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### Using Short Stories as a Technique to Develop Intercultural Competence among EFL Students

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### **Abstract** Article info

The current research paper aims at checking the effectiveness of integrating short stories in developing intercultural competence among first year EFL learners at the University of Bejaia. It is based on the hypothesis that if short stories are taught appropriately, first year EFL students' intercultural competence would be promoted. In order to check the efficiency of this technique, an experimental design was carried out with twenty, first year students of English. The experimental group went through a pre-test. After that, the experimental group was taught two short stories in the literature module in two experimental sessions (1h30 mn for each). Finally, students took a post-test to measure the improvement of their intercultural competence. The results that were gathered from the post-test and compared to those of the pre-test revealed that short stories are an effective technique to develop learners' intercultural competence. The majority of learners changed their negative attitudes towards the American culture. They appreciate the Americans' way of life. Additionally, they become respectful and tolerant towards the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture. Moreover, they learned some cultural aspects related to

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#### Kerwords:

- ✓ short stories;
- ✓ intercultural competence;
- ✓ the American culture .

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Americans. Besides, they improved their knowledge about some idioms and American dishes. More importantly, they learned some skills that could help them in interacting with Americans and interpret some of their behaviours. To sum up, EFL teachers could rely on short stories as an efficacious technique to develop intercultural competence among EFL learners.

Résumé

de l'EFL.

Article info

### Le document de recherche actuel vise à vérifier l'efficacité de l'intégration des histoires courtes dans le développement des compétences interculturelles chez les apprenants EFL de première année à l'Université de Bejaia. Il est basé sur l'hypothèse que si les nouvelles sont enseignées de manière appropriée, la compétence interculturelle des étudiants de première année de l'EFL serait encouragée. Afin de vérifier l'efficacité de cette technique, une conception expérimentale a

été réalisée avec vingt étudiants de première année d'anglais. Le groupe expérimental a subi un pré-test. Après cela, le groupe expérimental a appris deux nouvelles dans le module littérature en deux sessions expérimentales (1h30 mn pour chacune). Enfin, les étudiants ont passé un post-test pour mesurer l'amélioration de leurs compétences interculturelles. Les résultats obtenus lors du post-test et comparés à ceux du prétest ont révélé que les histoires courtes sont une technique efficace pour développer les compétences interculturelles des apprenants. La majorité des apprenants ont changé leurs attitudes négatives envers la culture américaine. Ils apprécient le mode de vie des Américains. De plus, ils deviennent respectueux et tolérants envers les différences entre la culture américaine et la culture algérienne. De plus, ils ont appris certains aspects culturels liés aux Américains. En outre, ils ont amélioré leurs connaissances sur certains idiomes et plats américains. Plus important encore, ils ont acquis des compétences qui pourraient les aider à interagir avec les Américains et à interpréter certains de leurs comportements. Pour résumer, les enseignants de l'EFL pourraient s'appuyer sur les histoires courtes comme une technique efficace pour développer la compétence interculturelle parmi les apprenants

### Kerwords:

- histoires courtes;
- la compétence interculturelle;
- ✓ f.a culture Américaine

#### 1.Introduction

A successful language learning situation requires exposing learners to the target culture in order to advance their proficiency level in the target language. Nasirahmadi, Madarsara, and Aghdam (2014) claimed that "since culture is crystalized in human beings' everyday language, it is impossible to separate these two in teaching EFL" (p. 1325). Neglecting this utmost element (culture) would bring about a considerable deficiency in the mastery of the English language. It is, thus, important for EFL learners to develop intercultural competence when learning.

However, it is assumed that first year Algerian students of English at the University of Bejaia lack intercultural competence. First, their knowledge of the American culture might be limited. They are more likely unacquainted of the defining aspects of the American culture. They usually watch a lot of American movies which are most of the time misleading. Starting from this point, they might build negative attitudes towards the American culture since Americans have different behaviours and beliefs from the Algerians'; that Algerian learners are unable to interpret. Hence, they might view American cultural elements as inappropriate. For instance, they might regard certain behaviours as taboos simply because they are unacceptable in the Algerian culture. Moreover, learners do not have a module that fosters their skills in case they travel abroad to an English speaking country. For instance, if they were in the USA, they would be culturally paralyzed since they lack the skills for interpreting behaviours and interacting with Americans.

Overall, learners are in need of developing intercultural competence. Therefore, what can be the technique to use in order to improve it? One possible way to develop intercultural competence in an English class would be using literary works. For instance, short stories could be not only an effective technique but also a rich source in teaching English due to the cultural load they carry. In other words, short stories depict people's everyday life which, in turn, includes elements and aspects of culture. Additionally, they can raise cultural awareness, linguistic awareness, motivation, etc (Khatib & Seyyedrezaei, 2013).

### 2. Method and Materials

The participants in this study consist of twenty first year English students randomly selected and belonging to the same group (N=20). However, two students were absent during the first experimental session, so the pre-test and the post-test were conducted with eighteen students. 38% of them are boys while 62% of them are girls. Their mean age is nineteen years old (M=19). They are enrolled in the Department of English at the University of Bejaia during the academic year 2017-2018. First year students are chosen to undergo the case study because cultural competence should be developed in the first years at the university level.

In order to test the research hypothesis, two research tools (a questionnaire and a pre/post-test) were used with first year LMD students of English at the University of Bejaia. The questionnaire aims at checking the participants' general knowledge about the concept of culture. In addition to the questionnaire, a quasi-experimental design was carried out. The experimental group, which consists of 20 students, went through a pre-test which seeks to collect data about their attitudes towards the American culture, its defining aspects and some skills for interpreting behaviours and interacting with Americans. After that, the exp group was taught two short stories in the literature module in two sessions (1h30 mn for each). These stories are "Why Don't You Dance?" And "They're not Your Husband" by Raymond Carver. Finally, students took a post-test to measure the degree of improvement of their intercultural competence.

### 3. Results

### A/ Questionnaire

The questionnaire aims at finding out learners' general knowledge about culture. It examines how learners perceive the concept of culture (culture with big "C" and small "c"), its importance and incorporation in EFL classes. Further, it checks whether learners appreciate learning idioms as part of learning the English culture. Moreover, it seeks to examine whether cultural elements like attitudes, beliefs and values are taught by their teachers as well as the techniques used to introduce them. Learners were, also, asked if they make extra efforts to learn culture outside the classroom. Finally, the questionnaire ended with asking learners about their favorite English culture. It is important to note that the questionnaire was piloted to six students for the sake of checking the comprehensibility and clarity of the questions. They found all questions clear and comprehensible.

The analysis of the questionnaire has brought to light noteworthy results. Most of the students could opt for the most appropriate definition of culture. They are aware that learning culture is very important, and it should be incorporated in learning English. However, most of the cultural elements like attitudes, beliefs and values are rarely taught by their teachers. Still, they make extra efforts outside the classroom to enrich their knowledge about the English culture.

#### B/ The Pre-test/ Post-test

The Pre-test/post-test consists of fifteen questions ranging from open to close questions. The Pre-test was employed as an instrument to measure students' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards the American culture. It involves three sections, and each one combines a different number of questions. The first section includes three questions about learners' attitudes towards the American culture. The second section contains four questions about the major American cultural aspects. The third section is comprised of eight situations. The two first situations assess learners' knowledge about American idioms. The third situation seeks to check learners' general knowledge about American food. Questions 4-8 put learners in situations where they are supposed to interact and interpret Americans' behaviours and attitudes. It is important to note that the pre-test/post-test was piloted to six students for the sake of checking the comprehensibility and clarity of the questions. They found all questions clear and comprehensible.

Table 1: Learners' attitudes towards the American culture

I like the American culture	pre-test	post-test
Yes	14(78%)	18(100%)
No	4(12%)	0
Undecided	0	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

From table 1, it is noticed that in the pre-test, the majority of students (78%) liked the American culture, but 12% did not. In the post-test, all of them liked the American culture. The results at hand show that the majority of learners in the pre-test like the American culture. This could be the result of watching American movies and listening to American songs. However, four students did not like it. Probably, they do not accept their way of thinking or living since they have different behaviours that are not accepted in the Algerian society. In the post-test, all learners adhere that they like the American culture. Throughout short stories, they could have a general overview of the American culture. They were introduced to cultural aspects that they found interesting. This implies that the two experimental sessions changed the attitudes of four learners towards the American culture.

Table 2: The Appreciation of the American Way of Life

I appreciate the Americans' way of life.	pre-test	post-test
Yes	7(39 %)	16(89%)
No	5(27 %)	2 (11%)
Undecided	6 (34 %)	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

In the pre-test, 39% of learners expressed their appreciation towards the Americans' way of life, but 27% of them did not. 34% were undecided about this issue. In the post-test, all of the learners except for two appreciate the Americans' way of life.

From the above percentages, in the pre-test, the participants were divided into three groups. The first group appreciates the American's way of life. They are open to their behaviours, way of thinking and clothing. The second group does not appreciate American's way of life. They consider them as inappropriate since they are against the principles of the Algerian society in general and Islam in particular. The third group was undecided. They could not have a clear position. On the one side, they like the Americans' way of life. On the other side, they find some of their behaviours unacceptable. In the post-test, the majority of learners appreciate the Americans' way of life. Throughout the short stories, they could understand that their behavioursare based on certain beliefs that they should respect them. The short stories adopted in the experimental study gave a deeper insight about the American way of life. However, two learners still do not appreciate the Americans' way of life. They totally reject them since they are opposed to the Algerian culture.

Table 3: Accepting and tolerating the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture

I accept and tolerate the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture.	pre-test	post-test
yes	9(50%)	16(89%)
No	3(17%)	0
Undecided	6(33%)	2(11%)
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

In the pre-test, while half of the group accepted and tolerated the differences between the American culture and the Algerian one, 17% did not. Moreover, 33% were undecided. In the post-test, 89% of the exp group accepted and tolerated the differences between the American culture and the Algerian one.

This table shows that half of the exp group in the pre-test accepted and tolerated the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture. Though the American culture is different from the Algerian one in religion, customs, traditions and behaviours, they still respect and tolerate them since each society is different and respect should be mutual. However, three students reject the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture. They refuse their religion, customs, traditions and behaviours. In the post-test, all learners except for three accept and tolerate the differences between the two cultures. They learned that it is true that Americans are different from Algerians in many cultural aspects, but this is not a reason to reject the differences. Still, 11% could not really decide about it.

**Section2: Aspects of the American culture** 

Table 4: Americans believe in having a personal control over their destiny

Americans believe in having a personal control over their destiny	pre-test	post-test
Yes	6 (34%)	18(100%)
No	4 (22%)	0
I do not know	8(44%)	0
total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

The results in table 4 show that in the pre-test, nearly half of the group (55%) did not know. 34% of learners answered yes while 22% answered no. In the post-test, a considerable percentage of change occurred. All the students became aware of the previously mentioned fact.

This question intended to check students' awareness about Americans' attitudes towards fate and destiny. In the pre-test, nearly half of the group is ignorant that Americans are totally opposite to Algerians who believe in "maktub". Americans believe that they have free will, and that they create their own future. Only six students were knowledgeable about this American cultural aspect while four students thought of Americans to be like Algerians in terms of fate. In the post-test, all of the participants became aware that Americans do not surrender to whatever happens to them. They believe that they build their own lives.

Table 5: A typical American man is attracted more to fit women

A typical American man is attracted more to fit women.	pre-test	post-test
Yes	6 (34%)	18(100%)
No	3 (16%)	0
I do not know	9 (50%)	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

Table 5 shows that in the pre-test, half of the group (50%) did not know whether a typical American man is attracted more to fit women while the rest were divided between yes (34%) and no (16%). When dealing with the post-test, we notice that all of them provided the right answer.

The results reveal that half of the group is unaware of the importance of physical appearance in the American society. A typical American man is attracted to fit women (Simpson, 2002) while such women would not be appealing to a typical Algerian man. Some learners answered yes since many American movies depict fit women as popular and attractive. Others answered no because fit women are not popular in Algeria, and many of them try to get on weight. After the experimental sessions, the participants learned that physical appearance is viewed differently in the two cultures. This denotes that the learners have become aware of the physical feature that attracts an American man the most (fitness).

Table 6: Students' opinions about Americans being individualists or collectivists

Americans are	pre-test	post-test
Individualists	8 (44%)	18 (100%)
Collectivists	10 (56%)	0
Other	0	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

From table 6, it is noticed that in the pre-test, 56% of learners thought of Americans to be a collectivist society. In the post-test, the percentage of the participants who believed Americans are individualists increased from 44% to 100%.

The findings reveal that 56% of learners think of Americans as collectivists. They thought that they are like Algerians. That is to say, they give precedence to the group on behalf of the individual. However, this is not true. Americans are competitive and their interests take precedence over those of the social group they belong to (Carteret, 2011). This is what they have learned in the experimental sessions. All learners became aware that individualism is a central cultural aspect of Americans.

Table 7: The symbolism of TV in the American culture

Symbolism of TV	pre-test	post-test
Sexual amusement	2(12%)	0
Nostalgia	2(12%)	0
A human need that	2 (12%)	18 (100%)
gives life meaning		
I do not know	12(67%)	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

In the pre-test, 67% of learners seemed to be unaware of what television symbolizes in the American culture. The other three options ranked ideally (12% for each). In the post-test, all learners realized that for Americans, TV is a human need that gives life meaning.

The results show that most of the participants are ignorant of what TV represents in the American houses. For them TV is a symbol of series and coffee ads. It does not play a vital role in their lives. However, for Americans it is crucial since through TV that Americans understand who they are and how the world works around them (Jhally, 1992).

Table 8: The symbolism of bed in the American culture

Symbolism of bed	pre-test	post-test
Sexual amusement	13 (72%)	18 (100%)
Nostalgia	1 (5%)	0
A human need that gives life meaning	1(5%)	0
I do not know	3(16%)	0
total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

In the pre-test, 72% of learners opted for sexual amusement. 16% of them did not know at all .The other two options got the same percentage (5%). In the post-test, all learners realized that for Americans, bed is a symbol of sexual amusement.

To many Algerians, bed is the place where they can have rest after a tiring day. For Americans, however, it is the place where they can fulfill their sexual needs. The majority of learners answered correctly because many American movies depict bed scenes. Still, three students have no idea about it. Probably, they do not watch American movies or TV series. After the experimental sessions, all learners became aware that bed for Americans symbolizes sexual amusement.

#### Section3:

Suppose you were in the USA .You had a typical American colleague called James. Imagine these situations.

Table 9: The meaning of « I am all wet »

I am all wet means	pre-test	post-test
I am extremely angry	1 (5%)	18 (100%)
I am totally	4 (22%)	0
disappointed		
I am completely upset	2 (12%)	0
I do not know	11 (62%)	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

Table 9 shows

that in the pre-test, only 5% of students could get the correct meaning of the idiom. 62% of them said that they did not know. However, after being exposed to the short story, all the students answered correctly.

This question intended to examine students' knowledge about Americans idioms. There are many idioms to express anger instead of simply saying "I am angry". The results have revealed that the majority of learners are ignorant of what this idiom means. Hence, if they were in the USA, and somebody told them he is all wet, he would not understand him. After, the experimental sessions, learners could understand the meaning of this idiom.

Table 10: The proposed dishes

You and James called a restaurant to order lunch. James asked you to choose a dish of your choice for him. The chef proposed these dishes. What would you choose among these taking into consideration that James is <b>vegetarian</b> ?	pre-test	post-test
Cole slaw	0	18 (100%)
Hamburger	0	0
Cobb salad	18 (100%)	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

The results show that in the pre-test, all the participants (100%) opted for cobb salad. Nevertheless, in the post-test, they have chosen cole slaw.

This question was tricky. In the pre-test, the word 'salad' misled the learners. Expectedly, all learners said they would choose for James cobb salad since they thought that it is a salad that contains only vegetables. After the experimental sessions, all learners realized that cobb salad contains bacon. Therefore, they opted for cole slow, which is a salad that consists of cabbage and mayonnaise.

Table 11: What James would do when suffering from a problem

The results show that in the pre-test, 67% of the learners answered that a typical

If James suffered from a problem, he would:	pre-test	post-test
Practice sport	2 (11%)	0
Drink alcohol	12 (67%)	18 (100%)
Go to the church	2 (11%)	0
Listen to music	2 (11%)	0
Other (please specify)	0	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

American man would drink alcohol when he suffers from a problem. However, the rest of them answered that he would practice sport, go to the church or listen to music (11% for each). In the post-test, all of them provided the most appropriate answer which is drinking alcohol.

Alcoholism in the USA acts as a social lubricant (Simpson, 2002). The majority of the participants are aware of it especially that American movies usually depict people who have problems as alcoholics. Even in Algeria, few people turn to alcohol in hard times. However, the majority of men smoke or practice sport while women complain to their friends or pray to Allah for help. These instances are rare in the USA. After the experiment, the exp group learned that a typical American man would drink alcohol to forget about his own problems.

Table 12: Learners' reaction after seeing the kissing scene

You were walking in a street .You saw James kissing and hugging his girlfriend Emily in front of all people. You would feel:	pre-test	post-test
Embarrassed	6 (33%)	1 (5%)
Disgusted	1 (5%)	0
Indifferent	8 (44%)	17 (95%)
Ashamed	3 (15%)	0
Other (please specify)	0	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

The findings show that 44% of learners said they would feel indifferent. 33% of them would feel embarrassed. 15% of them would feel ashamed. 5% would feel disgusted. However, after the experimental sessions, the exp group learned that in the USA, it is frequent to see a couple in an intimate scene. Hence, 95% of learners would feel indifferent, yet a learner would still feel embarrassed.

A global view of the results indicates that more than half of the participants would feel indifferent. This is quite natural for them since sometimes they see such scenes at the university. However, such scenes are not frequent in public places. It would be shocking to see such an

unacceptable behavior. With regard to Americans, kissing is one way of expressing love to a beloved one. Americans feel that they need to express their feelings rather than keeping them inside (Crowther, 1999). Therefore, seeing an American couple kissing each other in a public place is something natural.

Table13: James' reaction

James' reaction	Pre-test	Post-test
He would scream on his girlfriend's face	3 (15%)	0
He would hit the man	15 (85%)	0
He wouldn't react at all	0	18 (100%)
Other	0	0
Total	18 (100%)	18 (100%)

From table 15, 85% of the exp group anticipated that James would hit the man, yet 15% thought he would scream on Emily's face. In the post-test, all learners answered that he would not react at all.

The responses in the pre-test are expected from the participants since an Algerian man would definitely hit the man on the spot. Algerians are known for their overdose jealousy. They do not accept their wives to get close to strangers. For Americans, things are different. Emily's behavior is considered as something natural since Americans like to share some experiences like dancing with foreign people even in their first contact (Crowther, 1999). Therefore, James would not react at all. That was the answer that all the participants answered in the post-test.

#### 4. Discussion of the results

The analysis of the pre-test and post-test has highlighted important findings. The outcomes of the pre-test indicate that most of the students lacked cultural competence. However, the results of the post-test prove that their attitudes, knowledge and skills have improved.

First, the majority of the exp group in the pre-test has preferences towards the American culture. Maybe, they watch a lot of American movies, and they listen to popular American songs. That is why, they like it. Nevertheless, a few of them did not like it. Probably, they did not accept their way of thinking or living since they have different behaviours that are not accepted in the Algerian society. In the post-test, all learners like the American culture. Throughout the short stories, they could have an insight to the American culture. They were introduced to cultural aspects that they found interesting. Moreover, some learners did not appreciate American's way of life. They consider them as inappropriate because they oppose the Algerian culture. Also, a few of them reject the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture. They refuse their religion, customs, traditions and behaviours. The short stories adopted in the experimental study gave a deeper insight about the American way of life. Learners could understand that their behavioursare based on certain beliefs that they

should respect and tolerate them. To sum up, the short stories changed their attitudes towards the American culture. The majority of the participant started to like the American culture, appreciate the Americans' way of life and more importantly accepted and tolerated the differences between the American culture and the Algerian one.

With regard to aspects of the American culture, in the pre-test, most of learners were ignorant of American cultural aspects like individualism, free will, openness towards change, and fitness as well as the symbolism of TV and bed. The majority of learners thought that Americans are like Algerians. They explain everything as being "maktub", and they prioritize the benefit of society over theirs. After the two experimental sessions, the exp group learned that Americans are individualists who are not confined to destiny. They place faith in the future and give extreme importance to time. They are, also, attracted more to fit women. In addition, they do not know what some stuff symbolize in the American culture. In the post-test, all learners realized that TV for Americans is a human need that gives life meaning. No American family can live without it since they regard it as an open window to the world.

Finally, learners were put in imaginary situations and asked how they would react in each one. Those situations developed some skills that could enable them to cope with certain situations in the USA. In the pre-test, nearly all learners lacked the skills that could help them interpret Americans' behaviours and interact with them. It was proved that if they were in the USA, they would find a difficulty in coping with certain situations. In other words, they would be culturally paralyzed. Moreover, they lacked language proficiency. For instance, the majority of learners do not know the meaning of some idioms like "being wet" and "naming a figure". After the experimental sessions, learners realized that the first idiom means very angry and the second suggesting a price. In addition, they were introduced to some American dishes, particularly the food that vegetarians eat. In the pre-test, the word 'salad' misled the participants. They chose for James cobb salad since they thought that it is a salad that contains only vegetables. After the experimental sessions, they opted for cole slow, which is a salad that consists of cabbage and mayonnaise. Another American cultural element was introduced, which is alcoholism. The majority of the participants seem to be aware of it especially that American movies usually depict people who have problems as alcoholics. The pre-test/ post-test included an important cultural dimension, which is task and relationship. The results of the pre-test revealed that the participants are not aware of the dimension of task and relationships in the American society. Their answers were influenced by their cultural background since Algerians usually prioritize relationships over the task they are accomplishing. In the post-test, all learners realized that in a place of work, Americans emphasize the fulfillment of work over their relationships. In the end, learners were asked about American feelings and emotions. In the pretest, learners did not know that Americans express their feelings openly everywhere. In the post-test, they learned that Americans believe that they should express their feelings rather than retaining them. Therefore, it is common to see in American streets couples kissing and hugging each other. Also, Americans like to share some experiences like dancing with foreign people even in their first contact.

All in all, the results of the pre-test/ post-test proved that learners developed their cultural competence. The majority of learners changed their negative attitudes towards the American culture. They learned some cultural aspects. More importantly, they learned some skills that could help them to interact with Americans and interpret some of their behaviours.

#### 5. Conclusion

This experimental study has sought to check the usefulness of integrating short stories in developing intercultural competence among first year EFL learners at the University of Bejaia.

The results of the questionnaire have revealed that the participants are quite knowledgeable about the concept of culture. Most of them are aware of its importance and incorporation in EFL. The elements of culture are rarely taught by their teachers using some techniques like proverbs and videos. Sometimes, some autonomous learners try to enrich their knowledge about culture using interesting techniques like movies, documentaries and songs.

The results of the pre-test/ post-test proved that learners developed their cultural competence. The majority of learners changed their negative attitudes towards the American culture. They appreciate the Americans' way of life. Additionally, they become respectful and tolerant towards the differences between the American culture and the Algerian culture. Moreover, they learned some cultural aspects related to Americans, be they individualism, free will, openness towards change, importance of time and fitness. Besides, they improved their knowledge about some idioms and American dishes. More importantly, they learned some skills that could help them in interacting with Americans and interpret some of their behaviours.

To further investigate the adequacy of the proposed technique (short stories) in the domain of EFL instruction, a longitudinal research should be done with a more extended number of participants including more short stories and both an experimental group and a control group.

Still, there are some questions that were raised during this research. How can passive students be motivated to read when they are not even able to read a short story of one page? How can teachers introduce cultural elements that may seem embarrassing for learners such as emotions and sexuality? Do the social and the religious contexts influence learners' understanding and perception? Do mixed classes hinder students' participation? These questions are not related to this study. They have been found during the lesson presentations. Nevertheless, they are new findings in the field of research that we hope researchers will initiate a research about them.

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