her questions. Rose's behaviour here can be explained by



Bennett (2017) who argues that individuals develop their intercultural sensitivity as they become more aware and competent in intercultural interactions.

In trying to understand why these female students wear black *abayas* for university, Rose drew on her own personality and religious identity as she described herself as a conservative person who liked to cover up relative to her country's standard norms. Based on her reflection on her religious identity, she could understand the feelings of Omani female students on why they chose to cover up.

[...] because I completely understand their feelings of keeping things private and unobservable for all the reasons that go with that. And I mean, I, myself am conservative by my country standards (Rose, interview 2, 4/03/2020).

Both Rose and Leo noted the idea that some aspects of culture in Oman have changed and they attributed part of this change came from the neighbouring countries. She said that she knew a little bit about people who lived in Oman some generations back that used to wear colourful dresses. She could distinguish that the Omani traditional dress is colourful and modest at the same time but in the university female students chose to wear black *abayas*. She said:

It's both and it's also changed. I know a little bit about people who used to live in Oman, some generations back and they were more colourful here. So, I'm aware of this. And so, I do think that you have certain things other cultures that influence habits, traditions here, like Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. That's where it's more they wear the black. But you still see women walking around wearing the more colourful, more traditional, but still modest dress (Rose, stimulated Recall session 2, 2/03/2020).

Rose described wearing *abayas* by Omani women as a change in culture which signifies that culture changes and can adopt new traditions which aligns with CIC perspective (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; 2017; Rings and Rasinger, 2023) that culture is in a state of struggle.

Additionally, Leo engaged in conversations with students in the music club, noting that some tended to be more liberal in their clothing choices, with preferences for styles that were not traditionally Omani and might have been influenced by neighbouring countries. This perspective shows that a regional context (macro context) might have influenced the national and local cultures (micro contexts). Rose's and Leo's recognition of the influence of neighbouring countries on fashion choices aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, which suggests that

neighbouring cultures can have significant effects on one another's values and behaviours. This cultural phenomenon is described as the 'cross-pollination' of cultures (Hemmann, 2020; Takemae et al., 2022) which suggests that cultures interact, exchange, and influence each other over time, resulting in the blending and sharing of cultural elements. This concept challenges the notion of isolated, static cultures and emphasises the dynamic, interconnected nature of cultural evolution (Martin & Nakayama, 2017; Rings and Rasinger, 2023).

What is considered a modest dress code and accepted by the whole society was also accepted by the university regulations. This change in social practice also shows another theoretical explanation which is that modesty can be also socially constructed. As wearing black *abayas* was not dominant in Oman, and it was not the dominant culture 50 years ago, the influence of other cultures and how Omanis accepted it over time can explain that the idea of being modest by wearing black *abayas* has been introduced to the Omani society and has replaced the traditional Omani dress code for women when they go out or for some social occasions.

This also shows how the university culture is influenced by the society culture outside university. Wearing *abayas* outside university has become fashionable among the younger generations. This community culture outside the university carried over to the university setting, reflecting the common practices beyond the campus. It's challenging to envision a complete separation between university and external cultures, especially in a single country. The dominant culture outside the university often represents the national culture, while the university culture is confined within its own context. It can also be inferred or explained how the bigger (macro) culture (national culture) can influence the smaller (micro) culture at SQU (university culture or the institutional culture). On the other hand, expatriate teachers should also know that wearing black *abayas* was not enforced by the university nor by Islamic teachings in the first place.

These ideas may not be clear to many non-Muslims who lack sufficient knowledge of Islam, and sometimes, even to many Muslims themselves. Some Muslims may also have difficulty distinguishing between what is considered a cultural practice and what is not, as they often engage in these practices as a community without questioning their origins. This can also be seen in some new expatriate teachers who think that they must wear black *abayas* when they go to a university or if they want to work in Oman. Some expatriate female teachers think that they must wear a hijab, a headscarf, or a black *abayah* even if they are not Muslims but these are not true assumptions. This cultural appropriation was discussed above when Sam and Leo mentioned that some male teachers who thought to affiliate well with the Omani culture should dress as Omani

men do which may not be appropriate or may be seen as bizarre (Scafidi, 2005; Young, 2010; Siems, 2019, Terem, 2023; Cattien & Stopford 2023).

The interplay between culture, gender, and education is further explored by scholars such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), who introduced the concept of "cultural capital". This notion elucidates how cultural practices and norms are transmitted within educational settings, shaping individuals' behaviours and perceptions. Following specific dress codes aligns with the transmission of cultural capital through education, reflecting the role of educational institutions in upholding and transmitting cultural values.

Overall, the teachers interviewed highlighted the interconnectedness of culture, religion, and personal preferences in understanding various aspects of Omani society, such as social behaviours and dress codes. They recognised the complexities and influences from different sources and power dynamics (macro and micro), providing insights into the cultural dynamics present in Oman. They acknowledged that cultural and religious factors can contribute to dress code choices but also noted that traditions within cultures evolve over time. This aligns with CIC scholars' perspective that views culture as a state of struggle and change (Martin and Nakayama, 2010; 2017; Rings & Rasingar, 2023).

#### **6.1.5.4. Gender designated spaces at university: walkways, stairs, and lifts**

Some aspects of the university cultural context that represent its invisible values and norms (covert culture) (Hall, 1979) are not explicitly stated but are reflected in various visible forms (over culture) (Hall, 1979) such as signs and written guidelines. An illustrative case that surfaced during my classroom observations which provided insights into expatriate teachers' real-life perceptions and behaviours, pertains to the contrasting perceptions of a female expatriate teacher's use of corridors, stairs, and lifts compared to the expected norms. While the university's signage clearly designates separate walkways, lifts and stairs for males and females in some areas in the university, some female teachers just followed what they thought was easier or could work better for them without strictly following SQU signages.

Rose and Laura mentioned that they as female teachers could use the male walkway, lifts and stairs but the reverse was not permissible. In simpler terms, male teachers did not use the walkways designated for females by the university.

What I've seen, I've noticed, is that when it comes to the male walking corridors, it's a little bit freer over who's in that way more than it is in the female area (Rose, stimulated recall session 1, 3/3/2020).

To me (the researcher) this was an idea or a behaviour that could be based on a conceptualisation of the cultural context and how gender sensitivity played a role in this institution. When I asked Rose about the reason how she had that idea, she replied that she would only make guesses and she had no theory behind her behaviour:

I think that you're not asking the right person on that one. I'm not Omani. And so I mean, I can make guesses and there is no theory about it (Rose, stimulated Recall session 1, 3/3/2020).

Rose's perspective of using the male corridors because she is not Omani might be explained by the Laura's observation who noticed that Muslim female teachers Omanis and non-Omanis used the female corridors. As she stated,

What I've noticed is that the female teachers who are Omani and even some other Muslim teachers from outside of Oman may use the female corridors. And the males don't go into the female spaces (Laura, stimulated recall 1, 3/3/2020).

On the other hand, Laura justified why she would use the male spaces. That reflects her understanding of her role as a teacher and her assumption that it did not matter to the students.

I can't find the female staircase. I don't know where if I want to take the stairs, I don't know where to go. I just take the male staircase, because I'm a teacher. And I don't think they care (Laura, stimulated recall 1, 3/3/2020).

I think that there's flexibility with it under certain circumstances. And I do think that some teachers follow it and then others don't. There are other female teachers who walk I just walked down the middle corridor inside, because that's faster. And I think others do as well. I think there's less concern about the teachers (Laura, stimulated recall 1, 3/3/2020).

Laura's observations regarding the use of gender-segregated spaces at SQU reveal an interesting gender dynamic. Her insight into how female Omani teachers and some Muslim teachers from

outside Oman used the female corridors while male teachers typically did not enter female spaces highlights the complexity of this practice and how it varies among individuals. Laura pointed out that not all female teachers adhered to the practice of using female corridors exclusively. Some might walk down the middle corridor, suggesting that adherence to these customs can vary among teachers. This observation highlights that cultural practices are not monolithic, and individuals may interpret and practice them differently.

To me, (the researcher), this is rather strange because certain behaviours stem from a notion a person holds (Borg, 2006). It is either a person does not like the rule or he/she breaks the rule because he/she notices some other teachers do the same. To problematise this point for the sake of discussion, one may argue by saying: if we just behave according to Rose's assumption that she can use those male walkways just because she is not a male teacher, then male teachers can also use female resting rooms because it says, 'female students resting room' and it does not exclude teachers (males and females). The same things happen to stairs and lifts as they are also being gender designated.

There are no written rules that dictate that those walkways are only for students and exclude teachers. It is very clear, from my observations on the way to classrooms, that students (males and females) followed those rules strictly and I never noticed male students walked in the female walkway nor female students walked in the male walkways unless it was by mistake or they were new to the building or university. The question is that why do some teachers not follow the signs placed by the university on the way? Do they follow traffic signs but not walkway signs? This shows that these teachers clearly had their own assumptions of the context that such segregation of walkways were for the sake of females but not for the sake of males. In other words, that segregation is not separating the two genders but for the female students to feel comfortable. Thus, they assume that males would not feel uncomfortable if female teachers use their spaces but it is not the opposite if males and females use female designated areas. This is a socially constructed assumption that could be true, to some extent, and it could be noticed in other similar situations. This assumption is supported by Al-Musalli's (2010) study, as discussed in the Literature Review, who found that Omani female students found the coeducation setting was more uncomfortable than their Omani male counterparts did at 88.23% and 63.63% respectively. She explains this result as these students being "the product of a single-education context" (p. 163) when they were at schools before coming to university. This semi-segregation system at SQU gives a private space for the majority of students who come from single-sex schools to familiarise themselves gradually for coeducation.

Participants confused terms and would assume things because they were not Omanis, or they are not Muslims, so they thought they did not have to abide by the rules and regulations of university, religion or the country. Even understanding the rule or the socio-cultural norm itself they did not feel they needed to understand it well as long as they were not directly offending anyone. Rose said she respected the rule but *"I cannot understand how can one respect it without following it"*. She did not give it much thought but, she just behaved according to what she thought was right, not as what was expected. That is because it was not clear or clearly stated. She believed that being a non-Muslim in a Muslim context would excuse her from following 'norms of behaviour' and 'mandates' that Muslims in that context were expected to follow. In this case, she classified that as mandates that Muslim staff and students should follow but not expatriate EFL teachers. She perceived the university regulations as an Islamic order since this university is based in a Muslim country. She was not aware that not all university policies and rules/regulations are Islamic, but they could be political, social, academic or even financial or other reasons. As she expressed it,

Yeah. But also, I accept that I don't always understand. And I don't feel that I sometimes really have to understand as long as I am not offending and because I just didn't think about it, I mean, other than to notice it, and to make sure that I am respecting it. I don't know. Maybe it's just that I'm a non-Muslim. So, they're like, we got they're excused there. Oh, but you're a Muslim. So, you need to be following this, the mandates or whatever you want to call it. The norms of behaviour. I mean, they make allowances for it (Rose, Stimulated 1 Recall session, 3/3/2020).

This confusion that Rose had, shows the complexity of this university cultural context as SQU regulations were not clearly stated anywhere, so expatriate staff could understand it well before they started working in this educational institution that had a specific cultural context. Consequently, they would draw their own conclusions and behave in what they thought was appropriate according to their perceptions and assumptions. Thinking that these regulations were only set for Muslims and so must only be followed by Muslims reflects how university socio-cultural considerations and Islamic expectations were not distinguished. Comparing following university rules such as designating walkways to either gender and following Islamic teachings such as praying and fasting Ramadhan to be mandatory for Muslims but not for non-Muslims is a complete confusion. In this case, this teacher, who had been teaching in Oman for over six years, has been confused about something that is a common sense to Omanis and this shows that a person behaves in a certain way based on his/her understanding or the thought one's carrying (Borg,

2006). She confused university regulations with Islamic teachings when she said, “I do not have to abide by that as I am not a Muslim”. Although expatriate teachers do not have a specific uniform for work, they do have an expected dress code which is different from that of female students. But when it comes to the other university expectations such as walkways, stairs, and lifts for example, male and female teachers are actually expected to obey such regulations. If these cultural contexts are still confusing to experienced expatriate teachers, then the university must make it clear through official written guidelines for new teachers so they can follow the rules and not be left to their subjective assumptions and guesses.

To understand the Omani culture and how these words and instructions or regulations are perceived and used in this cultural context, a person has to understand how these terms are used and known in their specific contexts. This context is not easily understood as the university regulations are not taken from just one specific source. In other words, it is difficult to definitely decide if they are merely religious, cultural, political or secular rules. This is explained by Colman’s (2003) and McKay (2003) as such institutions not being detached from the other factors of the wider society which includes "international, national, community, ethnic, bureaucratic, professional, political, religious, linguistic, economic and family contexts in which schools and other educational institutions are located and with which they interact" (Colman, 1996, p. 1).

In fact, the university regulations are not stated to be either Islamic or secular; they are mixtures of many ideologies. This university holds to Islamic values in general but also there are other regulations that come from politics, social norms and Western educational systems. There are several factors that shaped this university's regulations. They can be from university policies that fit the higher educational system, some of which can be local while others can be international. Some of them can be based on social restrictions or social customs that people agree upon that the university considered when it was established. This conclusion highlights the necessity of Neuliep’s (2018) contextual approach to intercultural communication (CAIC) in understanding how external factors- such as cultural, microcultural, and environmental contexts- influence teachers' perceptions and practices in IC. Having discussed this area with the participants in the CPS, I can conclude that there is a scarcity, if not a complete lack of studies that have explored the complexity of this university's cultural context. Therefore, expatriates and even some Omani teachers may get confused unless more clarifications and explanations are provided to them especially when they arrive and start working at this institution.

Overall, Laura's insights reflect the adaptability and context-dependent nature of cultural norms in Oman. While there are established practices for gender separation, the extent to which individuals, including teachers, adhere to these practices may vary depending on the situation, their personal preferences, and their degree of familiarity with local customs. These observations underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in an intercultural teaching context.

Every culture has underlying beliefs, values, and norms that shape behaviour and societal expectations. Sometimes, these core aspects of a culture—its ideology—are not explicitly stated but are reflected in various visible forms such as signs and written guidelines. For instance, imagine a society where punctuality is highly valued. While there might not be a direct statement saying, “punctuality is important,” you might notice numerous signs around emphasising the importance of being on time or guidelines that stress the consequences of tardiness. These visible indicators represent the underlying belief system that values punctuality.

Similarly, cultural ideologies about gender roles, respect for elders, work ethic, or social interactions may not be explicitly articulated but can be discerned from the rules, signs, or instructions prevalent in that culture. They serve as tangible manifestations of the intangible values and beliefs held by that society.

Understanding these visible cues—whether they are signs in public spaces, workplace guidelines, or societal norms—can provide insights into the deeper cultural ideologies that influence people's behaviours and interactions within that particular cultural context.

When analysing institutional practices at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), it is critical to differentiate between explicit and implicit policies, as both shape the experiences of expatriate teachers within the academic environment. Explicit policies, such as formal guidelines on assignments deadlines, teacher evaluations, and student assessments, provide a structured framework that ensures institutional consistency. In contrast, implicit policies, which encompass unwritten expectations related to pedagogy, gender interactions, and professional dress codes, subtly regulate social and professional conduct. These implicit policies are often reinforced through institutional culture rather than formal documentation, shaping interactions and teaching practices in ways that may not always be immediately visible to new faculty members (Martin & Nakayama, 2019).



Critical intercultural communication (CIC) highlights how these implicit policies create power dynamics that particularly impact expatriate teachers at the CPS. The informal nature of such expectations means that expatriate educators often navigate an unspoken socio-cultural framework, where their professional autonomy may be subtly constrained by cultural norms and hierarchical institutional structures (Dervin, 2016). For instance, while there may be no official restrictions on certain pedagogical approaches, implicit norms may discourage open discussions on sensitive topics such as gender roles or religious topics. These unspoken rules reinforce dominant cultural narratives and subtly position expatriate teachers within a framework where adaptation is expected, yet not always explicitly articulated.

The power dynamics embedded in implicit policies can also create challenges for expatriate teachers in terms of classroom engagement and professional identity (Al Muqarshi & Kaparou, 2023). Studies on intercultural workplace dynamics suggest that when institutional norms remain unspoken, expatriates often rely on trial-and-error learning or informal peer guidance to understand workplace expectations (Piller, 2017). This places expatriate teachers in a position where their ability to integrate effectively depends on social networks and their capacity to interpret cultural cues. Furthermore, the lack of clarity surrounding these norms can lead to inconsistencies in how policies are perceived and applied. This may reinforce an underlying hierarchy where local cultural knowledge serves as a form of institutional power.

Ultimately, the interplay between explicit and implicit policies at SQU illustrates the power of cultural hegemony in shaping academic spaces. While explicit policies provide a foundation for operational consistency, implicit policies maintain socio-cultural control by subtly regulating behaviours and expectations in ways that are not formally documented. This reinforces a form of symbolic power that expatriate teachers must navigate, often without clear institutional support. As critical intercultural communication scholars argue, such power imbalances highlight the need for greater transparency in institutional policies to foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment (Holliday, 2018). By acknowledging these dynamics, SQU can work towards a more culturally responsive approach that bridges the gap between formal institutional structures and the lived experiences of its diverse teaching staff.

After discussing the complexity of the institutional culture as perceived by the teachers, it is also important to explore how they navigate and adapt themselves interculturally to the classroom culture which will be the focus of the following section.

## **6.2. The summary of the chapter**

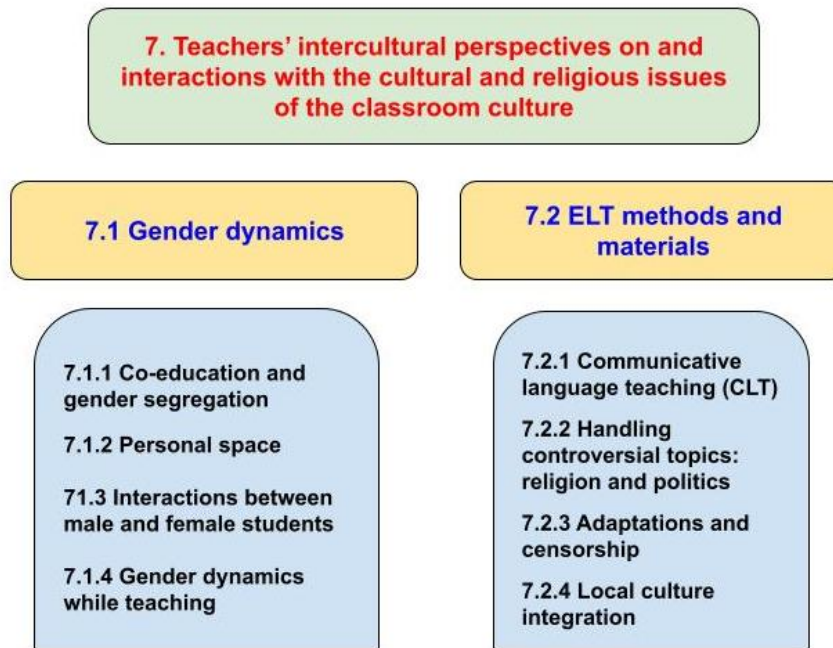
The chapter aimed at exploring expatriate EFL teachers' perspectives on the institutional culture at the CPS, SQU and in what ways it affected their IC interactions and teaching practices. The chapter started by investigating teachers views on the concept of culture. The data revealed that they have varying ways of conceptualising culture which showed the complexity of the concept as the literature of this study also suggested. Then, the chapter analysed and discussed teachers' perspectives on the institutional culture at the CPS and what influenced it. The participants reported that the institutional culture was influenced by both international factors (macro) and national (micro) factors which formed a unique culture with the presence of multicultural staff. The chapter then discussed the university cultural guidelines that teachers need to be aware of. The participants reported that the institution's sociocultural guidelines were unofficial and all of them were not sure who and where they learned about them. After that, the participants were asked to distinguish between religion and culture which they found it difficult as they both affect each other and they sometimes overlap. The participants also pointed out that religion in Oman is an important factor that affected people's life even at the CPS where they recalled some specific examples on how religion, Islam, has influenced the CPS and SQU culture. The chapter discussed some examples such as prayer times during lecture times, dress codes for both teachers and students, and gender designated areas at SQU. Discussing those examples of cultural issues showed they had varying perspectives and reactions towards them and it also explained and justified the complexity of the cultural context at SQU.

## **Chapter Seven: Analysing and discussing Theme 2**

### **7.1. Theme 2: Teachers' intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the cultural and religious factors in the classroom**

Sociocultural considerations are some of the main contextual factors that affect and shape the classroom environment and culture. In the previous chapter, I discussed the socio-cultural guidelines relevant to teachers at CPS when exploring the institutional culture. In this chapter, my focus shifts to the practical aspects of intercultural communication, specifically addressing the socio-cultural and religious factors applicable in classroom settings. While socio-cultural considerations might seem to overlap with the socio-cultural guidelines discussed in Theme One, the emphasis in this chapter is on providing examples of socio-cultural and religious factors that teachers raised to be taken into consideration. This distinction is significant because social-cultural guidelines are primarily associated with the institutional culture, and they are unofficially provided to teachers by the induction committee and by other sources such as friends' experiences. This section will analyse and discuss expatriate teachers' perspectives on classroom culture issues and how teachers react to them interculturally. By addressing these cultural and religious aspects, this investigation will shed light on another aspect of the microculture (classroom culture) within the broader context of the macroculture, which encompasses the CPS and SQU.

Since the classroom is the place and 'social space' (Bourdieu, 1989) where expatriate teachers culturally interact with Omani students and equally drawing on the literature review of the importance of context where these teachers work, it was essential to explore this theme. While analysing the data, certain sub-themes emerged that were categorised under the umbrella of 'gender dynamics' and 'ELT methods and materials'. The sections discussed how expatriate teachers interacted with gender issues concerning Omani students and how this culturo-religious context affected how the teachers handled teaching materials and methods. These issues play a very relevant role in shaping and influencing the classroom culture, including the behaviours of both teachers and students which happened within the classroom and affected the range of topics discussed. The themes related to the issues of classroom culture are also discussed in the literature (Holliday, 1997; Richard & Rodgers, 2014). In educational contexts, a classroom is composed of various elements that contribute to the overall teaching and learning environment. The elements (sub-themes) that emerged from the data analysis of this study are visually represented in the following figure and then will be discussed in the following sections.



**Figure 14: The theme and sub-themes for this chapter**

As shown in the figure above, the main theme of this chapter is **‘Teachers’ intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the cultural and religious factors of the classroom culture’**. This theme served as a central focus in the research, with participants being asked specific questions about it. However, as discussions unfolded around this particular theme, additional sub-themes emerged which were subsequently categorised under this overarching theme. The first sub-theme encompassed gender dynamics, which was further subdivided into smaller sub-themes including **coeducation and gender segregation, personal space, interactions between male and female students, and gender dynamics while teaching**. The second sub-theme, ELT methods and materials, encompassed aspects such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), handling controversial topics (religion and politics), adaptations and censorship, as well as the integration of local culture.

### **7.1.1. Gender Dynamics**

Since SQU has adopted a coeducational system in its classrooms where male and female students study together, seeking expatriate teachers' perspectives on how they navigate this socio-cultural environment is vital. This is because cultural aspects related to gender are prominent in various

aspects of the university. These are evident in its architecture, classroom seating arrangements, and university guidelines as the latter became apparent in the context of this study.

#### 7.1.1.1. Coeducation and gender segregation

Coeducation has garnered attention as both a cultural and academic concern in most countries across the globe (Karaca & Gezegin, 2023). Furthermore, as coeducation constitutes a significant feature of the study's context, namely SQU, as it is one of the key socio-cultural and religious considerations, it necessitated a thorough discussion with the expatriate teachers.

During class observations it was noteworthy that the version of coeducation at SQU, had a degree of gender segregation and semi-segregation existed. This implies that, while male and female students study in the same classroom, they do not sit next to each other. In the majority of classes, they do not engage in direct interaction and communication with each other. Introducing coeducation was an integral part of higher education in Oman, but the university had to accommodate Omani socio-religious considerations by implementing gender segregation on campus to some extent. However, even with this accommodation, expatriate teachers reported facing cultural challenges when teaching in this educational environment.

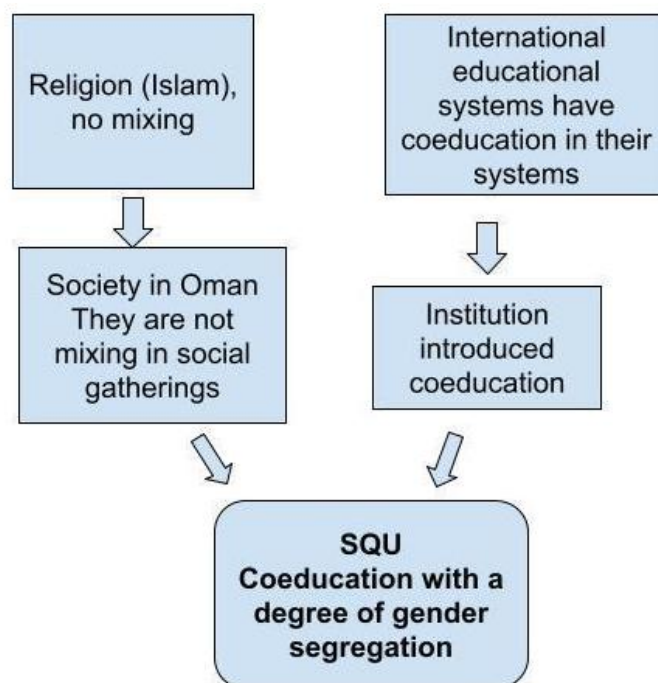


Figure 15: Coeducation at SQU

Reflecting on their previous experience before they came to Oman, the participants found the most significant difference in Oman was the gender segregation within the mixed-gender classroom. All participants emphasised the significance of gender considerations in the coeducational settings, particularly in cultures where gender segregation or semi-segregation is a norm. This perspective highlights the complex interplay between pedagogical practices, cultural norms and religious practices, and institutional expectations.

Laura's initial reaction of finding the separation "weird" is common among expatriates or individuals from different cultural backgrounds when encountering such practices for the first time. It is natural to question and seek to understand the reasons behind these divisions. As she expressed it,

Now I don't even think about it to be honest. Um, when I first arrived, I was like, Huh, this is 'weird'. It was definitely. I wasn't sure what to expect (Laura, stimulated recall discussion 1, 3/3/2020).

Leo and Laura reflected on the coeducational setup at the institution, noticing a significant difference among the students. For many of the students, it was their first experience of coeducation since they were at year 4 (Grade 4) in public schools, indicating their previous education more than likely took place in single-gender environments. As Leo and Laura observed the students at SQU, they saw them gradually adapting to the coeducational system, which still had some level of separation, with different rooms and areas were designated for each gender such as restaurants, entertainment areas, computer labs, library, and study areas. Looking at the older students at SQU, such as the volunteers, and music club participants, Leo and Laura perceived that they had already settled into this system, and each individual had decided the extent to which they prefer segregation or integration. They also mentioned that over the course of a semester, some students might gradually start to communicate with peers of the opposite gender, moving from initial shyness to more active interaction. This implies that while gender separation is an initial cultural practice in the Omani society, students may become more open to cross-gender communication as they become more familiar with each other. Leo stated it as follows:

I think for coeducation, here the main difference is that when the students arrive, it's their first experience of coeducation since they were prepubescent. So, it's not like they've arrived with lots of experience of coeducation. And I'm seeing it just carrying on as usual and seeing them actively adjusting to the coeducational system. One that directs students

in different directions and gives them different rooms to different areas to eat in and things. When I see people further up at SQU, like the volunteers and people in the music club, they've settled into it and they've decided the extent to which they remain segregated or not (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Leo supported his position with an incident of a female student who was new to the university and who adapted over time to the gender segregated areas. As he narrated,

I saw one girl who walked down the men's corridor right at the beginning, and looking like she didn't care, but then within a week or two, she was using the women's balcony as normal (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Laura has also adapted to this separation over time. She guessed that the separation served multiple purposes, such as providing students with spaces where they could be more at ease and not feel like they were constantly under scrutiny. This respect for the comfort and cultural norms of those who might be more conservative aligns with the principles of cultural sensitivity and inclusion (Bennett, 2017). In diverse societies, such practices can help people from different backgrounds feel more comfortable and maintain their values and traditions. As Laura thought,

I think, after a certain point, they get over their shyness a little bit. But I think it's just to allow them to have their own separate spaces with so that they don't feel like they're monitoring themselves all the time. I'm guessing that's part of it. And part of it also is just out of respect for those who are quite conservative, and maybe don't feel comfortable being in close proximity. I'm guessing (Laura, stimulated recall 1, 3/3/2020).

Despite this, Leo felt that the coeducational system at SQU was not fully established yet and was possibly undergoing ongoing adjustments. As a student somewhere in the Foundation Programme, Leo contemplated how these individuals were stepping into this coeducational experience to varying degrees. As he reflected,

So, it doesn't feel like I'm looking at an established system of coeducation. Being where I am at the beginning of the Foundation Programme, or the middle of the Foundation Programme, I'm looking at people stepping into this system and it's coeducation to a degree (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Leo's and Laura's observation that students arriving at the institution may have limited prior exposure to coeducation suggests that their cultural backgrounds could significantly influence their reactions to this new experience. Different cultures have varying norms and expectations around gender interactions and segregation. In some mini-cultures in Oman, strict gender segregation is the norm, while in others, coeducation is the standard. As these students adapt to the coeducational setting, they face intercultural challenges in terms of understanding and adapting to different gender dynamics. Their reactions could range from enthusiastic acceptance to cautious adjustment - or even resistance - depending on their cultural frames of reference.

The structured approach at SQU of channelling students in different directions and providing separate spaces for gender-specific activities (as discussed in Theme 1, in the previous chapter) demonstrates the institution's attempt to manage potential intercultural conflicts that could arise from differing cultural perspectives on gender interactions. This management strategy acknowledges the importance of considering cultural diversity when introducing coeducation, ensuring that students' comfort zones are respected while fostering a more inclusive environment (Elyas, 2011; Richard & Rodgers, 2014). The gender segregation practised by students and accommodated by the university can be understood through the Contextual Approach to Intercultural Communication (CAIC) by Neuliep (2018), as it is derived from the broader macro culture, which, in turn, originates from societal practices and religious recommendations. This serves as clear evidence of the influence of cultural and religious beliefs on the internal structure of higher education institutions (Brown & Lee, 2015). While introducing coeducation system seems to be an international influence (macro), it is the national and local Omani powers (micro) such as religion and culture that shaped the coeducation version that existed at SQU (see Figure 15: Coeducation at SQU).

Leo's and Laura's perspectives provide valuable insights into the interplay between culture, gender, and the educational system regulations. The transition to a coeducational system in an educational institution involves a complex intercultural process as multicultural teachers and students from different regions in Oman with their various regional cultural backgrounds come together to navigate a new environment that may challenge their existing beliefs, norms, and societal and religious expectations. This might create a "third culture" (Bhabha, 1994) environment where students from various cultural backgrounds interact and develop new norms, behaviours, and practices that differ from those of their home (community) cultures. This emerging 'third culture' in this dynamic environment is shaped by interactions, negotiations, and adaptations (Bhabha, 1994; Rings & Rasinger, 2023) among students and other members of the



institution from diverse backgrounds as they learn to coexist in a shared educational space with specific expectations that may differ from their own. The case of the girl (Leo's example) who initially used the men's corridor but later adapted to using the women's balcony exemplifies how individuals engage in a process of creating a shared culture (third culture) that accommodates various perspectives. Viewing culture from such a perspective aligns with Rings and Rasinger (2023) who contend that culture is shaped by negotiations and interactions between people.

Another support for considering the existence of a 'third culture' at SQU is Leo's perspective that coeducation at SQU does not feel like an established system, but rather a process that students are 'stepping into', highlighting the evolving nature of the 'third culture' (Bhabha, 1994). This process is not fixed or predetermined but rather subject to ongoing negotiation and transformation. Hence, the culture of coeducation at SQU is not fixed, but rather aligns with the dynamic perspective of culture as defined by the CIC (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). An illustrative example of this dynamism and its impact on teachers is the students' seating arrangements which will be discussed in the next sub-theme (gender segregation).

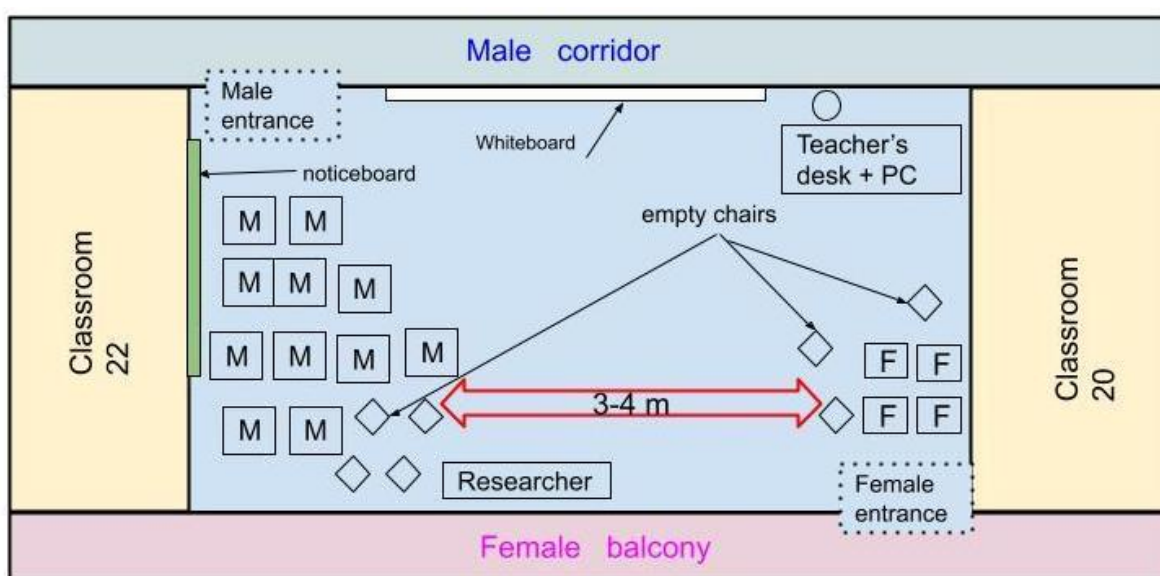
#### **7.1.1.2. Gender segregation in the classroom**

Before I discussed gender segregation with the participants, I first shared with them the classroom physical setting as depicted in a sketch (field notes during class observations) during the class observation. This sketch of the classroom showed how gender segregation in the context of this study set a platform for the subsequent discussions that took place in the classroom.

The following figure shows the physical setting of Leo's classroom depicted from classroom observations (field notes). There were 11 male and 4 female students present in the class. Students of the same gender tended to cluster together on one side, which depended on the class size and the room's capacity. Classrooms varied in size as well as the number of students across the courses. Male students (M) were on the left and the female students (F) were on the right. Whereas in this particular class, there was a space of 3-4 metres between the males and females, in other classes, this distance could be just a metre as in Laura's class. Female students occupied the space close to the back door of the classroom (female entrance) and they sat as far away as they could from their male classmates. Sometimes, some empty chairs were used as a barrier to separate or increase that gap between males and females which is signified in the figure by a rhombus. However, Laura mentioned that it was common for students to skip the first two rows, leaving empty chairs, regardless of gender. This seating preference was not gender-specific, as both male and female

students tend to fill seats starting from the back and move forward. This behaviour was likely driven by student preferences for a variety of reasons, including personal comfort, visibility, interaction with classmates or personal shyness versus confidence.

Laura explained that the gap of approximately 1.5 m between male and female students was not a deliberate policy but rather a practical arrangement. The aisle down the middle allowed her to move freely and assist students as needed. This indicates that the separation between male and female students is not enforced but occurs ‘naturally’ due to the classroom layout. Therefore, the seating arrangement was entirely at the discretion of the students, who chose where to sit based on their comfort without any intervention from teachers. In some classes, males sit at the front, while in others, males and females sit opposite to each other. Teachers, irrespective of their gender, had the flexibility to move around the classroom and approached students as needed, particularly during tasks. Typically, teachers of both genders utilised the male corridor and entrance when entering and exiting the classroom; they did not utilise the corridors and entrances designated for female students (field notes during class observations).



**Figure 16: Leo's classroom setting (Classroom observation 1: 25/02/2020)**

Based on class observations, some classrooms had separate entrances for each gender. During the stimulated recall discussion, I asked Laura about this classroom arrangement. She noted that classrooms at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) often have separate entrances for male and female students. Moreover, the students tend to sit in specific areas according to their gender, ensuring minimal interaction between the opposite gender. As she answered,

In Oman, I don't know how it works in other situations, but these like all of the classrooms in SQU are this way. Even like computer labs have separate entrances. So, you just get used to it. The females sit in front of the female exit so that they don't have to walk in front of the boys and the boys don't sit near the female entrance, so that they're not blocking the girls (Laura, stimulated recall discussion 1, 3/3/2020).

This practice of separate entrances and seating arrangements is normalised and expected in the Omani educational settings. These practices appear to be culturally rooted, reflecting Omani societal norms.

In another stimulated recall discussion, I raised with Laura the issue of gender segregations by saying: “I noticed during the class observation that males on one side and the females on the other side”. Laura answered,

But as far as I can tell, and I've even asked about it, even Omani teachers have said, they self-segregate, they could choose to sit together if they wanted to. They just don't feel comfortable with it (Laura, stimulated recall discussion 1, 3/3/2020).

Laura observed that students self-segregate rather than being strictly directed to sit in gender-specific areas. She also thought that Omani teachers and students chose to follow these practices because they were more comfortable with them and out of respect for conservative individuals who might be uncomfortable with forced gender interaction.

The participants' insights reveal the influence of Omani cultural norms on classroom dynamics, including gender separation and self-segregation practices. These practices are not rigidly enforced but are voluntarily followed, taking into consideration the comfort levels and values of the students. It also emphasises the importance of cultural awareness and respect for local customs when teaching in an intercultural setting like Oman.

Referring to his mother's generation, Leo noted that gender segregation was not something new to him as he recalled his mother's school days. He drew a comparison using his mother's experiences, highlighting certain similarities between the UK and Omani cultures. These similarities included coeducation within educational institutions and his mother's conservative attire, which mirrored the clothing norms he observed in Oman. Leo's cultural background

facilitated his comprehension of coeducation and the religious and cultural objectives underpinning it. Leo conveyed his viewpoint by stating:

I'm reminded of what my mum says about her experiences because I feel like my mom would have fit in quite well in Oman had she been here. She went to a Catholic Convent School in London when she was young (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Oman's cultural and religious aspects caused Leo to draw comparison between his mother and grandmother's culture and the current Omani culture by saying:

We have these stereotypes about Christians, wearing sandals and unflattering jumpers and things like that. That stereotype of what British people think of when they think of active practicing Christians. And that was encouraged where she was growing up. So, when I see the class is segregated, it kind of, I think, **knowing that about my mum's upbringing, makes it seem less alien here**. That I kind of think to myself, well, this wasn't uncommon, a generation or two ago, even covering your hair, like in my grandmother's generation, if you left the house, you should have something on your head because it would be a very audacious woman to go out just with her hair flowing down. So, when they wear a scarf or a hat or something over their head, so, I kind of think that, I don't like to think that Oman is this many years behind the UK (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Leo also reflected on the historical similarities between the UK and contemporary Oman regarding ideas of modesty and gender roles. As he stated,

I kind of think that it's not been that long ago that we were quite similar in a lot of these areas with, with ideas of age, gender (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

He further added,

It used to be quite common in the past. She [his mother] went to a school which had originally been girls only. During her time there, they let boys in, but I believe they sat on different sides of the class. All the girls were given a talk about how to behave when the boys came, what's appropriate behaviour for interacting with boys. Additionally, all her teachers were nuns, covering their hair, covering their faces, and wearing long clothes (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

This example demonstrates a degree of cultural awareness and is part of ICC that he reflected upon and which helped him to improve his intercultural understanding of the cultural context at SQU. With his knowledge of his mother's school days, Leo used a familiar cultural context (his mother's upbringing) to make sense of and relate to the cultural practices he encountered in Oman. This demonstrates the importance of personal and cultural backgrounds in shaping one's understanding of new cultural environments. Leo's reflection on coeducation aligns with Byram's (1997) emphasis on developing an understanding of educational practices in different cultural contexts. Leo's ability to draw parallels between his mother's experiences and the cultural context in Oman reflects a degree of intercultural sensitivity, where individuals can understand and appreciate cultural differences (Bennett, 2017). It also indicates a positive desire to conform to local norms rather than trying to be a force for change.

It is important to recognise that each educational setting and cultural context may have its own unique approaches to coeducation and how it is managed. Oman, as a predominantly Muslim country, follows Islamic values and traditions which, to a high degree, shape its educational practices. Today, most (if not all) higher educational institutions in Oman have embraced coeducation to provide equal opportunities for all students. It is, therefore, essential to recognise that educational systems in different countries are influenced by their unique cultural, religious, political and historical contexts (Bruner, 2001; Brown & Lee, 2015).

Using the CIC perspective, Leo's comparison raises questions about how cultural norms, including those related to education and gender, are negotiated and adapted over time. It also underlines the complexity of cultural practices. This demonstrates to an extent that gender segregation at SQU is a result of negotiation between individuals within the institution and the broader society they represent. This negotiation becomes apparent when certain students in specific classes choose to self-segregate, and also when female teachers utilise spaces traditionally designated for males.

Leo's reflection highlights that cultural norms can evolve over time and may have been shared or similar in various regions in the past. This also implies that cultural practices and beliefs are not fixed but can change and adapt based on historical, social, and environmental factors. This aligns with Kramsch (1993, 2013) and CIC researchers such as Martin and Nakayama (2017) and Rings and Rasinger (2023) who argue that cultures are fluid, dynamic and in a continuous state of change. It also shows that Leo was trying to appeal to a sense of 'common humanity' by assuming that Oman and the UK are all alike just at different historical stages of development.

By discussing historical similarities between the UK and Oman, Leo highlighted the importance of understanding cultural contexts in a nuanced manner. Making fixed assumptions or judgments about cultural practices can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations in intercultural communication. Instead, recognising the dynamic nature of culture (Kramsch, 1993; 2013; Nakayama & Martin, 2017; Rings & Rasinger, 2023) allows for more open-minded and respectful interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the context of SQU, which is a diverse and multicultural environment due to its international faculty population and students' cultural backgrounds, understanding the dynamic nature of culture becomes even more crucial. Being aware of historical and evolving cultural norms can help individuals at SQU navigate intercultural interactions with sensitivity and respect, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious academic and social environment. This result emphasises the importance of considering history when studying IC as guided by the CIC (Marin & Nakayama, 2010; 2017).

#### **7.1.1.2.1. Personal space**

Regarding gender dynamics, Rose, Leo, Laura, and Sam all mentioned being mindful of 'personal space' and ensuring a respectful distance, especially with female students.

Well, for example, if you are a male teacher and you walk into the classroom, and you have here mixed-gender classrooms, but of course, everyone is Muslim. And Muslims have beliefs about **physical contact space, eye contact**. And if you're male and there're female students, and especially in the very beginning, when they don't know you, you really need to mind that. If you look carefully, it can be a little bit of a minefield (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

Leo emphasised that this issue of 'personal space' concerned male teachers' behaviour towards female students whom he and other participants described as "conservative" and who did not find it "easy to communicate with" especially in the presence of men.

In terms of gender, I think there are for male teachers, allowing for extra body space, not encroaching too much into their **personal space**, especially with female students, is an important one. When I monitor female students, I tend to be kind of further back, so I'm asked to come over and kind of give them permission to breach their personal space (Leo, interview 1, 20/02/2020).

Leo emphasised the need to be careful and considerate when interacting with female students, as some students may hold ‘more traditional and conservative views’. As he stated,

Considering female students, it's essential to approach delicately and not make assumptions. Err on the side of caution as some students are more traditional and conservative (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

This gender sensitivity was reported in other incidents, as some were discussed in Theme 1, 'gender-segregated spaces at SQU,' and in Theme 2, where some participants such as Laura and Leo found it difficult to communicate with female students and find suitable topics for them in class.

Participants highlighted the importance of respecting ‘personal space’ and being mindful of cultural norms when interacting with female students. This perspective is consistent with the broader literature on gender-sensitive teaching practices (Elyas, 2011). It is recognised that creating a comfortable and respectful classroom environment is crucial for effective teaching and learning and this includes considerations related to ‘personal space’. According to my participants, particularly the male teachers, teachers must be aware of cultural norms and individual comfort levels when it comes to physical proximity in the classroom especially towards female students. Research in the field of education has shown that gender can impact classroom dynamics and interactions. For example, studies by Crowe (2011) and Rocha *et al.* (2019) have found that female students may feel more comfortable and engaged in the learning process when they have their personal space respected.

#### **7.1.1.2.2. Male and female students’ interactions**

Class observations revealed that interactions between male and female students were limited in the classroom. Given that active participation and peer interaction are essential in language learning, teachers were asked about their perceptions of gender dynamics and student interactions in the classroom.

The participants reported that, although the students are in a gender-mixed classroom, they did not interact with each other, especially in their first year. They also reported that some female students did not feel comfortable talking or raising their voice while participating in the presence of their male classmates. However, in some classrooms, male and female students were reported interacting with each other.

Laura reported that female students did not feel comfortable because the male students outnumbered them in her class.

Because the boys are ... especially when there's like a big group of boys who are old, maybe, like, maybe a little uncomfortable with having the girls but they're the majority. So, they're more comfortable with speaking out. But the girls are very uncomfortable with, like being heard by the boys with being observed by the boys (Laura, interview 1, 1/3/2020).

Leo used the phrase "uncomfortable equilibrium" to describe the dynamics between genders in the classroom. It suggests that there is an underlying tension or imbalance in the interactions between genders within the classroom setting.

I think there may exist an uncomfortable equilibrium between the genders in the classroom. They are aware of each other's presence but do not interact directly. Some of the girls seem to be conscious of being spoken over and at times dominated by the boys, which has been mentioned before. This awareness sometimes translates to the classroom setting (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Teachers' observation that the students are aware of each other's presence but do not interact shows some form of social distance or hesitancy between the genders. The comment perhaps further suggests that some girls felt conscious of being spoken over or dominated by boys, which may have contributed to gender disparities in participation and communication, ultimately creating challenges for some female students in the classroom. Laura, on the other hand, dealt with this issue by giving fair opportunities for both genders (discussed later).

Leo supported this observation with one example:

For instance, I once pointed to a notice board on the side of the room where the boys were seated, and all the boys looked at the spot, while the girls continued looking straight forward. It was as if they didn't want to acknowledge the boys' presence, but they knew they were there. The girls didn't look in the direction of the boys or the notice board located behind them (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

The example of the notice board (see Figure 16) illustrates how this social conformity and reluctance may manifest in the behaviour of students. The girls' reluctance to acknowledge the



boys' presence, even while knowing they are there, might reflect a deeper underlying social dynamic.

Leo interpreted of the above example as follows:

Ladies will talk quieter when there are men in the room, which is something I feel. I can't do that. In watching a film, like how quietly they actually talk is incredible to me. But if you have a class with just ladies or a class where there are no men in the room and the teacher's outside, the volume is very different. The behaviour is very different from the presence of male students, affecting what they're comfortable doing and saying, and how loudly they are. Sometimes it's like they don't want to be the voice that stands out or they don't want to be the person that stands out when there are men there (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

This comment offers insights into the influence of cultural norms and gender dynamics on student interactions in the classroom. It highlights how societal expectations may shape communication behaviours, with female students adjusting their speech volume and behaviour in the presence of male peers. This is also highlighted by Mamnoun and Nfissi (2023) who found that teachers often unconsciously allocate more attention to male students, resulting in boys dominating classroom interactions while female students experience relative invisibility. This behaviour might stem from cultural or societal norms that dictate how women should behave in the company of men.

One possible interpretation of this behaviour is that the female students might feel hesitant or uncomfortable acknowledging the male students' presence directly, possibly due to cultural or societal norms. This reluctance to make eye contact or engage visually could be influenced by factors such as gender roles, expectations, or even personal comfort levels. It is essential to recognise that such behaviour does not necessarily mean that the female students were disinterested or unresponsive to the notice board's content. Instead, it might reflect the existence of subtle gender dynamics in the classroom, where students might navigate interactions differently based on their gender identities or perceptions of social norms.

This observation is consistent with existing research on gender dynamics in educational settings, particularly in conservative societies (Al-musalli, 2010). Studies have shown that in such contexts, gender segregation can lead to distinct classroom behaviours and preferences among male and female students. For example, female students may feel more comfortable and participative in

same-gender environments, and they are more reserved when interacting with male peers or instructors. This can affect their engagement in the learning process and their willingness to participate in class discussions. The concept of male students dominating classroom discussions and female students feeling marginalised or unheard is consistent with the broader literature on gender inequalities in education (Dawkins, et al., 2017). There comes the role of the teacher in terms of how they would interact with this socio-cultural issue while being in the classroom.

On the other hand, Laura and Sam reported that in her experience, students often discussed with same-gender peers, although there were occasions when mixed-gender discussions occurred. They appreciated it when students engaged in cross-gender discussions but did not force or require it, especially in foundation courses (for first year students). They anticipated that students may collaborate more across genders as they advanced to more specialised majors (later years).

I've had a few classes where the girls and the guys would talk to each other and be like "I disagree with her" or "I think he has a good point". But, I like it when that happens, but I don't expect it. I don't require it. I don't ever ask them to do that. If they do it on their own, awesome. And I do tell them when it comes to presentations once you start your majors you will be even possibly in groups with the other gender, but I don't in foundations, I don't force it (Laura, stimulated recall 1, 3/3/2020).

Laura also emphasised the idea of not adding extra stress to the language learning experience. Forcing students into interactions across genders that made them uncomfortable, especially in terms of gender dynamics, might hinder their learning progress and negatively impact their overall experience.

There are all of these things that make it a little bit difficult on an emotional level. I just think why add extra stress. If the girls are more comfortable with the girls, and the boys are more comfortable with the boys, let them be comfortable, I will push them outside of their comfort zone and other ways. But I just think gender is not necessarily ... it's not a battle, I want to fight (Laura, stimulated recall discussion 1, 3/3/2020).

While Laura recognised the importance of moving students out of their comfort zones in some aspects of language learning, such as grammar and vocabulary, she distinguished between language challenges and social interactions. She seemed to prioritise the former while allowing the latter to evolve more naturally. Studies in ICC highlight the significance of acknowledging

and respecting diverse communication styles within a multicultural classroom (Kim, 2017). Laura's approach is in harmony with this by recognising that students may have varying comfort levels based on their cultural background expectations. Moreover, research by Byram (1997) emphasises the need for educators to avoid imposing their cultural norms on students and to foster an environment that accommodates diverse cultural perspectives. Laura's decision not to mandate gender-specific interactions reflects a similar commitment to avoiding unnecessary cultural impositions. Intercultural language teaching requires educators to be culturally sensitive (Cancino & Nuñez, 2023). Laura's and Sam's consideration of students' potential discomfort and her decision not to force gender-related interactions demonstrate a nuanced understanding of cultural sensitivity in language education (Bennett, 2017).

The above discussion emphasises the importance of understanding and negotiating cultural norms that affect communication practices. Educators should be aware of how gender dynamics may influence students' interactions and create an environment where all students feel empowered to express themselves authentically, regardless of their gender (Gay, 2018). It also raises questions about power dynamics and how cultural norms perpetuate certain communication patterns. It prompts us to consider how gendered behaviours might be reinforcing unequal power relations between genders in the classroom (CIC perspectives). Female students potentially feeling the need to lower their voices or not stand out in front of male students is an indication of gender expectations that are informed by their socio-cultural norms (Khan, et al., 2014; Kilby, 2023). This result aligns with a case study by Khan, *et al.*, (2014) which reveals that female students often hesitate to participate in mixed-gender classrooms, speaking in subdued voices due to lack of confidence and fear of male judgment. This behavior is attributed to socio-cultural norms that position females as subordinate, leading to reduced classroom participation. Addressing these issues could lead to a more inclusive and equitable classroom that fosters open dialogue and respects the diverse communication styles of all students. That could help to create a welcoming culture in the classroom which could align with the notion of a 'third culture' (Bhabha, 1994).

These insights reveal a complex interplay of cultural norms, personal preferences, and evolving classroom dynamics. While there may be some self-segregation based on gender, it is not seen as an issue, and gender-specific discussions are not enforced. Instead, it is the students' comfort and natural choices that seem to influence these behaviours. This flexibility in student interactions reflects an environment where students have some autonomy in how they engage with their peers, and this may evolve as they progress through their academic journey.

Research by Bigler and Liben (2007) has shown that gender segregation and self-consciousness about gender roles can manifest in early childhood and persist into adolescence. Students may become more aware of gender roles and expectations, leading to behaviours such as boys dominating discussions or girls feeling hesitant to assert themselves in mixed-gender settings (as in Leo's class). Furthermore, studies on classroom participation and gender dynamics, like those by Mahmoud (2015), have consistently found disparities in how male and female students engage with classroom activities. These disparities often result from cultural and societal norms that influence students' perceptions of gender-appropriate behaviour.

Addressing this “uncomfortable equilibrium” is essential for promoting a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. Research by Martin and Dinella (2012) suggests that teachers play a pivotal role in mitigating gender-related disparities. By implementing strategies that encourage equal participation (as Laura did) and creating a classroom culture that values diverse perspectives, teachers can help break down the barriers to healthy interaction and engagement between genders.

It can, then, be understood that there may be gender-related dynamics influencing student interactions in the classroom. It highlights the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment where all students feel respected, valued, and encouraged to engage actively in the learning process, regardless of their gender. Addressing any existing gender disparities and promoting equal participation can contribute to creating a more positive and enriching educational experience for all students.

#### **7.1.1.2.3. Gender dynamics and teaching**

In examining the effect of gender dynamics on teaching, the participants were asked about if the presence of both genders in one classroom (coeducation) affected, in any way, their teaching. Some of them reported that the unequal distribution of genders in the class influenced their choice of activities. It also had an impact on their communication with individuals of different genders, among other issues.

Leo answered,

I think for activities which involve a partner or working with someone next to you, on nearby, or working on something alone or listening, then these activities you can quite easily do. When it comes to things which involve the whole class, then you start to notice some differences. For example, the boys typically will shout out answers more; the girls would wait to be asked, still might raise a hand, and then put it down again when they

realise that the boys have already answered. But they might not answer immediately after a boy unless there's a gap, and they want to respond to what the boys are saying directly (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

For presentations, Rose reported that some students suggested the teacher separate boys and girls to present on different days to help the girls feel more comfortable. As Leo recalled it,

In presentations, you get someone proposing that the boys and girls do those on different days and try to have similar numbers of both genders on each day. They'll often say, "Oh, but the ladies will be more comfortable if we're not there". Generous offers like that (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

This proposal seems to stem from a perception that the female students are more comfortable or confident in a gender-segregated setting (Al-Musalli, 2010).

Given an odd number of male students during class observation, I inquired about Laura's approach (during the stimulated recall discussion), considering that some teachers might avoid activities in such cases such as Leo. In the context of group discussions, when faced with an odd number, she took the initiative to participate herself, either by facilitating role plays or engaging in one-on-one discussions. This illustrates her commitment to maintaining an inclusive learning environment, ensuring that each student has the opportunity to contribute and interact (Laura's Class observation).

With discussions, just with group numbers, sometimes I'll have an odd student out, like you saw, I had to do one of the role plays with one of the students, because we had an odd number of boys that day. Sometimes, I just put them, two in one and sometimes I'll just sit and talk with one of them (Laura, stimulated recall 1, 3/3/2020).

Leo mentioned that he could make positive effects by drawing parallels between cultures in his teaching. However, there are certain aspects of the culture, such as interactions between men and women, that he felt he could not change or which prevented him from implementing certain activities, such as a mill drill activity (an activity which all students stand up and interact with each other), due to cultural norms. He shared an example of a teacher in his previous workplace (in a college) who lost his job within a week or two for making boys and girls sit next to each other in a circle during a lesson. Leo acknowledged the importance of understanding cultural

sensitivities in teaching English and making appropriate choices to ensure a successful learning environment.

In the quote below, Leo demonstrated a high level of caution regarding the cultural sensitivities associated with interacting with Omani students.

And I certainly have to approach some things a different way. Particularly,... sometimes it's quite easy solutions. Like if I need to move chairs, first, I ask the boys to move, and when they finish, then I ask the girls, or vice versa. So, sometimes it's easy fixes. Sometimes, it forces me to think of another solution. Perhaps occasionally, it prevents me from doing some activities that would be beneficial, but I think generally speaking, you can't force people to do things that are outside their comfort zone. So, you just have to work with it (Leo, interview 1, 20/2/2020).

Leo's response demonstrates his adaptability and understanding of cultural differences in his teaching approach. He acknowledged that some activities may need to be modified or omitted due to cultural sensitivities, but he also sought practical solutions to address these challenges. Leo's ability to navigate and respect cultural boundaries shows his professionalism and commitment to creating a comfortable and inclusive learning environment for his students. He recognised that forcing people to do things outside their comfort zones may not be effective, and instead, he chose to work with the cultural context to ensure a positive and effective teaching experience (Gay, 2018). Looked at critically, he chose conformism over challenge conservatism over change as this is an area that may endanger his employment. Leo's recognition that he could not force students to step outside their comfort zones reveals an awareness of power dynamics and the need to avoid imposing cultural values or norms on others (Byram, 1997). By working with the cultural context rather than against it, he empowered students to engage in the learning process comfortably, thereby fostering a more positive and effective educational experience. On the other hand, that is possible at the expense of the students' personal development and adapting their relationship skills for the future and mature adult life (Al Badri, 2015).

Leo's response exemplifies a CIC approach (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Nakayama & Martin, 2017) which emphasises the recognition of power dynamics. His approach also is in line with the CRP (Gay, 2018) wherein cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and respect for diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in creating a conducive and inclusive learning environment for his students. By

valuing and acknowledging cultural differences, he encouraged mutual understanding and cooperation, enhancing the overall learning experience for all parties involved (ELbashir, 2024).

The majority of participants, regardless of their gender, found that the biggest challenge for them was establishing boundaries and understanding their position when communicating with female students. Both male and female participants found it easier to adjust to communicating with male students as they found common grounds (characters and cultures between males and theirs), but with female students, it was harder to know where to stand and they felt more uncertain about how much personal space (especially for a male teacher) they should give (personal space). They were uncertain about the lines they should not cross.

So, I think I've always been relatively good at connecting. But in terms of connecting with Omanis, I think the hardest part for me, at first, was connecting with the girls. Because they weren't speaking out, I wasn't picking up on ways to connect with them... The girls have limitations in terms of what they're willing to share about their personal lives because it's very private for them... Trying to connect with the girls, I think it's a big challenge" (Laura, interview 1, 1/3/2020).

Moreover, Laura's struggle to find relevant examples for female students echoes the need for culturally sensitive teaching methods such as CRP (Gay, 2018). Laura also realised that it is crucial to avoid falling back on stereotypes or gendered topics, such as cooking or cleaning, which can be perceived as clichés and not relevant to modern female students in Oman. However, Laura thought of engaging her female students by saying:

But I can by telling my stories and admitting things that have happened to me that were maybe a little uncomfortable or silly or whatever. Or just even talking about my own feminine routine of putting on makeup or going shopping, if they can relate to that, I think a little bit better. I'm still learning about that, though. I still don't think I'm where I want to be in terms of connecting with the girls (Laura, interview 1, 1/3/2020).

Research on inclusive teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) emphasises the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural backgrounds, experiences, and values of students, particularly in diverse or conservative settings (Gay, 2018). In Laura's case, acknowledging the private nature of female students' lives and finding ways to connect with them on shared experiences like 'makeup routines' or 'shopping' can help build rapport and make

learning more relatable. It also reflects how cultural norms and expectations can influence classroom discourse. Wider issues of gender, culture, and privacy intersect in complex ways that affect classroom communication. Moreover, it highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017). Laura's recognition that some topics are sensitive for her female students reflects the need for educators to be aware of cultural norms and boundaries when teaching in a foreign context.

Another finding is that Laura admitted that the cultural issue in connecting with female students is an ongoing challenge. This underscores that intercultural teaching is an evolving process. This is also supported by Xu (2018) who emphasises that intercultural teaching is an ongoing process that demands continuous adaptation, self-reflection, and learning to effectively bridge cultural gaps whenever possible.

#### **7.1.2. Teachers' intercultural interactions with ELT methods and materials**

Sub-themes concerning ELT methods and materials surfaced from the participants' responses, with teaching materials being recognised as one of the primary factors influencing teaching practices at the CPS. These resources wield significant influence over the teaching process, as articulated in Leo's remark:

Additionally, the materials used in the classroom, some of which come from CPS and some that are always in place, play a significant role in the teaching process (Leo, interview 1, 20/2/2020).

When asked about what factors can affect their teaching practices, the participants highlighted that the cultural teaching methods teachers adopt affect the teaching and learning process in a classroom. They also noted that some aspects of the Omani culture, especially the gender segregation in the classroom, had influenced how they would teach or which they would select as teaching materials for Omani students.

Different teachers' cultural backgrounds may draw on varying subtend teaching methodologies, which can also affect the effectiveness of the lessons depending on the context and pedagogy used. As Leo pointed out,



Additionally, your cultural background may influence your teaching methods, which could be more or less effective depending on the context and pedagogy. For instance, if your culture has a teacher-led approach versus a more communicative one, it can affect the lesson's outcome (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

When expatriate teachers, hailing from Western educational backgrounds and teaching in the multicultural context of CPS, were asked to share their observations regarding the dominant cultural influences on the CPS's institutional culture, they identified a mixture of both Western (macro) and local culture (micro) influence in shaping the educational system and overall culture at CPS.

Leo and Sam shared their observations regarding the teaching methodology and the presence of Western and Omani culture in the institution. Leo noticed the transition from traditional methods (such as grammar translation teaching methods) (Bax, 2003) to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and further noted a shift towards a post-methods approach that emphasises the value of focus on form. However, they pointed out that the institution appeared to be a few years behind in incorporating grammar instruction, as there was no dedicated grammar strand in the foundation programme. The curriculum document (a document that explains all the courses studied at the CPS with their learning outcomes) emphasised a skills-based approach where grammar was addressed reactively rather than being the central focus. Leo suggested that this approach aligned with the perception of language classrooms in the West, but it did not accurately reflect the reality of the institution. He raised the question of whether the influence of Western culture and the CLT movement was evident in the institution, or if it was more of an imagined or reinterpreted cultural phenomenon. Some teachers (Leo and Sam) acknowledged the challenges students face due to the lack of explicit grammar teaching. Overall, Leo's analysis highlights the complex interplay between teaching methodologies, cultural influences, and the institution's approach to language education. As Leo explained it,

And adjusting from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is probably the biggest adjustment I made coming to Oman for the first time. I can't just say, "Stand up, Milan," to interview five people [in the class]. I have to manage everything differently and getting them to stand up and move around is more difficult (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

This suggests that the new context in Oman may require expatriate teachers additional efforts to encourage student participation and engagement. This also illustrates the importance of being

flexible and open to adjusting one's teaching methods according to the cultural and educational context of a new location (Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Shaw, 1997; Richards & Rogers, 2001, 2014; Bax, 2003; Kabir, 2011). It also reflects the complexities of intercultural communication and the need for educators to be sensitive to the unique needs and expectations of their students in diverse settings.

#### **7.1.2.1. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

One of the teaching methods that the participants found challenging to apply in a mixed-gender classroom at SQU was Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT refers to an approach that emphasises communication as both the goal and the means of teaching a language. It focuses on real-life communication and interactions rather than the rote memorisation of grammar rules (Richards, 2005).

In the subsequent quotes, Leo elucidated the challenges he encountered while implementing CLT due to the cultural sensitivities associated with coeducation in his classes.

And then with speaking activities. I think movement in the classroom is limited, and that affects the types of communication you can do. I think Communicative Language Teaching, which is always dependent on there being a need to get information from another person, could be like a gap that you need to use language to achieve (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Regarding many contexts in the UK, where Leo came from, since there was no such gender sensitivity as opposed to the cultural and religious context in Oman, he said,

[a]nd there are so many in the UK context, for example, where there aren't sensitive sensibilities about gender, you have all these different options of different ways to make this information gap work. Whether it's having different things around the room or having different people with different information or changing partners and things like that, it becomes more of a logistical challenge to incorporate those into the classroom (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Having odd numbers for one of the genders caused a challenge for some teachers such as Leo.

If you want to have something lined up in chairs, and then they move along one partner and talk to another person each time, you have to negotiate that, and it can affect normally,

if you've got an even number of students, then you can put everyone in pairs. But here, you say, "How many do I have? An even number of girls? Do I have an even number of boys? What do I do with the extra?" You have to think twice, and you can't do those activities as easily just as a last-minute choice. You have to actually give it some thought: How will I exercise that in the classroom? (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Another challenge for teachers in such a scenario is having a smaller number of one gender in a classroom.

If there's a very small number of girls, let's say three girls in the class, and you have 17 boys, then you can have all the boys moving around, but the girls are going to be in one group regardless. So, what's the point of doing it? If it's only going to benefit the boys, maybe they should do something which includes all three girls instead (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

According to Leo, having coeducational classes with gender sensitivities at SQU appeared to contradict the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology he was accustomed to in the UK. Incorporating class discussions and interactive activities faced numerous obstacles due to culturally limited communication between male and female students. His words emphasised how the need for active communication and interaction became a logistical challenge when dealing with an uneven number of students, particularly in regard to gender considerations. It underlines the importance of considering the classroom dynamics and cultural sensitivities when designing language learning activities that promote effective communication and language use. The teachers' recognition of the cultural challenges at the CPS concerning the viability of the CLT approach coheres with the viewpoints expressed by Holliday (1994), Pennycook (1994), Bax (2003), Kabir (2011), and Richards & Rodgers (2014) who all emphasise the significance of taking the cultural context into account prior to formulating decisions about pedagogical methodologies. This finding is also in line with the views presented by Kabir (2011) who asserts that teaching methods need to be contextually and culturally dependent. Kabir's (2011) work supports the idea that methods are appropriate when they consider learners' socio-cultural factors and integrate them into the instructional approach. This cultural effect also confirms Denman and Al-Mahrooqi's (2018) assertion that Omani national culture, including religious values, significantly affects educational outcomes.

All this also suggests the need for teachers to be mindful of such disparities and strive for inclusivity in designing activities. It emphasises the importance of creating learning experiences that benefit all students, regardless of their gender, and promoting equal participation and engagement in the classroom. The teacher's acknowledgment of the need to adapt to different contexts is in line with the CRP approach of incorporating students' cultural experiences into the curriculum to enhance engagement and motivation. It aligns with Gay's (2018) concept of recognising and affirming students' cultural identities while creating an inclusive learning environment. By considering these factors, educators can foster a more supportive and equitable learning environment for all students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; 2022). However, there is a clear tension between the 'progressive' need for inclusivity and affirming cultural tropes which are not comfortably compatible with that virtue.

#### **7.1.2.2. Handling locally controversial topics**

According to Pace (2021) "controversial topics" are meant to be topics that provoke "highly charged reactions due to their sensitive nature" (p.xviii). By drawing on the findings that this study revealed in Theme 1, that there are relating to the socio-cultural and religious guidelines for not discussing certain topics in the classroom, the participants recalled that they were advised to avoid discussing certain topics, including religion and politics, among others. The finding also showed that those guidelines were unofficial, unwritten suggestions for new expatriate teachers and there was no clear set of rules for teachers regarding what aspects of culture to mention or how far to extend the discussion of culture in the classroom. That finding resulted in delineating this current sub-theme (controversial topics) for this section in order to explore how expatriate teachers became aware of and handled these controversial topics.

The participants elaborated on two primary subjects: religion and politics. As for the remaining topics, they were merely listed without elaboration. This is because these other subjects are intricately connected to the overarching sub-themes of 'religion' and 'politics'. Among these topics are 'sex', 'alcohol', drugs, 'boyfriends/ girlfriends' relationships, 'kissing', 'dating', 'teenage pregnancies', 'sexually transmitted diseases', 'contraception', 'family planning', and 'inappropriate materials in films'. Reflecting on these subjects, it is obvious that they are sensitive, primarily due to their religious implications, if not approached with care. Therefore, I have categorised these topics under an overarching sub-theme that I have called 'Religion and its pertinent issues' which will be discussed in the following section.

### 7.1.2.3. Religion and its pertinent issues

The analysis of the data showed that the participants used different words to refer to religion as a topic to avoid. For example, Rose classified it as a ‘taboo topic’, while Malcolm categorised it as ‘sensitive topics’, ‘touchy topics’, ‘culturally sensitive topics’, and ‘culturally sensitive materials’. The diverse language used by participants indicates the nuanced and complex nature of their perceptions regarding the sensitivity of discussing religious matters in the educational setting. It also indicates the varied perspectives on religion among participants.

Within the broader discussion of cultural and religious considerations, this sub-theme focuses on participants’ approach to discussing religious topics in the classroom. The participants reported that, despite the significance of religion in the Omani context, they were advised to avoid discussing it in the classroom. However, the participants interpreted and approached this specific guideline differently. While some of them such as Rose and Laura avoided it completely, Leo and Malcolm showed confidence to integrate it in their lessons.

Malcolm and all the other participants, despite their awareness of the topics they should avoid, were uncertain about where they got this information from (discussed in Theme 1).

I believe that I read somewhere where it said, like, really don't discuss about religion and politics in the classroom (Malcolm, interview 1, 27/2/2020).

Regarding topics to be wary of discussing in the classroom, Rose mentioned that the suggested guidelines highlighted ‘taboo topics’ such as politics and religion. However, Rose and the other participants acknowledged that these guidelines were informal and not officially documented. Thus, Rose stated that she did not necessarily agree with everything in the guidelines but understood the importance of adhering to them.

Well, the only guidelines that I've ever seen are the ones offered by the induction committee. They talked about **taboo topics** and they mentioned **politics, and religion**. Maybe I don't know what else I can't remember. But I mean, those were the two big ones. I think, perhaps, obviously **sex** but yeah, I can't remember what else (Rose, interview 2, 4/3/2020).

Laura elaborated on this issue and her position was to avoid religion as a topic to discuss with her students.

Even asking students really personal questions about their own opinions about religion or talking about religions other than Islam in class other than like, just factually, like, somebody asked me about Jesus once. And I think I just, I was like, well, here's what historical documents say about Jesus, and I'm not going to talk about that anymore (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Laura would avoid sharing her opinions about religion as she did not want to cause discomfort to her students.

I'm trying to relate to them [students] to establish rapport, then I'll share some personal things, but I don't, I don't want to talk about my opinions about religion, because I have very strong opinions, and I don't want to share them. And I don't want them to feel the discomfort (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Intercultural communication involves navigating cultural differences and religion is a sensitive and deeply ingrained aspect of identity for many individuals. By refraining from sharing her opinions, Laura aimed to avoid potentially discomforting or alienating her students because of their religious backgrounds. Laura acknowledged the power dynamics inherent in the teacher-student relationship in the Omani context. By choosing not to share her strong opinions about religion, she recognised the influence she held as an authority figure. Her awareness of the potential discomfort her strong opinions could cause reflects a commitment to maintaining a positive and inclusive learning environment. This approach aligns with a critical perspective on intercultural communication that acknowledges the potential for power imbalances in communication (Martin & Nakayama 2010) in the classroom.

She reported that she would avoid religious topics because she held different opinions that might cause tension or discomfort between her and her students. She linked students' comfort with their learning results. As she put it,

I don't really feel like the religion plays very much of a role for me at all. My religious beliefs are pretty, like, irrelevant in this context. I don't believe anything similar to what my students believe. I understand enough about what my students to believe, to avoid the

major obvious pitfalls. And then any other places that might be a little bit sensitive, I've just watched very carefully, I just avoid bringing up anything that might stir the pot. And if other students seem like, they're uncomfortable, that I might steer the conversation away because I don't, like I said, if they're uncomfortable, they're less likely to learn and there are situations where discomfort builds your learning. And that state of discomfort is where you grow the most. And that's true for learning a language but not true with talking about sensitive subjects, right? I want them to feel uncomfortable with like having to use new vocabulary and new grammar. That's really difficult for them in a conversation, not for them to have to talk about something that they like emotionally feel stressed about (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Laura was sensitive to the potential for conflicts that could arise from discussions about religion, especially given her limited knowledge about the subtleties of different religious (Islamic) practices. To maintain a harmonious classroom community, she avoided topics that could lead to judgment or discomfort among students.

I don't want there to be conflict because I don't understand enough about the subtleties of it to sort of ease the conflict if it happens (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Realistically there are lots of things that I know about Islam, but also, when it comes to the depths of differences between the way that different people practise and observe their religion, in their own families privately, publicly, I know that there's a lot that I don't know. And I just don't want to stick my foot in something that I don't know about and unintentionally cause tension or I don't want to say something that's offensive to somebody, because my intentions are pure, I respect everyone's individual path, and the choices that they make and their beliefs. So, I just tried to stay out of it (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Laura recognised that certain topics, behaviours, and themes may be considered unsuitable or offensive in her students' cultural and religious context. As a result, she refrained from using examples or recommending materials that could potentially clash with her students' beliefs and values. This approach is in line with the principles of intercultural communication and respect for diversity, but to some critical perspectives may consider this approach as not being challenging and critical of possible inequalities and injustices within the status quo (Al Badri, 2015; Nelson, 2004; Norton & Pavlenko, 2004).

Moreover, Laura also linked her avoidance of sensitive topics to her students' comfort and learning outcomes. It reflects her awareness of the cultural and religious sensitivities of her students. She believed that students who feel uncomfortable in the classroom are less likely to learn effectively. By steering clear of controversial or emotionally charged subjects, she aimed to maintain a positive and conducive learning environment. While acknowledging the value of discomfort in stimulating language learning, Laura distinguished between the productive discomfort of language challenges and the potentially counterproductive discomfort arising from sensitive subjects. She sought to foster a balanced environment where students feel challenged by language learning but not emotionally stressed by classroom discussions.

However, this approach of avoiding controversial topics in the classroom does not meet with Norton's and Pavlenko's (2004) advice who urge teachers to "introduce controversial topics that students have not raised" (p.510) such as discourses of gender and sexuality. According to the participants of this current study, gender and sexuality are among the topics they would avoid bringing to the classroom, as advised by the suggested guidelines.

Given Laura's stance on avoiding the expression of personal beliefs and opinions on religion, I sought further clarification on a topic that was not originally part of the interview questions but became relevant due to her remarks. The inquiry pertained to her identity as a teacher, an aspect she emphasised in connection to her decision to not discuss religion in the English class. Laura emphasised her strong personal opinions on religion and her awareness that students might hold antagonistic views, potentially leading to conflicts. In light of this, I aimed to explore how she navigated the separation of her personal beliefs, whether religious or cultural, from her professional practices during interactions with students. She answered by saying,

Well, I think the first thing is that there are so many things to talk about, that have nothing to do with religion. And the students are gonna have their own viewpoints, they're gonna have their own beliefs about those topics, we can talk about medicine, we can talk about the study of how are physicists learning about the location of planets in the universe. We can talk about robotics, we can talk about how are chemists improving the safety of our makeup that we ladies use, right. There are all kinds of topics, we can talk about, that we don't need to have any sort of religious discussion around. And so for me, it's just, I don't need to talk about religion, because there's such a wealth of other things that we can discuss, that don't have that sort of emotional, affective weight (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).



There are lots of other things that are not emotionally loaded, that we can talk about that don't have any sort of, like, cultural .... There aren't any reasons not to express your opinions, your thoughts, because we're just talking about science, or we're just talking about biology or chemistry or whatever it is (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

It is clear that Laura wanted to avoid any kind of cultural and religious tensions with her students. Laura's teaching technique was to creatively generate other non-religious topics that could be discussed in the classroom, ensuring that there were plenty of subjects that did not carry the same emotional intensity. Laura suggested that there were numerous alternative ways to help students develop critical thinking, debating skills, and the ability to express themselves without delving into potentially divisive subjects. She was not against fostering skills like debate and argument but believed these skills can be nurtured through less 'sensitive topics'. This resonates with pedagogical approaches that prioritise student engagement such as CRP and critical thinking development and it also aims to create an inclusive and comfortable environment for all students. Looking at it critically, it can be at the cost of personal development of the students.

Her second approach was to differentiate between her personal beliefs and her professional role as an English language teacher. She saw the classroom as a place to focus on language learning and other non-religious topics, ensuring that emotional or affective weight related to religion was minimised.

Leo mentioned that there were differences in what is considered acceptable in the West compared to Oman, particularly related to topics like alcohol and sex. He also clarified his way to address discussion of alcohol in the Omani classrooms. As Leo pointed out,

I mean, there are socio-cultural and religious differences between the West and Oman. Some things acceptable in the West may not be acceptable here, like discussing **alcohol in class**. In the UK, it's rarely a topic in classrooms. A teacher might make a comment about students' 'nights out' or something. However, in Oman, we avoid raising such subjects unless [directly] relevant, like in the **context of dangerous driving** (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Leo was aware of the disparity between his cultural background and the host culture (Oman) when he tackled these cultural topics. Similarly, this was also expressed by Laura who did not just follow

the suggested guidelines blindly but stated that she clarified how she talked about drinking alcohol with her Omani students.

We can talk about drink, like the **effects of drinking alcohol**, but we can't talk about like, **the culture of drinking**. Right, like, which, in a lot of places is major, like, the culture of drinking is a huge part of culture, in a lot of places, but that's off limits. So, I thought everything was pretty explicit. I couldn't tell you where to find it (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Leo discussed the topics that are considered off-limits in the context of teaching in Oman. While alcohol could be mentioned in specific contexts like the cause of car accidents, the topic of 'sex' was completely avoided. Leo emphasised that discussions related to 'sex', 'teenage pregnancies', 'sexually transmitted diseases', 'contraception', and 'family planning' are generally agreed to be off-limits in the classroom. As Leo put it,

Well, I wouldn't talk about **sex** at all, whereas other topics like alcohol could be referred to in the context of the cause of car accidents. We do cause and effect essays, but we never do anything about teenage pregnancies or anything like that. So, I think that the whole area is generally agreed to be off-limits (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Leo pointed out that in the UK, it might be possible to talk about 'sex' in indirect or objective terms, but in Oman, even indirect discussions related to sex are avoided due to cultural sensitivities. The intention is to maintain a respectful and appropriate learning environment in line with Omani cultural norms and values. As he noted,

In the UK, you can talk about '**sex**' in kind of indirect or objective terms. But you wouldn't sensationalise it or make anything racy or titillating with the issues associated with it. I mean, you'd never write an essay about the effects of 'sexually transmitted diseases' in Oman. That would never be a topic that you'd receive or choose to fit into a lesson. Similarly, anything related to that, 'contraception' or even 'family planning', *I guess they would be too close to the bone that you just steer clear* (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Among other topics to be avoided mentioned by Laura were such things as 'boyfriend and girlfriend relationships'; even showing 'films' to Omani students that had 'inappropriate themes' for Omani culture was to be avoided. As she put it,

I am being **sensitive** to not introduce, like, I won't use examples of like '**boyfriend girlfriend relationships**', because I know that that's not considered suitable here. There are different behaviours, or activities or types of relationships that I'll just, I won't use as an example, or, like, I won't recommend '**films**' that have particular themes or particular behaviours, that I know, some of the more conservative students would find really offensive (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Talking about drugs was also listed by Laura as one of the topics that she would avoid, but again, she knew how she could introduce it to her Omani students.

Talking about drug use, I know, is discouraged. Although, like the use of drugs as a trend, like statistically. This is increasing or these teenagers are using drugs for these reasons, like that's okay. But talking about it like on a more personal level, or talking about the experience of it is not okay. Generally anything, even like, even like really private details of like a of a family are typically you know, like, like husband-and-wife type of things like those are all off limits (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).

Being sensitive to introducing such controversial issues to the participants' Omani students, whom they described as conservative and their approach to tackling these topics show their cultural sensitivity which is something encouraged by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Gay, 2018).

In response to the question whether teachers had been addressed about cultural issues that may arise in teaching materials or lesson planning, Malcolm mentioned some 'sensitive culturally materials' or topics to be avoided in the classroom. He also explained how he approached such issues.

As far as selecting content for the classroom, some things are culturally sensitive, and those aspects need to be considered. If we come across certain topics, like 'dating' or other touchy subjects, we need to find a way to work around them. When using third-party materials, it's important to filter out content related to 'kissing' or 'Hollywood stuff.' I generally avoid using such materials because they don't add any real value to the teaching itself. (Malcolm, Interview 2, 14/1/2021).

As a Muslim, Malcolm filtered out culturally sensitive topics that often appear in commercial textbooks, such as ‘dating,’ ‘kissing,’ and references to Hollywood. He worked around these topics to ensure they aligned with cultural expectations. He also stated that he avoided materials that, in his view, did not “add value” to teaching. This practice was not exclusive to his teaching in Oman—he had also exercised similar discretion when teaching in the U.S., despite it being a different cultural and religious context. His religious identity, therefore, played a role in his teaching decisions across different environments.

Another topic Malcolm identified as culturally sensitive was gender issues. While he is American, his Muslim faith shaped his understanding of what is culturally appropriate in Oman. Despite differences between American Muslim culture and that of his Omani students, he noted that some issues are universally significant to Muslims, regardless of cultural background (as discussed in Theme 1 on the intersection of religion and culture).

No, no, I filtered some of them. **I'm kind of sensitive** especially when it talks about this comparison between men and women. But then there's some hot topics that are just really, in most cultures, like the one I have brought up about women making more money than men. This is a hot topic and, and it is important to get them thinking about it. But there are some other types in there that I just kind of filtered out. I didn't want those. But I do take into **consideration gender**. I'd take into consideration like, if there are some questions that are talking about **alcohol or something like that, consumption** of certain things (Malcolm, stimulated recall discussion 1, 27/2/2020).

Malcolm's approach to teaching reflects his broader pedagogical philosophy, which emphasises cultural sensitivity and relevance. Drawing from his experience in the U.S., he did not simply adopt teaching materials as they were but filtered out content he deemed unnecessary or inappropriate. His justification aligns with findings from El-Sakran and El-Sakran (2021), who observed that teachers tend to avoid culturally sensitive topics due to their limited positive impact on students' cognitive development.

It can be seen here that Malcolm was driven by the principles of his Islamic identity where he would not just accept the material even if he was ‘inside’ American culture where they might accept ideas that were not acceptable in the Omani context. His own religious identity influenced his professional practices. However, he did emphasise that the context in Oman which is obviously an Islamic context, had its own specificity.

Because we're in Oman itself, it would be different if we were somewhere else teaching and then religion or some other cultural things will come up but we're actually in a monolithic type of culture per se. So, it's just automatic that just keep politics and religion to a minimum and just deliver other subject matter and that's it (Malcolm, interview 2, 14/1/2021).

Malcolm's way of teaching (or his teaching 'philosophy') is in line with the contextual approach which is advocated by many researchers (Bax, 2003; Neuliep, 2018).

Leo's perspective provided a practical illustration of how teachers navigate cultural and religious sensitivities. It offers a real-world example within the larger context of institutional culture.

So, you can assume that anything that could be construed as promoting alcohol would be a negative. So, I haven't seen any other policy of it, it just seems like an obvious assumption. You wouldn't go in and tell them about a celebration you had where you got very drunk (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

This shows how Leo perceived this sensitive cultural issue. Not promoting alcohol and assuming it would be viewed negatively indicates that he knew the university values a conservative approach towards the propagation of certain topics, including alcohol consumption. Leo pointed out that there might not be a specific written policy on this matter, but it was considered 'an obvious assumption' based on the university's ethos and cultural norms.

The above perspectives of the participants highlight the importance of understanding and respecting the institutional culture and values when working in an educational setting in Oman and the region, especially concerning 'sensitive topics' like alcohol that might not align with the cultural/religious norms of the country and its citizens. Brown and Lee (2015) argue that teachers need to adopt a pedagogy which values students' religious and cultural beliefs and norms. Furthermore, the expatriate teachers' example of refraining from discussing a celebration involving excessive alcohol consumption, sex, and politics aligns with theories of ICC that encourage cultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017). Their understanding of the cultural and religious context prompts teachers to exercise discretion in sharing certain experiences, reflecting a certain level of ICC (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Byram, 1997). The teachers' approach highlights the importance of adapting communication to fall in line with the cultural and religious norms of the

university, a principle central to effective IC and CIC (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002; Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Gobert, 2015).

#### **7.1.2.4. Local culture integration in the classroom**

This subtheme emerged as the participants reported to integrate local culture into their classrooms.

Despite the general guidelines of avoiding topics like politics and religion, Leo and Malcolm approached these suggested guidelines differently to other participants. They believed that religion was an integral part of people's lives in Oman and could not be ignored. While they acknowledged the importance of avoiding sensitive topics, Malcolm also highlighted that some aspects of these subjects, such as politics influencing economics or religion's impact on a person's sense of purpose and could be relevant to discussions in an English language classroom.

Leo explained:

Now that we were told this, one that they always teach teachers about not mentioning, politics, religion, pork, and whatever else. However, I do mention religion, because it's such a part of people's lives. I don't think you can sidestep it by pretending it's not there, at least in a culture like Oman. (Leo, interview 1, 20/02/2020).

Malcolm and Leo shared similar approaches to how to handle religious and political issues although they had different religions. While Malcolm and Leo understood the rationale behind these guidelines, they found it challenging to avoid these topics completely, as these topics were sometimes connected to the subject matter being taught. They emphasised the importance of cultural context in teaching and mentioned that they tried to relate the subject matter to students' daily lives to make it more engaging and relevant. While integrating cultural context into teaching enhances engagement (Jukes et al., 2021), its effectiveness depends on how authentically it fosters learning. Khan (2014) highlights its benefits in language education, but a critical lens questions whether it promotes intercultural competence or reinforces cultural stereotypes. While cultural relevance is essential, its impact on critical thinking and inclusivity requires further scrutiny.

Leo and Malcolm mentioned that showing an interest in the culture and demonstrating awareness of language and cultural aspects had a positive effect on students. Acknowledging and understanding their culture is important to the students, and they appreciate it when teachers respect and recognise their cultural background in the classroom. Leo mentioned that he demonstrated awareness of language and culture in his teaching. For instance, when teaching about referencing, he drew parallels with the chains of transmission in the Sunnah (Prophetic traditions),

which showed where information came from and its reliability. He then related this to academic language, emphasising the importance of referencing to identify trustworthy sources. Students appreciated this approach and were impressed by his knowledge and connection to their cultural context. He brought information from the students' Islamic culture literature to relate to what they already were familiar with so they can understand the English one. This is emphasised by other researchers (Mahmoud, 2015; Shah & Elyas, 2019) who contend that ELT teachers incorporating students' cultural materials that are relevant to the students' context help to increase their motivation to learn English. Adversely, ignoring students' culture according to Shah and Elyas (2019) is one of the main reasons for ELT being not successful in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Leo's and Malcolm's choice to discuss religion despite the general guidelines of avoiding topics like politics and religion marks their sensitivity and awareness to the cultural and religious fabric of Oman. In doing so, they acknowledged the limitations of a blanket approach (a broad one that can be used to fit equally most or all situations) (Naz, 2023) that disregards the significance of religion in Omani society. Leo's and Malcolm's approach aligns with the principles of ICC and pedagogy, which emphasise the value of acknowledging and respecting cultural nuances (Byram, 1997; Bennet, 2009; Brown & Lee, 2015), even if they involve topics that might be considered sensitive or taboo in other contexts (Byram, 1997). This can be effective if they navigate the nuances of these issues well without causing any kind of discomfort to their students.

Leo's and Malcolm's viewpoint also reflects the understanding advocated by Tudor (2001) that classrooms should be viewed as "a socially defined reality" (p.11), shaped by diverse groups of social actors. By addressing religion in the classroom, Leo and Malcolm acknowledged the holistic nature of teaching and learning, as suggested by Tudor's ecological lens approach. Furthermore, Leo's and Malcolm's perspective highlights the significance of religion in shaping student-teacher relationships, aligning with the insights discussed by Mowlana (2014) about how Islamic values and sociocultural norms influence communication and interaction. This illustrates that Leo's and Malcolm's approach recognises the cultural power dynamics outlined by the CIC (Martin & Nakayama, 2010), wherein religious beliefs affect how individuals communicate and relate to each other. This also concurs with other researchers such as Ladson-Billings (2022) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) who emphasise that 'contextual elements' significantly affect the teaching and learning process. This also aligns with Neuliep's (2018) Contextual Approach to Intercultural Communication (CAIC), which emphasises how intercultural interactions are shaped by broader

cultural and environmental contexts. However, it remains crucial to assess whether these adaptations foster genuine intercultural engagement or maintain existing power structures.

Leo's and Malcolm's approach can be seen as an application of Bax's (2003) assertion that context plays a pivotal role in teaching methods, reinforcing the importance of contextual factors recognised by various scholars (Hall, 1976; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Shaw, 1997; Bax, 2003; Kabir, 2011; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; 2014; Neuliep, 2018; Ladson-Billing, 2022).

As advocated by Kabir (2011), the adaptability of teaching methodologies used by the participants is crucial, recognising the role of socio-cultural aspects in shaping students' encounters. The participants' circumspect approach toward discussing sensitive subjects like 'alcohol', 'sex', 'dating', 'kissing', etc demonstrates their cultural sensitivity and awareness of the way of religious and societal perspectives in Omani education, as noted by Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2018). This approach mirrors Elyas's (2011) perspective that cultural sensitivities warrant steering clear of subjects that might trigger discomfort or misinterpretation. The participants' stance aligns with the overarching viewpoint shared by a range of scholars, including Kabir (2011), Gobert (2015); Denman and Al-Mahrooqi (2018), and Elyas (2011), who collectively emphasise the substantial role of contextual factors in shaping effective teaching decisions. This perspective also corresponds with the literature's emphasis on being culturally sensitive and avoiding sensitive (controversial) topics and taboos in teaching, as highlighted by Elyas (2011) and corresponds with CRP (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billing, 2022).

#### **7.1.2.5. Discussing politics**

All participants highlighted another sub-theme that expatriates needed to be mindful of discussing, the politics of the host country (Oman). This is also considered controversial and a grey area and the participants expressed varying perspectives on how to handle it. Leo, Laura, and Malcolm emphasised that as expatriate teachers in Oman, they refrained from criticising the government or the country's beliefs.

Some topics that just can kind of carry over into something **that's just very political**, I tried to **stay away from those** (Malcolm, stimulated recall discussion 1, 27/2/2020).

Discussing politics in any specific way as opposed to like, this is something historically that happened. Like in passing without discussing like, do you agree that it shouldn't have happened like that is discouraged (Laura, interview 2, 20/12/2020).



Malcolm said he would filter out topics that are not appropriate and avoid politics that should not be discussed in Oman. Thus, he was aware that there are topics not to be discussed, not because of culture or religion but because it is legally not allowed in Oman although they would be fine in the US. Here he had to draw distinction between religion, culture and politics. Criticising the government is not allowed in Oman by the Omani Law (Oman, 2015) but in the US.

Leo was more specific by stating a cautious approach to discussing political matters that could be deemed critical of the political system. As he declared,

Well, you wouldn't criticise, I think criticising the government, no, no, when you're in an absolute monarchy like this. I wouldn't want to criticise the country or undermine any of the national myths and beliefs. So, I'm not really a flag-waving patriot back home, and I'm kind of suspicious of people who are. But I wouldn't undermine the National Day celebrations here, which are widely enjoyed by everyone. And I wouldn't promote a form of making comparisons that suggest my country's form of government is better than theirs. I'd stay clear of anything that might be considered critical of the political system (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Sam and Leo expressed the view that discussing sensitive political topics as expatriates working under a visa in Oman could be risky and might be perceived as sowing seeds of discontent. Leo reported that while there is no official policy on this matter, there seems to be a general understanding among expatriates to avoid such discussions to maintain a positive image. Sam, Leo, and Malcolm highlighted the importance of cultural and political sensitivity and understanding when teaching in Oman. Therefore, criticising the institution can be perceived as an affront to the nation's cultural heritage. Their approach demonstrates an awareness of power dynamics in intercultural interactions, recognising the potential consequences of making comparisons between political systems (CIC) (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). By avoiding actions that may be perceived as undermining the country's identity or national celebrations, the teachers showed a willingness to engage with the local culture in a respectful and constructive manner. By avoiding criticism of the institution or national culture to maintain respect, educators may inadvertently contribute to a culture of silence that prevents students from questioning or critically engaging with their own society. This dynamic may limit the development of critical thinking and open dialogue, which are essential components of intercultural communication (Piller, 2017).

Leo and Sam mentioned that people in Oman often express positive sentiments about the late Sultan on social media. As expatriates living in Oman, Leo and Sam believed it was best to avoid discussing sources critical of the government or its decisions publicly. As Leo stated,

I think for most people, that would be kind of common sense, like we have a thing in the UK of not talking about politics with strangers. So, it probably relates to that attitude that we already have. But also, if you see people becoming uncomfortable, that will affect how you approach things as well. Yeah, I think it's something people work out themselves (Leo, interview 3, 21/12/2020).

Leo's statement again reflects his awareness of cultural sensitivity and the importance of avoiding sensitive topics, such as politics, when interacting with people from different cultures. He drew parallels with the UK's social norms, where discussing politics with strangers is generally avoided. Leo understood that in Oman, it is essential to be cautious about criticising or discussing certain topics related to the government, as it could make students uncomfortable and might not be well-received by the local community. He emphasised the need for teachers to be sensitive to cultural norms and the reactions of their students, allowing them to navigate these topics in a respectful and considerate manner (Gay, 2018).

Demonstrating sensitivity to local norms and values fosters mutual understanding and facilitates effective communication between the teacher and their Omani students. This approach promotes positive intercultural exchange and enhances the overall teaching experience for both teachers and students (Gay, 2018). This result resonates with a recent study by ELbashir (2024) who investigated the relationship between teachers' cultural sensitivity and classroom management in Oman. The findings indicated that teachers who exhibited high cultural awareness employed optimal classroom management strategies, suggesting that cultural sensitivity positively influences teaching effectiveness.

In a diverse and culturally sensitive learning environment, ELT expatriate teachers should be mindful of the social, religious, and political contexts of their host country (Brown & Lee, 2015; Bruner, 2001; Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014;) as they contribute to shaping the educational system and its policies (Liddicoat, 2004). This occurs because, as Byram (2008) contends, governments utilise educational systems, and that foreign language education serves as a means to achieve social and political goals. These objectives are clearly integrated into the formal structure of educational institutions.

Leo's and Sam's perspective on political discussions within the context of Oman's absolute monarchy resonates with the intricate interplay between the political and institutional cultural contexts of English Language Teaching (ELT), as discussed in the Literature Review. The security of the country is a high priority for the authorities and teachers from other countries must realise that public political criticism of the government is not welcome in Oman. Being ignorant about this may lead to very undesirable consequences. Most teachers have said that in the induction week at the CPS these issues had been addressed, so they should be aware of them (as discussed in Chapter 6). Freire (1970) and Foucault (1972) assert that education systems are political tools that shape discourses, knowledge, and power dynamics. Their cautious approach aligns with this idea, exemplifying how the political context significantly influences the decisions and behaviours of individuals within educational settings (Bruner, 2001; Brown & Lee, 2015).

Political ideologies, both at the macro and micro levels, impact English Language Teaching. The macro-political context, driven by global power dynamics, influences the dominance of certain languages, like English, due to economic, cultural, and political agendas. At the micro level, government policies shape language education, curriculum, and teacher training programmes. The government's priorities and decisions influence language teaching approaches and content and thus contribute to the broader cultural context of SQU (Abad, 2013; Liddicoat, 2004).

The macro-political context's influence on ELT is evident in Leo's, Rose's and Sam's apprehension about criticising the government or engaging in comparisons between political systems. Phillipson (1992) contends that the English language is closely associated with the socio-economic power of specific nations. Additionally, Pennycook (2007) highlights the political and economic consequences of ELT in developing countries. Leo's and Sam's choice to avoid undermining national myths and political systems reflects a recognition of the larger socio-political framework in which they operated, safeguarding against potential conflicts.

Leo's and Sam's remarks also reflect the micro-level political context's effect on expatriate teachers' teaching practices. The availability of resources, funding, and social climate in a country can influence language teaching policies (Syed, 2003). The participants' decision to navigate political discussions cautiously aligns with this dynamic.

The broader discussion on the importance of the institutional cultural context complements the participants' general stance. Their consideration of Oman's culture and political environment

aligns with the understanding that educational institutions are influenced by their surrounding societal and political norms (Bruner, 2001; Brown & Lee, 2015; Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014). The participants' careful approach acknowledges the significant role that institutional culture plays in shaping beliefs and behaviours (Rosenholtz, 1991; Thompson, 2010). The participants' perspective exemplifies the need for educators to be mindful of the cultural effect of their practices and policies, as highlighted by researchers (Hongboontri, 2003; Burns, 2013; Puzio *et al.*, 2017). As suggested by Byram and Grundy (2003), understanding the socio-political and institutional contexts of a culture is essential for educators to navigate the complexities of IC interactions in the educational environment.

To conclude this section, it is clear that the participants had varying perspectives on how to handle these controversial topics. However, the participants' approach to avoid sensitive topics, such as religion and politics, can be seen as a form of self-censorship. While the participants' intention is to create a safe and comfortable learning environment, self-censorship as argued by Al Badri (2015) might limit students' exposure to different perspectives and constrain the scope of discussions. Censorship does, in fact, play a significant part in the teaching practices of the individuals who participated in this study; nevertheless, this approach is both complicated and, at times, even contradictory. It is necessary to have knowledge of which topics may prove to be problematic; yet, the responses of the participants to censoring may vary substantially depending on their cultural and religious backgrounds, and on their certainty and confidence on how to handle such issues. Some of these topics might be sensitive to specific classroom contexts but not to others. As has been demonstrated in this section, censorship is frequently tied to religious and political considerations. With censorship, the participants also used alternative teaching methods and topics that they were sure would not be culturally or religiously controversial. Ultimately, while censorship may serve as a tool for navigating sensitive topics, it also highlights the complexities educators face in balancing cultural, religious, and academic considerations, often limiting opportunities for open dialogue and critical engagement in the classroom.

## **7.2. Summary of the chapter**

This chapter aimed to explore the perspectives of expatriate teachers on cultural and religious issues in their classes and how they interculturally interacted with them. It commenced by analysing the data and categorising it into themes and subthemes, which were illustrated in Figure 9. The exploration of the main theme involved the analysis and discussion of two primary subthemes: Gender dynamics and ELT methods and materials. The discussion of 'gender dynamics'

revolved around several sub-themes that emerged from the data, including coeducation, gender segregation, personal space, and student-student interactions. The findings showed that expatriate teachers noted a nuanced situation at SQU, where coeducation was introduced to align with Omani socio-religious considerations, leading to some level of gender segregation on campus. Nevertheless, some female teachers perceived that this form of gender-segregation was more relevant for Omani students and teachers rather than for expatriate teachers. The teachers also reported that gender segregation in an educational setting limited their use of certain teaching activities deemed unsuitable for mixed-gender classrooms, particularly in the foundation programme where there was a lack of interactions between the two genders. The expatriate teachers highlighted the complex interplay between pedagogical practices, cultural norms, religious considerations, and institutional expectations. Gender dynamics within the coeducational setting were found to be influenced by students' cultural backgrounds, with some exhibiting enthusiasm for coeducation while others displayed cautious adjustment or resistance. The teachers did observe the emergence of a 'third culture,' shaped by interactions and negotiations among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The "personal space" issue was also discussed and participants expressed the importance of being mindful of this especially with female students who may adhere to conservative cultural norms. Discussing how teachers dealt with ELT methods and materials, the data revealed that certain teaching methods, such as CLT, were reported to be challenging to apply in a mixed-gender classroom where males and females are segregated and there was reluctance to communicate with each other. The findings also showed that expatriate teachers were advised to not discuss certain controversial topics in the classroom, specifically categorised under religion and politics. However, the results demonstrated that participants had varying perspectives on how to handle these topics. While some chose to avoid them and find alternatives, others confidently and openly expressed that they could not avoid them, showcasing their capability to navigate and use them in a constructive way in their lessons.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

After analysing and discussing the data presented in the preceding chapter, it becomes crucial to summarise the findings. Given that this study is grounded in the Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) framework proposed by Martin and Nakayama (2010), the findings reaffirm the holistic approach of the CIC and show diverse contextual elements and powers that play a role in moulding and influencing the English Language Teaching (ELT) environment at SQU and which consequently shape the teachers' perspectives and practices. During the course of data analysis and discussion, I found that the key concepts of CIC are embedded in the findings. For example, in answering Research Question 1 (RQ1), CIC's key concept of "the importance of history" is emphasised. In RQ2, "the importance of context" and "the importance of power" are demonstrated as well as "culture as a site of struggle".

The Conclusion's structure is based on the research questions that directed this study. This will be followed by the contributions of this study to different areas which will be presented along with its limitations, and implications, together with some future recommendations.

### **8.2. Research Question One (RQ1): To what extent do intercultural backgrounds/knowledge/training/experiences contribute to the development of expatriate teachers' intercultural communication at the CPS, SQU?**

This question was raised to explore how expatriate teachers' intercultural communication knowledge, training, courses, experiences, support, and pre/in-service support contributed to shaping and developing their intercultural communication while working at the CPS, SQU, Oman. This question also has been informed by part of the CIC key concept which is "the importance of history". Exploring teachers' IC in a context requires also considering the history (relevant to IC) of these expatriate teachers. Through their profiles, the findings of this study revealed that knowledge of IC gained, whether formally or informally, through experience and teaching in different cultural contexts helped expatriate teachers to develop their sense of IC at the CPS in Oman. It gave them a clearer lens through which to look at intercultural communication and interact accordingly.

It is clear from the findings that teachers with prior knowledge and experience of IC articulated and expressed themselves in a way that showed their intercultural communication understanding and intercultural sensitivity to the cultural context of the CPS, SQU. This was reflected in their

conscious examination of culture from various perspectives, as well as in their approach to engaging with socio-cultural issues and employing specific strategies when teaching controversial topics.

This study also showed that expatriate teachers, even when they came from the same country (three from the US and two from the UK), varied in their intercultural communication skills. These differences were influenced by factors such as their religious, cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds. Some teachers also attributed their intercultural understanding to their religious background as a means to help them understand the religious influence they observed in Oman as seen in the cases of Rose, Leo, Sam (Christians), and Malcolm (Muslim). While they did not share the same religion with their Omani students, except for Malcolm, some religious principles were found to be similar in both religions. This similarity facilitated their understanding of certain religious practices observed or encountered while working at the CPS, such as 'dress code,' 'coeducation,' 'personal spaces,' and other controversial topics they were advised to avoid. Consequently, the cultural and religious backgrounds of the teachers have played a significant role in shaping and influencing their intercultural competence (IC).

Furthermore, the findings also indicated that teachers who had previously worked with students from cultural backgrounds different to their own (Leo with Muslim minorities in the UK and in Indonesia; Rose with female students in the UAE; Sam in the UAE and in some European countries; Malcolm in America; and Laura with international students of assorted cultural backgrounds in the US), improved their ICC in other working environments such as Oman. Engaging with contexts similar to Oman, particularly within the Gulf region, added an extra layer to the ICC they had acquired as in the case of Rose and Sam. Consequently, it can be inferred that the more closely-aligned the teachers' previous experiences are, along with shared beliefs and values in the new cultural context, the greater their ease, flexibility, competence and confidence in interacting interculturally with those unfamiliar cultural settings. It can be concluded that previous successful intercultural adaptability enhanced adaptability in Oman. Although this finding aligns with one of the CIC principles which is "The importance of history", it contradicts the CIC perspective, which emphasises that culture is a state of struggle and change. This viewpoint would not endorse the idea that Intercultural Communication (IC) can assist expatriate teachers by examining similar cultures. By doing so, they can anticipate and reasonably expect some of the challenges they may encounter in a new context that shares certain cultural aspects with other societies.

This contradiction holds significance for scholars, educators, and practitioners in the field of IC. The CIC perspective, which posits that culture is characterised by struggle and change, serves as a foundational framework for understanding how individuals navigate and adapt to diverse cultural contexts. By identifying a finding that goes against this perspective, the discussion becomes relevant to scholars and researchers in the field, prompting them to reevaluate existing theories and explore alternative viewpoints.

Furthermore, this finding is linked to expatriate teachers, who are directly impacted by the contrasting perspectives on the role of IC in their adaptation process. The justification lies in the practical implications for expatriate teachers seeking guidance on cultural adaptation in the new cultural context. By challenging the CIC perspective and suggesting that IC may not be as effective in certain situations, this finding prompts educators and professionals to reconsider their approaches to supporting expatriate teachers. This linkage highlights the practical relevance of the academic discourse for those directly involved in intercultural experiences, making the discussion both theoretical and practically applicable.

The findings revealed that the CPS at SQU had an induction time for expatriate teachers when they first arrived at the institution (CPS). Although most of them appreciated this voluntary help from their colleagues at the CPS, others reported that that did not add much to their IC especially those who had had a prior experience in Oman or had missed the induction sessions. The findings showed that the people who were doing the induction were volunteers and the sociocultural guidelines they provided for new expatriate teachers were at the level of suggestions and were not 'official'. This left the expatriate teachers to navigate the cultural context at SQU based on their prior experiences and their subjective interpretations of the current context. In general, the induction programme introduced some cultural aspects alongside other services that newcomers needed when they first arrived in Oman.

### **Research Question Two (RQ2): What are the expatriate teachers' perspectives on and interactions with the institutional culture of the CPS at SQU?**

Since this study's scope is within the field of IC, and was informed by CIC in particular, contextual factors and power dynamics that influenced institutional culture had to be explored as these factors affected teachers' perspectives and practices. To discuss this question, I had to explore teachers'



perspectives on the institutional culture, specifically the CPS and SQU. Essentially, I had to answer the following sub questions: A) **“what ‘macro’ powers (contextual factors) contributed to shaping this institutional culture?”** In other words, how did expatriate teachers view the cultural contexts at SQU in Oman which included the overall SQU context consisting of the CPS culture and the classroom culture, and B) **How did the expatriate teachers interact with the socio-cultural issues at the CPS and SQU?**

One finding is that expatriate teachers interacted with and viewed the cultural context at the university through a complex interplay of factors influenced by socio-political, socio-cultural, religious and institutional dimensions. These expatriate teachers navigated a complex environment shaped by these dimensions which can be considered the power dynamics that played a part in the institutional culture of SQU and CPS. The factors discussed below are: international influence and higher education system, university socio-cultural guidelines, and socio-cultural, religious, and political influences on institutional culture.

### **International influence and higher education system**

The findings showed that the culture at the CPS and SQU is influenced by macro and micro systems. It can be concluded that the culture at SQU is not solely Omani nor international but may be described as a ‘third culture’ that has its own specificities as a result of a mixture of factors. That mixture came from the influence of international influence on the higher educational system as well as the international teachers who contributed in one way or another with their own experiences of diverse cultures and various experiences of other working environments and institutional cultures. This suggests that teachers should not assume that the CPS reflects the Omani culture outside the university (visible/invisible, Omani societal culture) but that it is a cultural context that accommodates both Omani and non-Omani cultures to create a ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994) that is socially constructed from micro and macro factors.

This finding also highlights the importance for teachers to critically evaluate the content found in books or websites discussing the Gulf region and specifically Oman. Such resources might inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or adopt a reductionist approach influenced by essentialist perspectives, which tend to oversimplify the diverse cultures of the Middle East or the Gulf by portraying them as homogenous. Although Oman shares some cultural, religious, economic and political aspects with other Gulf countries, it differs in other aspects. “Culture as a site of struggle”

according to Martin and Nakayama (2010) is one of the CIC perspectives which the findings of this study also revealed. Contrary to the belief in a monolithic culture, the participants (the ones who worked in the GCC) of this study observed variations in how Oman approaches some aspects of Islam compared to neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The findings emphasised that Gulf cultures are not homogenous, with religious influences, notably Islam, being important but not singularly determining cultural disparities. Instead, the research emphasised the multifaceted nature of culture, shaped by religious, political, historical, economic, and social contexts. Economic factors, particularly wealth, were identified as contributors to unique cultural expressions, as exemplified by a comparison between Oman and the UAE (as reported by Rose). The study did not aim to provide definitive answers about observed cultural differences. Rather, the study advocates for a critical perspective, encouraging a more comprehensive understanding of cultural intricacies, and highlights the effectiveness of employing the Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) framework in delving into and comprehending the complexities and power dynamics of Omani and Gulf cultures.

The findings also showed that there were two major influential contextual factors on institutional culture: religion and culture which will be discussed in the following findings.

### **University socio-cultural and religious guidelines**

Examining expatriate teachers' perspectives regarding the cultural guidelines of SQU and CPS (institutional culture), and how the teachers perceived and reacted to them, revealed a complex interplay between unofficial guidelines, implicit expectations, and culturally accepted norms. This interplay significantly shaped teachers' behaviours and intercultural interactions in the educational setting. This exploration illuminated the multifaceted nature of institutional cultural guidelines and their profound impact on teaching practices in a diverse environment. However, with all those expectations, the findings showed a consensus among the participants that there were no clear official regulations or guidelines that teachers needed to be aware of regarding cultural, political, social and religious aspects at SQU or teaching in the CPS. This posed tough challenges, especially for new teachers. Instead, reliance on implicit guidelines and informal suggestions from the induction committee or through informal conversations was observed among expatriate teachers. As a result, expatriate teachers diverged markedly in terms of interpretation and obedience to such vague (guidelines and regulations). Those suggested guidelines did affect teachers' behaviours inside the institutions and their classrooms; consequently, causing uncertainty, anxiety and insecurity among some of them. This finding highlights the necessity for teachers to exercise cultural sensitivity and adaptability when navigating potentially sensitive topics in their teaching.

The lack of formal ‘official’ policies emphasised the importance of self-education through interactions with colleagues and local individuals to gain cultural insights necessary for effective teaching and avoidance of potential career damaging mistakes.

There was an acknowledgement of tacitly accepted guidelines and cultural norms influencing educational practices. For instance, unspoken rules regarding gender segregation were noted, indicating the complexities teachers faced in adhering to socio-cultural and religious norms in order to create an inclusive learning environment. The convergence of formal pedagogical guidelines and implicit cultural norms highlighted the intricate relationship between institutional expectations and local cultural practices. Teaching practices were seen as deeply embedded in cultural contexts which influenced both formal and informal aspects of classroom dynamics.

### **Socio-cultural, religious and political influence on institutional culture**

The findings showed that institutional culture within SQU was shaped partly by the socio-political, socio-cultural, and religious contexts (macro contexts). This highlighted the intricate relationship between religion, politics and culture and their impact on the institution and thus on teachers' practices. These macro contexts are emphasised by principles of CIC and are included under “importance of context” and “importance of power” (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

In the context of expatriate ELT teachers who teach Muslim students in Oman, an understanding of the cultural and religious significance of Islam to Omanis is crucial for effective communication and relationship building with students and colleagues. That is because Islamic religious practices and beliefs directly affect the daily routines of individuals, especially when the religion is stated in the constitution of the country as the official religion, as is the case in Oman. Clear examples of such influence is the timing of daily prayers and the observance of Ramadhan affect classroom schedules.

The findings showed that religion played a big part in shaping the institutional culture and it was an important element that was well recognised by all the participants. The participants' perspectives illustrated the centrality of Islam in Omani culture and how it significantly influences everyone's daily lives. Participants recognised the reciprocal relationship between religion and culture, with both affecting each other to a certain extent. They noted that while culture impacts some aspects of religion, religion also influences cultural aspects within a specific context. This

suggests that these dynamics are powerful and profoundly influence the educational system within these culturo-religious contexts. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of their significance and take them into consideration while working in this institution.

The findings also showed that religion's effect on the educational system was on its institutional organisation, its staff, and working hours. It affected the social life of all as the findings showed the institution has social and cultural expectations and explicit and unofficial regulations that partly stem from religion such as dress code, prayer times, and gender-designated spaces at SQU. Teachers emphasised the need for awareness and understanding of Islam and Omani culture while teaching at SQU. Some (such as Malcolm) expressed concerns about a lack of education among some non-Muslim teachers regarding the basics of the culture and religion in Oman. They highlighted the significance of this understanding in creating an inclusive and respectful teaching and learning environment.

However, expatriate teachers had different perspectives when it came to understanding the institutional policies and their origin. Some of the participants conflated culture with religion which resulted in actions that went against some of the university regulations (signs and designated gender spaces). Their interpretations varied based on how much they understood to distinguish what might be religious, what might be generally cultural and what might be only an institutional policy. This finding also emphasised the challenge of distinguishing between religion and general culture, as participants often used the word interchangeably, causing potential misunderstandings. Participants also acknowledged the difficulty in separating religious practices from general cultural practices, as observed in their experiences in Oman. This overlap was highlighted by examples such as the blurred lines between certain local customs and religious traditions. Their accounts echoed the works of scholars emphasising the intertwined nature of cultural, social, and religious factors in intercultural interactions.

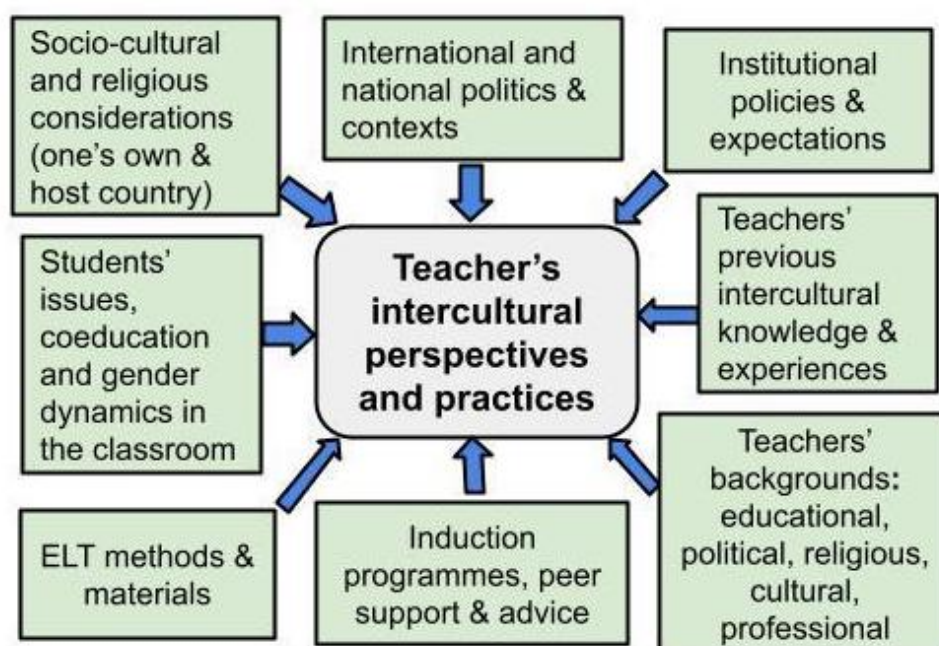
To avoid such confusion, the findings stressed the importance of incorporating cultural sensitivity and respect for religious beliefs of the students in ELT practices. Acknowledging and accommodating these students' beliefs within language instruction can contribute to a culturally responsive learning environment. This approach aligns with the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Gay, 2018).

The findings of this study indicated that the political context is another pivotal factor that contributed to shaping the culture at the CPS, SQU and consequently affected teachers' teaching practices in the classroom.

The findings noted that teachers should be cautious regarding the politics of the host country which was reflected in their cautious approach when selecting topics as teaching materials for Omani students. The teachers' approach to addressing the issue of discussing politics in the classroom was influenced by the guidance provided during induction sessions when they first arrived. Many reported being advised to avoid controversial topics, including politics, as outlined in the suggested unofficial guidelines for expatriate staff.

In summary, the findings indicated that teachers at SQU engaged with and perceived the cultural context through a lens that incorporates socio-cultural, religious, political, and institutional dimensions. This highlighted the integral role of religion, politics and general culture in shaping the fabric of the educational institution. Their interactions with this socio-cultural context shaped their teaching practices, communication strategies, relationships with students and colleagues and how they dealt with ELT materials. The intersection between institutional values, policies, and religious practices highlighted the need for expatriate teachers to recognise, respect, and adapt to these socio-cultural nuances. This contributes to a harmonious and culturally sensitive educational environment. The study advocates for a comprehensive understanding of these socio-cultural dimensions within the context of Omani culture and the educational institution. Understanding and taking these institutional factors into account can help EFL teachers (locals and expatriates) to create a more effective and culturally responsive learning environment and to address the challenges posed by the institutional cultural context.

While it is challenging to precisely classify or categorise how these contextual factors contributed to shaping and influencing teachers' perspectives and their intercultural practices at this particular institution (CPS, SQU), the following figure lists the contextual factors that participants identified as the main contributors to their intercultural interactions and perspectives at the CPS.



**Figure 17: What shapes teachers' intercultural perspectives and practices at CPS, SQU**

**Research Question Three (RQ3): What are the expatriate teachers' intercultural perspectives on and interactions with the socio-cultural and religious issues in the classroom?**

This question has given rise to other inquiries that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the matter. It is crucial to examine how the cultural context at SQU impacts the classroom experiences and instructional strategies of expatriate teachers. The primary focus of this question was to understand how expatriate teachers navigate socio-cultural and religious issues within the classroom culture. The intention was to explore how these teachers address and interact with the broader cultural framework influenced by macro powers and contextual factors. Essentially, the inquiry seeks to answer the question of how expatriate teachers negotiate the micro-level context while simultaneously considering the macro-level power dynamics that surround this educational setting (dialectic approach) (Martin and Nakayama, 2015).

The findings showed that expatriate teachers perceived the classroom culture as being influenced by a number of contextual factors (macro and micro). These factors are discussed in the following findings.

A notable finding is that teachers should take into account gender dynamics within the educational context, ensuring equal opportunities and treatment for all students. Being receptive to the cultural

nuances and traditions of Oman can help teachers foster meaningful connections with their students and promote a positive learning experience.

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate landscape of pedagogical practices, particularly the challenges associated with implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in a mixed-gender classroom deeply influenced by socio-cultural norms and gender dynamics. The observed interaction patterns underline the need for educators to navigate a nuanced terrain where socio-cultural considerations significantly impact the dynamics of language teaching and learning.

The findings showed that the participants varied in their approaches to discussing religion and politics in the classroom. That variation reflects the nuanced and complex nature of their perceptions regarding the sensitivity of these topics in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Oman.

The participants as a group were uncertain about where the information on topics to avoid (controversial topics) came from. This indicates a serious gap in communication or guidance within the educational institution. While some, like Rose, mentioned informal guidelines, the lack of official documentation raises critical questions about the clarity and consistency of the guidance provided to teachers. This information gap contributes to the participants' varied perceptions and approaches to handling sensitive topics. It is clearly a source of anxiety in the face of potential employment insecurity.

Nevertheless, the findings showed that the participants were aware of the need to avoid certain topics. This aligns with the existing literature on ELT in culturally diverse contexts. The emphasis on steering clear of controversial subjects like religion, relationships and politics is rooted in a desire to maintain a harmonious learning environment and respect students' cultural and religious sensitivities (Charise, 2007; Findlow, 2001).

Additionally, the examination of how expatriate teachers navigate controversial topics, specifically those encompassing religion and politics, reveals a diverse spectrum of instructional approaches. From instances of avoidance to confident incorporation, the participants' varied responses highlight the dynamic interplay between cultural relevance and pedagogical choices. This underlines the necessity of adopting a culturally relevant pedagogy, as suggested by Ladson-Billings (2021), that prioritises inclusivity, respect, and effective communication in diverse educational settings.

The findings showed that the participants' cautious approach (culturally sensitive approach) to discussing sensitive topics, such as religion and politics, also extends to other areas like gender, relationships, alcohol, and sex. This reflects their awareness of the cultural and religious sensitivities of their students. The participants' tendency to avoid these topics, even when they might be considered appropriate or common in other educational settings, highlights their adaptability and cultural sensitivity within the Omani context. It also reflects their desire to mitigate potential risks to their employment and careers.

The findings showed that some participants (Laura and Rose) decided to avoid expressing their personal opinions on religion and other sensitive topics. Laura's emphasis on students' comfort and learning outcomes aligns with the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings; 2021). By prioritising the avoidance of controversial or emotionally charged subjects, Laura aims to create an environment where students feel safe, respected, and more likely to engage in effective language learning, but at the expense of maintaining a non-critical 'no change' conformist approach.

This demonstrates a recognition of power dynamics in the teacher-student relationship at the CPS, SQU, Oman. This aligns with a critical perspective on intercultural communication that acknowledges the influence of power dynamics in the classroom (Nakayama & Martin, 2017). The teachers were aware that they did not want to use their authority as teachers (power) to impose their opinions on students. The approach chosen by my participants may not align with the post-colonial feminist teacher perspective, exemplified by Rhodenizer (2011). In her consideration of teachers as agents of change, reflected in her raised question, there is a divergence in ideological alignment. Rhodenizer's (2011) ideology is reflected in her question, which highlights this perspective: "Is it even possible to deliver ELT by a Western feminist teacher without colonising students and what do some influential post-colonial feminists have to say about that?" (p.14). In this context, the reference to a post-colonial feminist perspective, as represented by Rhodenizer (2011), suggests a particular viewpoint regarding the role of teachers within an educational framework. Post-colonial feminist perspectives often emphasise challenging power structures, addressing historical inequalities, and advocating for social change within educational settings. Rhodenizer's perspective, as an example, might highlight teachers as active agents capable of instigating change within these structures. This could involve questioning traditional power dynamics, addressing colonial legacies within education, and advocating for inclusivity and



equity. The participants' approach or actions might not directly reflect this active agency or explicit advocacy for change within the educational system. This divergence does not necessarily invalidate either perspective but rather underlines the complexity and diversity of viewpoints within the field of education. It suggests that different teachers or participants may approach their roles and practices from various ideological standpoints, influenced by their experiences, contexts, and beliefs about the role of educators in affecting change within the educational landscape. However, the participants' approach suggests that regardless of the teachers' ideology, teachers need to abide by the institutional policies even if they do not align with their personal ideologies.

The findings also showed that there was an interplay between personal beliefs and professional practices. For example, Malcolm's decision to filter out certain topics based on his religious identity even in the USA demonstrates the power of his religious belief influencing his teaching practices in Oman. In this case his personal beliefs are in line with the institution's and the host country's ideology.

The findings also showed that some participants (Leo and Malcolm) were confident to discuss what they had been advised not to discuss in classrooms such as religion and politics. Their decision indicates a more nuanced understanding of the local context and their recognition of the integral role of religion in the Omani society challenges the blanket approach suggested by guidelines. By acknowledging the significance of religion in students' lives, the participants demonstrated an awareness of the cultural fabric of Oman. Their approach aligns with intercultural communication theories that emphasise the importance of acknowledging and respecting cultural nuances, even if they involve sensitive topics. It also reflects an 'ecological lens' approach to teaching by recognising the holistic nature of education and the need to address topics that are relevant and meaningful to students' lives (Tudor, 2001) as long as they are tackled constructively.

The participants' diverse approaches to addressing controversial (sensitive) topics in the Omani ELT context highlight the complex interplay between cultural sensitivity, institutional guidelines, and individual beliefs. Their adaptability to the local context, cautiousness in navigating cultural differences and emphasis on creating a positive and inclusive learning environment align with the principles of ICC and CRP. The findings highlight the importance of providing clear and consistent guidance to teachers regarding sensitive topics and the need for ongoing professional development to enhance ICC in ELT. The provision of explicit and official guidelines may reduce

teacher anxiety, but there is a danger of such an approach ‘fossilising’ current institutional practice and inhibiting cultural change.

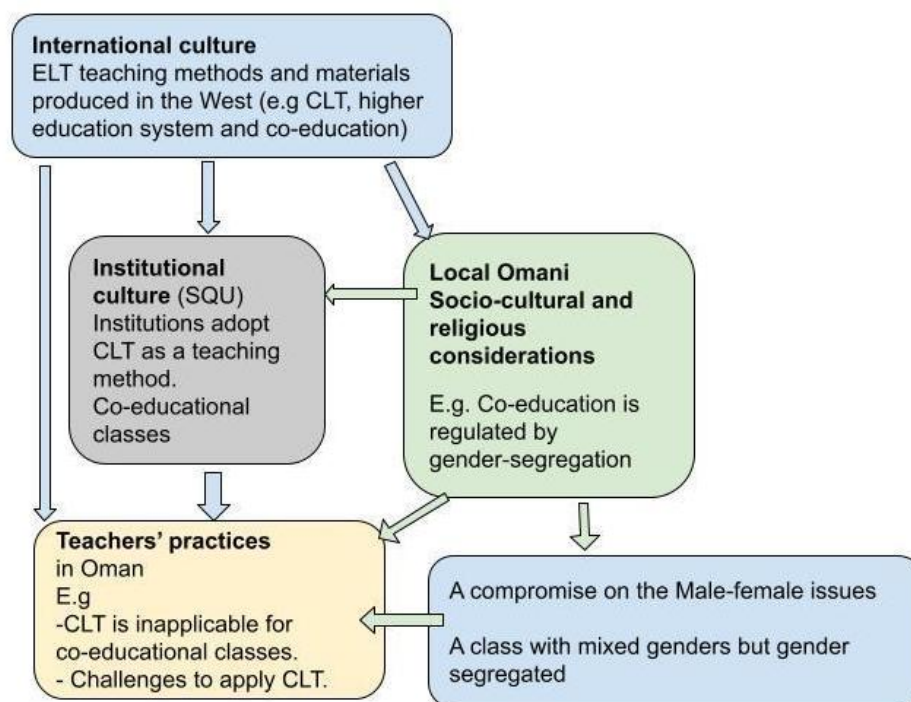
The finding showed that most of the participants tended to merely avoid sensitive topics, such as religion and politics. This reflects a form of self-censorship aimed at fostering a safe and comfortable learning environment and securing employment. This approach aligns with the broader theme of censorship in ELT, as discussed by other researchers (Findlow, 2001; Abu Wardeh, 2003; Martin, 2003; Elyas, 2011; ). The literature emphasises that censorship in ELT is often rooted in concerns about potential clashes with local beliefs, values, and cultural norms, as well as political sensitivities (Charise, 2007; Findlow, 2001). The participants' awareness of which topics might be problematic aligns with the idea that teachers need to be cautious about materials that could lead to cultural or religious controversies (Elyas, 2011). The complexities surrounding self-censorship become evident when considering the participants' diverse responses which were influenced by their cultural and religious backgrounds. The finding suggests that individuals with different cultural and religious perspectives may approach censorship differently which reflects the diversity in their certainty and confidence in handling sensitive issues (Hudson, 2006). This diversity underlines the need for a nuanced understanding of the potential impacts of self-censorship on students' exposure to varied viewpoints.

The finding also showed that some participants resorted to the use of alternative teaching methods and topics that were perceived as culturally or religiously non-controversial. This further illustrates the participants' adaptive strategies in navigating the complexities of censorship. This supports the notion that teachers may choose to avoid certain materials altogether or modify them drastically to align with local cultural norms (Abu Wardeh, 2003; Martin, 2003) and conform with the institutional guidelines.

In conclusion, the participants' approach to self-censorship echoes broader trends observed in the literature on ELT in the Gulf region. The careful consideration of which topics to discuss or avoid reflects an ongoing dialogue between educators and the cultural, political, and religious contexts in which they operate. The nuances of self-censorship highlight the intricate balance teachers must strike between maintaining cultural sensitivity and fostering open, diverse and even progressive learning environments.

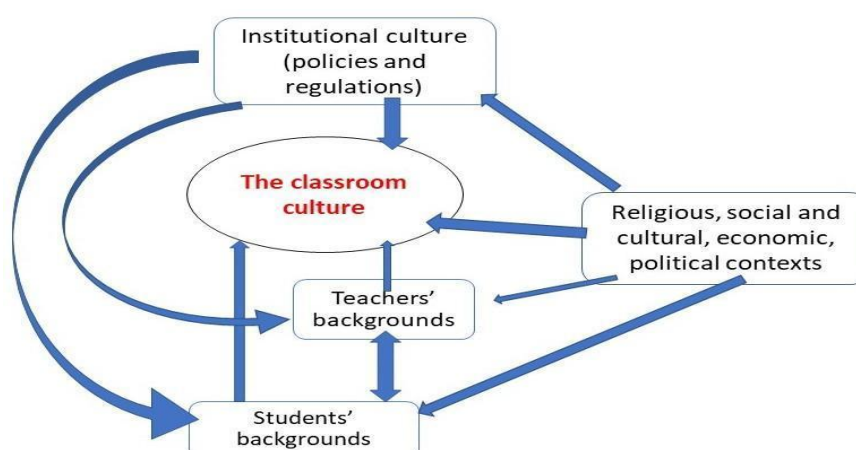
Overall, it can be concluded that teaching at SQU in Oman requires teachers, whether expatriates or locals, to be mindful of several sociocultural considerations. Firstly, teachers need to be aware of the gender norms and socio-cultural expectations of the society in which they teach. They should take care to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students but without abandoning a critical perspective. Political, socio-cultural, and religious influences were also shown to impact the ELT process in Oman, with certain topics being more sensitive than others due to their potential to challenge cultural or religious beliefs of the students. Secondly, the critical intercultural communication perspective aligns with this by emphasising the need for teachers to possess IC, adaptability, and sensitivity in navigating the multifaceted dimensions of diverse cultural settings, considering socio-cultural, religious, and institutional influences. Understanding these varied influences on teaching practices is crucial for fostering effective IC and creating effective learning environments. Recognising the multifaceted guidelines and their impact on teaching practices lays the foundation for a deeper appreciation of the contextual approach to intercultural communication and education within SQU. Thirdly, the cultural aspect of SQU plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and teaching practices of expatriate teachers. Cultural diversity at the university creates a dynamic and vibrant teaching environment, but it also presents unique challenges for expatriate teachers. Navigating cultural differences and adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of a diverse student body (including gender dynamics) can be both rewarding and demanding. Fourthly, teachers should be aware of the conservative nature of some Omani students and they should adapt their teaching methods accordingly to create a comfortable and inclusive learning environment. The findings highlight the significance of context-specific norms, societal expectations, and institutional guidelines in shaping teaching strategies and intercultural interactions. Expatriate teachers may need to be culturally sensitive and attuned to the traditions and values of Omani students. Developing intercultural communication skills and fostering mutual respect between teachers and students can enhance the overall teaching experience and promote effective teaching and learning outcomes.

The discussion above can be illustrated in the following figures, which, to some extent, elucidate the interplay of contextual factors and how they influence the classroom culture and teachers' practices.



**Figure 18: The influence of international educational culture and socio-cultural and religious considerations on the institutional culture and teachers' practices in Oman**

Understanding that classrooms have a multifaceted cultural context (see Figure: Contextual factors influencing the classroom culture) means that the teaching and learning environment is not just influenced by what goes on inside the classroom but is also shaped by various factors (macro and micro) such as the religious, social, political, and cultural context in which the classroom operates (Pennycook, 2021).



**Figure 19: Contextual factors influencing the classroom culture**

The findings of this current study suggests that when deciding on a teaching strategy or technique, it is, therefore, important to consider the classroom's unique environment, which is made up of

teachers, students, the educational system and the society surrounding them. Chick (2003) adds that teachers need to consider that occurrences inside the classroom are inherently connected to the society around them. This argument has been discussed and supported by researchers who emphasise the importance of context in ELT (e.g. Bax, 2003; Kabir, 2011; Holliday, 1997; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Shaw, 1997).

Pennycook (2021) usefully provides a clear picture of how these considerations are directly related to the work of language educators: "our classrooms... are affected by and have effects on the wider social, cultural, economic, and political world.... As educators we have to believe this: otherwise, our only role is to reproduce the social world as it is" (p. 130).

While Neuliep's (2018) contextual approach to intercultural communication (CAIC) is commonly applied to investigate intercultural communication within particular contexts, I utilised his general model to scrutinise the intercultural perspectives and teaching practices in the classrooms. This happened because the model enabled me to gain a profound comprehension of the teachers' perspectives and teaching practices through their engagement with the socio-cultural context at the university. This was achieved not just by blending various teachers' perspectives and practices, but also by concentrating on the contextual factors influences within and beyond the teaching environment. The model I embraced enhanced my comprehension in various aspects. Initially, I realised that investigating the contextual factors influencing teachers' intercultural communication at the CPS and in the classroom is not solely shaped by the local cultural context; it also holds the capacity to reshape the context in which they operate, such as classrooms and the institutional culture. Additionally, I recognise that the interactions between teachers and students and their shared space (classroom) are two-way, displaying mutual adjustments and reciprocal interactions. Thirdly, the classroom settings not only involves interrelationships among its components but is also open to external impacts originating from the broader surroundings, including the institution and the broader community (Bruner; 2001; Conteh, 2000; Holliday, 1997). Overall, I argue that teachers' intercultural communication exists within a layered structure of interconnected factors where each element affects and is impacted by the others.

## **Contributions of the study**

I consider that this study makes a valuable contribution to the literature of the fields of intercultural communication (ICC), critical intercultural communication (CIC), and English Language

Teaching (ELT). It also provides insights and recommendations for teachers, researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders in Oman and beyond.

This study has employed multiple theoretical frameworks and perspectives associated with IC to delve into and understand the teachers' perspectives and interactions within cultural contexts at a higher education institution. The theories and perspectives are critical intercultural communication, and a contextual approach to IC. By integrating these frameworks in one study, this study offers a theoretical contribution to the fields of cultural studies, particularly within IC and the CIC framework. This study successfully employed all these perspectives and frameworks to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. It would have been challenging to study it solely from one perspective or within a single theoretical framework.

Another contribution of this study is that CIC was used as a theoretical framework to explore expatriate teachers' perspectives and interactions with the cultural contextual factors which all contribute to shaping the cultural context at a higher education institution, CPS, SQU, the micro-culture and how classroom culture affects expatriate teachers' perspectives and teaching practices. This study draws attention to the contributing factors of those contexts so individual concerns should not be ignored as the cultural contexts affect teachers' practices. The study investigated how teachers' IC was shaped by the socio-political and religious contextual factors embedded in the power dynamics in the educational system at SQU in Oman.

Another theoretical contribution is that by aligning study outcomes with the CIC framework, the credibility and applicability of this theoretical framework is confirmed as useful in the realm of ELT and IC studies. This also shows that CIC is especially valid in ELT in the context of Oman and CPS, SQU in particular.

This study's practical contribution lies in its distinctive exploration of the experiences and perspectives of expatriate ELT teachers in Oman, a context that has not been extensively researched in the literature. It can be considered as a contribution to CIC studies as there were no studies in Oman, to my knowledge, that used the CIC perspective in exploring ELT teachers' perspectives and teaching experiences. It uniquely focused on understanding the teachers' perspectives and teaching practices in relation to their interaction with the local socio-cultural educational context. Although there have been studies conducted on expatriate teachers' experiences, cultural challenges, and cultural adaptations in various countries, there is limited

knowledge of such experiences in Oman, especially in relation to expatriate teachers' intercultural interactions with the power dynamics and contextual factors surrounding the educational context. Therefore, informed by CIC, this study sought to fill knowledge and empirical gaps in the literature by providing an in-depth analysis and discussion of the specific socio-cultural/political/ religious factors that expatriate EFL teachers faced in this particular context (CPS, SQU). It also clarified, to some extent, how those contextual factors affected teachers' IC in the institutional culture and the classroom culture at the CPS, SQU (see the figures above).

This study has also contributed to the body of IC research by offering empirical data and insights specific to the Omani context. It could inspire further research exploring intercultural dynamics in diverse educational settings or among different stakeholder groups. Additionally, this study provides practical recommendations to help institutions and teachers better navigate socio-cultural and religious factors and enhance their intercultural communication skills.

### **Limitations of this study**

As with any research, there are potential limitations to this study that should be acknowledged.

A potential gap in this study could be the limited exploration of the perspectives and experiences of local faculty members within the same university context. While this research focuses on expatriate teachers' (mainly from the USA and the UK) interactions with the socio-cultural and religious context, incorporating the viewpoints of local teachers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural dynamics in this educational institution. By including the perspectives of local and international faculty members, this study could uncover a broader spectrum of experiences, perceptions, and challenges in intercultural communication within the university setting. This inclusion would allow for a comparative analysis between the perspectives of expatriate teachers and local teachers, offering insights into potential points of convergence or divergence in their experiences and perceptions of the socio-cultural and religious context. Furthermore, exploring how these various teachers perceive the role of expatriate teachers in facilitating intercultural understanding or educational practices within the context of Oman could add depth to this study. Understanding how contrasting groups perceive and engage with intercultural interactions could uncover additional layers of complexity and potentially inform recommendations for fostering more effective intercultural communication within the university environment. Therefore, considering the perspectives of local teachers alongside those of

expatriate teachers would fill a potential gap in this study, offering a more holistic view of the intercultural dynamics at the university in Oman.

The small sample size (five expatriate teachers) may limit the perspectives, especially in that the CPS is known for having teachers of more than 30 nationalities. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the findings to different educational settings. Involving more teachers who are from different nationalities (besides USA and UK) may enrich the findings and may contribute different perspectives as they may share more of the cultural background aspects with their students and they may be more aware of other factors and powers such as socio-cultural and religious factors that affect the institutional culture and their teaching practices. Involving other nationalities, other than Americans and British, could also enrich the findings in terms of exploring how different cultural backgrounds, teaching experiences and educational knowledge feed into their intercultural communication in Oman. A larger sample size could provide a more representative picture of expatriate EFL teachers' perspectives and practices at the CPS, SQU. This limitation stemmed mainly from time and logistical constraints, as well as the predominantly qualitative discursive approach of the study. Qualitative case study research stresses the thorough exploration of particular phenomena within a specific context, usually with a limited number of participants.

Another limitation of this study is that its findings are grounded in the context of a specific university in Oman. Consequently, these findings might not universally apply across all educational settings, cultural contexts, or regions. Moreover, they may not necessarily even extend to other universities or be comparable to institutions outside Oman. Although this current qualitative study does not seek generalisation of findings, it is important to note that the findings of this study may only apply to the specific context in which the research was conducted. Nevertheless, these findings may help demonstrate that critical intercultural communication can decipher and acknowledge the contextual factors to draw broader conclusions. Although this study centred on a single institution, there is wide future potential for expansion to encompass additional universities. Such an expansion would enhance our understanding of the nationwide intercultural communication status. It is crucial to investigate how the CPS, with its unique policies, contextual factors, and cultural expectations, differs from other educational institutions in Oman.

The final limitation of this study is that conducting an in-depth exploration of intercultural negotiation and interactions requires much time for data collection and analysis. PhD studies have



time limitations, which may restrict the depth and breadth of data collection and analysis. I should acknowledge these time constraints and clearly define the scope of the study. However, doing the study during the peak of Covid-19 pandemic affected this study substantially, especially during data collection when my plan had been to observe classes in person (4-6 times). Due to medical constraints, I only managed to attend 2 classes of each participant teacher. That limited the in-person class observations and the stimulated recall discussions as later on the university completely closed. Some of the stimulated recall discussions were carried out online which was not planned for or expected. This unexpected change could have impacted the processes and procedures of data collection. I was not entirely confident about conducting online interviews at that stage and it was a new experience for both myself and my participants. This unforeseen shift might have made some participants uncomfortable with being recorded or seen in their own personal spaces. Three of my participants withdrew at that stage on the basis that it was too overwhelming for them to participate during Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the unforeseen interruptions that occurred during the data collection process, I successfully gathered sufficient data to address my research questions.

It is crucial for researchers to acknowledge these limitations and discuss their implications in the study. Recognising the above constraints provides transparency and highlights opportunities for future research to address these limitations and expand upon the findings of this study.

## **Recommendations of this study**

Based on the findings of this study, several potential implications and recommendations can be suggested to various stakeholders within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), intercultural communication, higher education institutions and beyond.

### **Policymakers**

The findings of this study can inform policymakers in the field of ELT. This has implications for higher education institutions, whether locally and internationally, especially the ones where expatriate workers are from various cultural backgrounds. By understanding the challenges faced by expatriate EFL teachers and the importance of IC, policymakers can develop guidelines and standards that promote culturally responsive teaching practices and foster intercultural understanding among teachers and students. Moreover, policymakers at various levels may find this study valuable in shaping policies related to cultural diversity and education. The findings

could contribute to evidence-based policymaking aimed at creating inclusive and supportive environments for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Institutions and educational policymakers might consider integrating insights from this study into professional development initiatives and courses to better prepare teachers for diverse intercultural contexts. Therefore, teacher educators and trainers involved in preparing future EFL teachers can utilise the research findings to enhance their training programmes by incorporating IC, CIC, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability components into teacher preparation courses. By doing so, they can better equip future teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate intercultural negotiation and interactions effectively.

### **Teacher training**

Upon careful consideration of the CIC framework, I am inclined to make recommendations in accordance with the study's findings and the guiding principles of CIC that have shaped this research.

The CIC framework places significant emphasis on context, culture, power dynamics, and history. This framework provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding and improving IC in ELT. Therefore, I recommend that educational programmes at higher education and teacher training integrate the CIC framework in the teaching courses. By following CIC principles in educational programmes and teachers' training, there should be an emphasis on considering the context, culture, and power dynamics of the place where teachers are involved. Considering the context entails being sensitive to the socio-political, cultural and religious contexts of the place, among other contextual factors. Therefore, devising inclusive and adaptable pedagogies that align with the diverse contexts identified in this study is essential.

Additionally, based on the findings of this study indicating that pre-service education and previous intercultural communication knowledge and experiences enhanced the participants' intercultural competence while working in Oman, it is important to recommend that educational professionals take steps to create pre-service and/or in-service teacher training initiatives. These programmes should aim to familiarise EFL teachers with ICC and highlight its benefits and contemporary relevance in education. Furthermore, these training programmes should equip teachers with practical methodologies to seamlessly integrate IC into their EFL teaching practices. Considering the evolving educational needs of our globalised world, teachers should also be encouraged to undertake individual efforts to deepen their understanding of IC.

This study also may have valuable empirical data to the broader field of intercultural communication research. It may inspire further investigations into the interplay of socio-cultural and religious factors in different educational contexts. By doing so, it may potentially lead to the refinement or expansion of existing theoretical frameworks. The research may also have implications to the existing body of knowledge on intercultural communication, EFL teaching, and cultural dimensions of language teaching settings and pedagogies. Researchers and academics can build upon these findings to conduct further studies. They can explore different cultural contexts by examining the experiences of teachers from diverse backgrounds and by investigating the impact of specific interventions on IC in ELT.

### **Institutions**

This study offers valuable insights for educational institutions where expatriate teachers are employed. Institutions can reflect on the findings of this study to revise, assess and improve institutional policies, support mechanisms, and professional development programmes that cater to the unique needs of expatriate teachers. Understanding the contextual factors (power dynamics) highlighted in this study might prompt institutions to establish support systems that facilitate positive intercultural interactions among faculty members and students. These support systems could include supporting the professional development of expatriate teachers by offering advice about successful strategies for navigating cultural differences, societal and institutional expectations, and socio-cultural considerations. This could involve creating platforms for open dialogue, cultural events, or collaborative projects that encourage positive intercultural interactions between members of the academic community and enhance IC and adaptability.

Although the study centred on expatriate teachers at the CPS, SQU, Oman, its implications extend beyond this specific group and context. This is because teachers' culture is shaped not only by their nationality but also by various identities and factors. This study highlighted that culture is not solely determined by a national context; rather, it can be influenced by teachers' experiences and other contextual factors (power dynamics). Therefore, the study's implications could extend beyond the academic realm, potentially influencing practices in the global workforce. Understanding the socio-cultural challenges and the strategies employed by expatriate teachers to address them could provide valuable insights for a broad spectrum of institutions, international agencies, companies, businesses and organisations operating in culturally diverse environments.

This knowledge and understanding of the contextual factor's dynamics can enhance their ability to communicate effectively in diverse and multicultural settings.

Higher education institutions, along with other organisations and companies, should explore the necessity of formalising unwritten rules and informal guidelines within institutional policies. This aims to enhance clarity and guidance, preventing uncertainty and ambiguity for teachers and students, all while avoiding the risk of freezing or fossilising progress and development. These guidelines and rules should be clear and explicit institutional guidelines for addressing cultural, political, and religious aspects within the academic setting. Implementing formalised policies can offer a clear framework for expatriate teachers. This recommendation addresses the current lack of explicit directives identified in the findings of this study.

### **Institutional support**

Universities should provide institutional support and resources to facilitate the integration of expatriate teachers into the socio-cultural fabric of Oman. This might include mentorship programmes, cultural orientation sessions, and access to resources that promote a deeper understanding of local customs, traditions, and religious practices that are experienced visibly in the working place (at least). As reported by the participants of this study and found useful when they first arrived in Oman was peer mentorship where experienced expatriate/local teachers assist newcomers in understanding the socio-cultural and religious landscape in Oman. These mentorship programmes can help teachers navigate the challenges associated with intercultural negotiation and interactions. They offer a platform for sharing experiences and recommended practices. It can introduce them to the educational system and its expectations effectively and provide them with practical strategies for navigating the socio-cultural and religious context in Oman.

They should also introduce them to the educational system in Oman, general information about working and living in Oman, the differences in teaching methodology and tackling educational and cultural issues that they may encounter while teaching in Oman or similar contexts. This should be reviewed and revised regularly so as to encompass historical and social changes and not become rigid permanent dogma.

Establish feedback mechanisms where expatriate teachers can provide input on the effectiveness of support programmes and the implementation of cultural guidelines. This ensures that interventions are responsive to the evolving needs and experiences of the teachers. This

recommendation is grounded in the study's findings, wherein some teachers had suggested improvements to the induction sessions they experienced.

### **Curriculum and teaching materials stakeholders**

Based on the findings of this study, which also aligns with the literature, curriculum developers, publishers of ELT materials, and teachers should contextualise teaching materials to be more responsive to the context where ELT is taking place. The findings of this study recommends that they develop and adapt teaching materials, resources, and curricula that reflect the local culture and context. This includes socio-cultural and religious aspects, into the curriculum by incorporating local examples, cultural references, and real-life situations that resonate with students' experiences. This ensures that the educational content reflects the cultural context of Oman by fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environment. By using culturally responsive materials, teachers can create inclusive and engaging learning environments that promote intercultural understanding and appreciation. Those materials stakeholders should consider and promote the development of course materials and teaching approaches that reflect the cultural diversity within the student body (considering gender dynamics), fostering a more inclusive educational experience. This recommendation is based on the finding of this study that teachers adopted different approaches when dealing with controversial topics. They had to take into account gender sensitivities and specificities, as well as socio-cultural, political, and religious considerations.

### **Teachers**

The findings of this research can directly benefit expatriate ELT teachers working in non-native English-speaking contexts, particularly in Oman or similar cultural contexts. The study provides insights into their perceptions, challenges, and strategies for navigating intercultural negotiation and interactions. Teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of their teaching context and use this knowledge to positively adapt their teaching practices, enhance their IC, and promote effective communication with students.

In the realm of ELT, this study offers insights into how socio-cultural factors shape the perceptions and teaching practices of international teachers regarding institutional systems within their respective cultures. Recognising the distinct cultures within educational institutions requires

adaptation and accommodation to the existing culture. This compels teachers to align with the institutional expectations.

By considering CIC, and CAIC perspectives and principles, teachers are urged to adapt teaching methodologies that consider and accommodate contextual factors. This involves a flexible approach that respects and incorporates diverse cultural norms and institutional dynamics. This can be done by exploring the integration of cultural sensitivity into pedagogical practices and examining how educators can leverage cultural diversity to enhance learning experiences.

## **Learners**

Learners of EFL might benefit from this study. From the teachers' perspectives of this study, students need to consciously understand the culture of the institution and the culture of the classroom which may differ from their own previous educational and domestic experience. Therefore, they need to accept it as a new culture (third space or third culture) to which they need to accommodate themselves. By doing so, they can overcome the socio-cultural tensions that they bring with them to the classroom from outside which hinder their learning and their IC either with other students or with their teachers.

## **Future research**

- While this study was informed by the CIC framework, there is a need for a study that explores areas that require more in-depth investigation. This could involve investigating additional contextual factors or expanding the study to different educational contexts for a more comprehensive understanding.
- There is a need for a study that explores students' perspectives and practices in navigating the university culture (third culture/space), which neither entirely reflects national cultures nor local and domestic sub-cultures in Oman. This study may provide insight into how students from different subcultures in Oman interact with university and classroom culture. It will shed light on their perceptions of coeducation, gender dynamics, and the extent to which the university culture creates an inclusive environment for Omani students.

- Since this current study investigated expatriate teachers on the classroom culture, it is essential to conduct research that explores how students interact with expatriate teachers and to what extent students need to improve their intercultural communication.
- Research should focus on ELT materials using critical discourse analysis to investigate how these teaching materials meet the local culture or diverge from it. It would be better if the study compares home produced materials with commercial materials used in the institution and how these materials can integrate local national culture with other cultures in the world.
- There is a requirement for a study that analyses the documents available, whether official or unofficial, that are concerned with the sociocultural guidelines of which teachers and students should be aware in their institution. This will clarify this grey area that the teachers of this current study expressed uncertainty about.
- It is imperative to investigate ELT after COVID-19 and how the socio-cultural and religious factors affect the educational and teachers' perspectives and practices in the online context. This is to explore to what extent the socio-cultural factors affect the new teaching and learning environment which may have its specificities, potentials, and challenges.

These recommendations aim to enhance the intercultural communication of expatriate ELT teachers, promote cultural sensitivity, and improve their teaching practices in the university context. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can create an environment that fosters effective intercultural negotiation and interactions. This ultimately benefits both teachers and students in their language learning journeys and contributes to the overall success of the educational experience in Oman.

By disseminating the research findings to these various stakeholders, the results of the study can have a positive impact on the field of ELT, ICC, and CIC. This dissemination fosters effective intercultural communication, promotes cultural understanding, and improves the overall quality of language teaching and learning experiences. Moreover, considering the implications of this study has the potential to contribute not only to the academic discourse but also to practical strategies and initiatives that foster positive intercultural interactions, policies and understanding

in educational and broader societal contexts. These research implications aim to deepen the understanding of the complex interplay between culture, education, and institutional dynamics, with other dynamics (macro and micro), thereby contributing to the development of more inclusive and culturally aware educational environments.



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# APPENDICES

## Appendix (A)



Downloaded: 03/02/2020

Approved: 21/01/2020

Muneer Al-Hadhrani  
Registration number: 180120521  
School of Education  
Programme: PhD in Education FT

Dear Muneer

**PROJECT TITLE:** Exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of their cultural context: A case study of the CPS at Sultan Qaboos University

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 026841

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 21/01/2020 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 026841 (form submission date: 20/01/2020); (expected project end date: 05/06/2020).

Participant information sheet 1072826 version 2 (15/01/2020).

Participant consent form 1074550 version 2 (15/01/2020).

Participant consent form 1072827 version 3 (15/01/2020).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Sophia Chahad  
Ethics Administrator  
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure>

The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf)

The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.

The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.

The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

## **Appendix (B) Information Sheet for Teachers**

### **Information Sheet for Teachers**

#### **1-What is this research about?**

This research focuses on the interplay of EFL teachers' identities and the cultural and educational context at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). It is not my intention to evaluate your teaching or to test your knowledge. Rather, this research is to explore how teachers understand this particular context and how they negotiate their professional and cultural identities while teaching English at the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS). As an English language teacher, you are invited to take part in my research and I would appreciate any assistance you can offer me.

#### **2-Who else is taking Part?**

Hopefully, nine more teachers will participate in this research.

#### **3-Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, so it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep, and I will ask you, as part of the university regulations, to sign a consent form to prove that you have voluntarily consented to participate in this study. However, if at any time or for any reason you feel you want to withdraw or do not want to participate, you are free to do so. You do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

#### **4-What will happen to me if I take part?**

Once you have given your permission, I will arrange with you either by email or a phone call a mutually convenient time for interviews and class observations. The first step to gaining insight into your views about the cultural and educational context at SQU, I will start with a general interview in which I will ask you questions about your background, teaching experiences in the CPS or somewhere else and other general questions of SQU and CPS context. This interview will last for about an hour, and will be recorded with your consent. This interview will be followed by class observations in order to better understand the context of classrooms and how teachers perceive it and interact with it.

The number of class observation sessions depends on your permission. I would prefer at least four full sessions throughout the semester. It is obvious that the more observations I do the more accurate data I will collect. I will only observe the class when it suits you and I will arrange with you in advance. My role, as a researcher in this study, is not judging, assessing or evaluating the performance of you and the students. I can reassure you that the research's aim is to explore the perceptions of the teachers involved and there will not be any judgment or inspecting the quality of teaching or learning.

After the class observations there will be the final semi-structured interview which may last for about an hour. The venue for the interview can be held in one of the meeting rooms at the (CPS) or it is totally up to you. I can come where you suggest or where is convenience for you.

#### **5- Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Yes, the conversations during the interview will be audio recorded. The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and academic publications. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**6-What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no possible dangers or risks of participating in this study. However, if any unexpected discomforts or risks arise during the research, please let me know immediately.

**7-What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no material benefits for those people participating in this study, it is hoped, while discussing this topic with the researcher during the interviews, that you become more aware of the issue being studied and benefit from your own reflections.

**8- What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel unhappy about any aspect of my research at any time, please let me know immediately. I will address any concern as soon as possible. Feel free to contact me on [mnal-hadrami1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:mnal-hadrami1@sheffield.ac.uk). In the event of you still not being satisfied, your enquiry can be investigated by my supervisor Dr Andrey Rosowsky, at [a.rosowsky@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:a.rosowsky@sheffield.ac.uk).

**9- Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that I collect during this research will be strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications for any reasons. Furthermore, the data will be stored in secure places. If at the conclusion of the project you would like your data to be erased, please inform me.

**10-What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The results of this research will be used expressly for my doctoral thesis which will be available at the University of Sheffield library and as an e-thesis after completion. It may also be that some part of the thesis be published in a peer reviewed academic journal or professional publication. Reports on the research may also be shared at conferences or for additional or subsequent research projects. You will not be identified in any such publication.

**11-Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This research has been ethically reviewed by my supervisor Dr. Andrey Rosowsky at the School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK. It has also been reviewed and approved by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee. Finally, it is reviewed by the Research Committee at the Centre of Preparatory Studies (CPS), Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

**12-Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research is sponsored and funded by the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman as part of my PhD scholarship and it is supervised by the University of Sheffield, UK.

**13-Contact for further information**

For further information: Dr Andrey Rosowsky, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW, Tel: (+44) (0)114 222 8136, email: [A.Rosowsky@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:A.Rosowsky@sheffield.ac.uk).

Thank you very much for your time and for making this study possible. If you have any queries or wish to know more, please contact me: Muneer, email: [mnal-hadrami1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:mnal-hadrami1@sheffield.ac.uk)

*19/11/2019*

## Appendix (C)

**Title of the research:** Exploring the EFL teachers' perspectives and the practices at the educational context of Sultan Qaboos University

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	<b>Ye s</b>	<b>N o</b>
<b>Taking Part in the Project</b>		
The project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
I understand that taking part in the project will include class observation of the teacher-student interaction, if any, and it is not to assess my performance or personal behaviour in the class at all.		
I agree to take part in the project.		
<b>How my information will be used during and after the project</b>		
I understand that no personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will be required for this project.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named or identified, as my personal details are not taken in this research.		
<b>So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers</b>		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

**Name of participant:**

**Signature**    Date  
**e**

**Name of Researcher:** Muneer  
Alhadhrami

**Signature**    Date  
**e**



## **Appendix (D)**