

University Students' Awareness of the Role of Culture in the Language Learning Process

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Received: 11/ 2023 / Accepted: 03/ 2024 / Published: 06/ 2024 <https://doi.org/10.26436/hjuoz.2024.12.2.1343>

ABSTRACT:

To learn English language and communicate in different contexts successfully, English language students need to learn about the culture of English native speakers in spite of mastering the linguistic knowledge of the language. Indeed, culture shapes the language just as it shapes the life of its speakers. However, it is unknown whether students are aware of the role of culture in the language learning process and in case they are aware, it is still not evident how they learn about the culture. To learn about these two aspects, the current study explores undergraduate students' awareness in this regard. It uses a four-Likert scale questionnaire to elicit answers from 45 EFL junior students in English Department. The results demonstrated that the majority of students are aware of the role of culture on English language learning and they use different methods to learn about the culture. Their awareness can be exploited to make culture part of English language teaching programs at universities.

KEYWORDS: English Language Learning; Culture Learning; English Language Students; University Students; English as Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Scholars who are interested in English language acquisition as a second or foreign language constantly study language and related disciplines to answer questions such as how language works and how humans learn their second and/or foreign languages. Their quest for answers might help language teachers and learners in the process of teaching and learning and might provide the process with effective strategies. Among those scholars, some of them have worked on the humans' cognitive ability of language learning (such as Chomsky, 1965), some others have worked on the psychological aspect of language acquisition (such as Krashen, 1982), some others have worked on curriculum design and program development in terms of approaches and methods of language teaching (such as Richards, 1994, 2013), some others have worked on the social aspect of language teaching and learning and specifically focused on the culture of its speakers (such as Byram, 1991, Kramersch, 1991). All these aspects are given considerable focus in the teaching and learning process. Although culture is not relatively emphasized in language teaching and learning, there are studies about some aspects of culture in relation to the foreign language learning. For instance, Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015) studied the positive role of culture on second/foreign language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972) clarify that the role

of integrative motivation, the desire to learn about the native speakers, and somehow to be close to the culture and speakers of that language produce successful learners of the language. Holliday (2009) investigated the challenges of learning about the new culture and its threat on learners' identities. However, the area whether the role of culture on language learning is known by students is sparingly studied. Therefore, the current study has two objectives; first, to learn whether students are aware of the role of the foreign cultures on their English language learning or no. While the second one is to find out how they attempt to learn about the foreign cultures. As such, the current study tries to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Are English language students at university aware of the role of the foreign cultures on English language learning?
2. How do English language students at university learn about the foreign cultures of American and/or British English speakers?

Since English in Kurdistan region and Iraq is considered a foreign language, in the current study the American and British cultures are referred to as the 'foreign cultures.'

2. Literature Review

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In this section, the researcher sheds some light on culture, then discusses the possible reasons behind ignoring culture in the teaching and learning process of the English language. Finally, the researcher discusses a number of previous studies conducted on culture.

Byram and Grundy (2003), on the one hand, state that "...culture in language teaching and learning is usually defined pragmatically as a/the culture associated with a language being learnt" (p. 1). On the other hand, culture can also be defined "...as a 'social heredity' transmitted from one generation to another generation with the accumulation of individual experiences, or a mode of activities differentiating people of one society from another society" (Ali et al., 2015, p. 2). Culture is thorough and complicated because various elements constitute culture. Indeed, "culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning" (Bates, Tucker, & Lozny, 1991, p. 10). Humans use language to transmit their culture from one generation to another. This transmission, interestingly, is often done subtly through, but not limited to, idioms, slangs, sayings, proverbs, and collocations. These forms of language, however, hinder learners to communicate successfully in authentic situations in spite of mastering the linguistic knowledge of the language. It is important, therefore, to expose learners with the foreign language as well as its culture simultaneously to enable them to use the language in authentic situations (Byram & Fleming, 1998) because "... language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 235). Indeed, "the most successful language learners learn culture and language together" (Kim, 2020, p. 520). Moreover, the "research in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) indicates problems faced by the learners in communicating language in context" (Ali et al., 2015, p. 3) and this is due to, as Bayyurt (2006) discusses,

The aim of English language teaching should be the development of the learners' 'intercultural communicative competence' in the English language to enable them to cope with issues that are related to the wider use of English in local and international contexts within the 'global village' (p. 234).

In fact, exposing students solely to the linguistic knowledge of English does not prepare them to be competent communicators in real life situations.

Although the above statements make teaching the foreign cultures critically essential to the teaching of English language, teachers appear not to agree with them. Aligning teaching language, however, with teaching culture is complicated because "the relationship between language and culture, whether in general or in a particular case, is of course an extremely complex problem which has psychological, sociological and political dimensions..." (Byram, 1989, p. 40). The sociological dimension might be one of the reasons that teaching culture is abandoned. Teachers might consider the new sociological dimension

as a threat to the local sociological dimension. In other words, there is a possibility that students embrace the new sociological perspectives and abandon the old ones. Another reason for abandoning teaching foreign cultures, as discussed by Byram and Feng (2004), is that "culture learning is perceived as less feasible if confined to the classroom than language learning" (p. 5). This perception might give teachers a logical reason to abandon teaching the foreign cultures inside classrooms. In fact, humans develop their local culture understanding through living the situations authentically and learning a foreign culture might require the same feasibility as learning the local culture. However, teachers and educators need to raise students' awareness about the role and importance of culture on their foreign language learning process. In today's globalized world and technological advancement, students can obtain crucial knowledge about the culture of English language speakers' societies outside the classroom and make their English language learning process more fruitful.

A number of studies have examined culture in language teaching and learning but still there is call for studying this aspect of language (Byram & Feng, 2004). First, Kuo and Lai (2006) discussed the necessity of teaching and learning the foreign cultures together with learning linguistic knowledge because "...they have an intertwined relationship and affect each other mutually" (p. 2). Kuo and Lai (2006) by explaining language, culture, and how they affect each other tried to prove that teaching culture and linguistic knowledge are inseparable. Second, Al-Issa (2005) studied the curriculum of his country, Sultanate of Oman, to evaluate the practicality of the written policy of the English language program. His evaluation was conducted through examining the English language teaching policy as well as interviewing various ELT agents. He concluded that although in the policy documents there are points about the importance of teaching and learning culture to the language learning, culture is not taught effectively and many aspects of cultural knowledge, that is necessary for a pragmatical use of language, remains underdeveloped in classrooms. The fact that the teaching of culture inside the classrooms did not reflect the policy documents is understandable because, as discussed above, teaching culture inside the classrooms is not as feasible as teaching linguistic knowledge. Third, Bayyurt (2006) studied teachers' perspectives on teaching culture along with teaching English as a foreign language in Turkey. He received positive statements from the 12 teachers he interviewed on this matter. Although it is important to have teachers' perspectives on teaching culture, it might not help students considerably. Since teaching culture inside the classrooms is difficult, as discussed earlier, it is better to focus on the learning of culture by students themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on students and how much they know about the role of culture and how teachers can direct them to a successful culture learning trajectory. For example, Prodromou (1992) studied 300 Greek students' views regarding the content of their language teaching program. He found great interest in "British life and institutions" as a cultural component (p. 45). Finally, both studies of Bada (2000) and Genc and Bada (2005) explored students' views about a specific culture class delivered to them as

part of their English language program. They concluded that the culture class contributed to students' raising

3. Research Design

Forty five EFL junior students in Department of English, Lebanese French University, participated in this study. Their age is between 17-40 years old. The selected university is a private university in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The selection of third year students in the 2023-2024 academic year was random in order to secure the possibility of having a good representation of the population. Moreover, they have passed two years at university so their responses for those questionnaire statements that are relevant to their program of study are more valid.

3.2 Instrument and data collection

The research method that is used for this study is quantitative method. Quantitative method, as described by Dörnyei (2007), is "a tool to explore questions in an 'objective' manner, trying to minimize the influence of any researcher bias or prejudice, thereby resulting in what scholars believed was an accurate and reliable description of the world" (p. 31). To investigate any issue, it is important to stay objective in order to identify the problem correctly and provide a solution accordingly. In addition to the objectivity of the process, the obtained data from a quantitative method is a "reliable and replicable data that is generalizable to other contexts" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 34). In quantitative method, a four Likert-scale questionnaire which consisted of nine statements was used as the instrument for collecting data (see Appendix 1). From these nine statements, six of them (no. 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12) were adapted from Rostami's (2016) study. The other three statements (no. 6, 8, 13) were constructed via consulting a

3.3 Data analysis

After collecting it, the data was analyzed using the SPSS software (version 23). The data was quantitatively

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the responses, the majority of students are aware of the role of the foreign cultures on their English language learning. They also make every effort to learn about the American and British cultures. To have a more detailed understanding of the questionnaire's findings, this section is presenting how the students responded to each item in the questionnaire using descriptive analysis. The analysis shows the percentage of the four-Likert scale categories that are used in the study.

With respect to the students' awareness of the role of culture on their language learning, the majority of them gave positive responses to the relevant items (no. 5, 6, 7). From their responses, 73.3% either strongly agreed or agreed that *There is close relation between English language and the American or British cultures (item5)*. This finding is in line with Rostami's (2016) study. In his study, a lower percentage (49.99%) of students agreed that language and culture are interrelated. Therefore, it may be asserted that more and more students are obtaining awareness regarding the role of culture on language learning.

Interestingly, the positive responses regarding the importance of learning the foreign cultures to enhance

cultural awareness both local and foreign, and to improvement in students' language skills.

3.1 Participants

number of sources (such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Dörnyei, 2007; Murtisari & Mali, 2017; Prodromou, 1992). Haji and Barany (2023) state that "when conducting research, the primary purpose of a questionnaire is to acquire pertinent information in the most possible valid and accurate manner" (p. 6). Indeed, when researchers collect data, it is vitally important to be precise and accurate in collecting the data so as to have a valid and reliable data. A valid and reliable data can make drawn conclusions from the data strong. A strong conclusion might truly add some specific knowledge to the literature and might be part of moving the flow forward. According to Dörnyei (2007) "content validity concerned expert judgement about test content" (p. 51). In order to evaluate its validity, the questionnaire was given to a professor in linguistics with 27 years of experience in higher education and a PhD holder in applied linguistics both of whom are working in Kurdistan region's universities. After the evaluation, the questionnaire was improved. The first three statements (no. 5, 6, 7) will elicit answers for the first research question and the other six statements (no. 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13) will elicit answers for the second research question. For the sake of pilot study, six students (that is equal to 13.33% of the total participants) participated in the questionnaire successfully. Finally, the questionnaire was ready to be distributed on the main participants of the study. After collecting the main data, Cronbach alpha reliability test was run as the first statistical test. The test revealed a score of 0.674, which is rated as "reasonable" (Taber, 2017, p.1278) and the result is accepted.

analyzed to examine university students' awareness of the role of the foreign cultures on their English language learning as well as how they learn about the foreign cultures.

English language proficiency saw a spike increase. All the students (100%) responded positively to the item that says *Learning about the American or British culture is important for improving my English language (Item6)*. Similarly, Genc and Bada (2005) found exactly a similar result in this regard, but a bit differently. They evaluated students' perceptions toward a particular culture course that they took. All the students (100%) in their study agreed that the culture course contributed to the development of their language skills. Moreover, Bada (2000) found a slightly lower percentage of students (94%) who believe that culture learning improves language learning.

Regarding the statement whether students want to study the foreign cultures, we have a consensus view among the students. A total of 91.1% agreed that *American or British culture should be part of English language teaching program (Item7)*. Only a small number of them (8.9%) did not want to have the foreign cultures in their curriculum. Similar to this statement is a question raised by Prodromou (1992). He asked students about the content of their program and what they prefer. He concluded that "there is quite strong interest (60 per cent) in British life and institutions amongst all students..." (P. 45).

Table 1. Awareness

No.	Statements	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Totality of agreement (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Totality of disagreement (%)
5	<i>There is close relation between English language and the American or British culture.</i>	22.2	51.2	73.4	22.2	4.4	26.6
6	<i>Learning about the American or British culture is important for improving my English language.</i>	53.3	46.7	100	0	0	0
7	<i>American or British culture should be part of English language teaching program.</i>	33.3	57.8	91.1	8.9	0	8.9

Items 8, 9, and 10 were put in the questionnaire to elicit answers about whether students receive help from others to learn the foreign cultures or no. Although students do not take any cultural classes, a high number of them agreed that they receive help from teachers and classmates. As many as 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they receive instruction from their teachers about the American or

British culture. Similarly, 80% agreed that even when they struggle in learning about the American or British culture, they receive help from their teachers and classmates. However, a considerably lower percentage (66.7) strongly agreed or agreed that the university provides them with resources to learn about the American or British culture.

Table 2. Learning culture depending on others

No.	Statements	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Totality of agreement (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Totality of disagreement (%)
8	<i>I receive instruction from my teachers about the American or British culture.</i>	17.8	62.2	80.0	17.8	2.2	20.0
9	<i>When I struggle in learning about the American or British culture, I receive help from my teachers and classmates</i>	15.6	64.4	80.0	15.6	4.4	20.0
10	<i>My university provides me with resources to learn about the American or British culture.</i>	20.0	46.7	66.7	24.4	8.9	33.3

Regarding students' independent attempt to learn about the foreign cultures, they gave different responses. While the responses for two items (no. 11, and 12) were close to each other, the last item (no. 13) received a lower positive response. From their responses, 93.3% and 86.7% strongly agreed or agreed that *American or British Magazines, newspapers, TV shows, movies, YouTube videos, ... etc. are great sources to learn about their culture (item11)* and that they search on the internet to learn about American or

British art masterpieces (item12) respectively. Rostami's (2016) study, however, found that the majority of students (33.33%) were negative regarding learning about the foreign art masterpieces. What obtained lower percentage among these three statements is having personal relationship with native speakers to enrich their cultural knowledge. From their responses, 73.3% strongly agreed or agreed that they communicate with American or British people to learn about their cultures.

Table 3: Learning culture independently

No	Statements	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Totality of agreement (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Totality of disagreement (%)
11	<i>American or British Magazines, newspapers, TV shows, movies, YouTube videos, ... etc. are great sources to learn about their culture</i>	68.9	24.5	93.4	2.2	4.4	6.6
12	<i>I search on the internet to learn about American or British art masterpieces.</i>	31.1	55.6	86.7	11.1	2.2	13.3

13	<i>I communicate with American or British people to learn about their cultures.</i>	31.1	42.2	73.3	20.0	6.7	26.7
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5. Conclusion

Culture is about a nation's history, beliefs, social and individual values, and view of the world. It shapes humans' lives as well as language. Thus, Language learning and culture learning are interrelated. In fact, learning about the foreign cultures improve students' English language proficiency. Indeed, to have communication skills and to communicate successfully in real contexts, English language students need to learn about the foreign cultures besides the linguistic knowledge. The current study examined students' awareness of the role of culture on language learning. The results are quite promising. The majority of students were aware of the existing relation and role of culture on language learning. Interestingly, more students were attempting to learn about the foreign cultures independently and without receiving help from teachers, classmates, or their institute. What limits the current study is, first, the number of the participants and, second, they were all students in English Department from one university. Therefore, these two points can be taken into consideration for future research. However, it is promising that the majority of students are aware of the relation between language learning and culture learning. Therefore, the implication of the current study's results is that teachers, educators, and program designers can take this as an opportunity to include content about the foreign cultures in language teaching programs. Students' awareness might contribute to the successful inclusion of cultural content in English language teaching programs.

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Appendix 1

Dear Participant,

This study is about university students' awareness of the role of culture in the language learning process. I would like you to participate in this questionnaire. If you decide to participate, it will take you approximately 10-15 minutes. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty. Participation in this study is completely anonymous because no personal information and/or identifiers are collected and at the time of sharing the data to others all the data from all the participants will be combined together to report totality of the matter.

Your participation and contribution to this study through sharing your insights and perceptions are highly appreciated. Your insights and perceptions will inform research in the field of teaching and learning English language and consequently help English language teachers and learners. Moreover, there is no right or wrong answers, rather responses are expected to be your own understanding and perceptions.

Thank you once again for your consideration and valuable participation.

Participation Consent

- a) I read the announcement above, and I understood completely.
- b) I know that I can withdraw from this study at any time without any reason and without penalty.
- c) I accept to participate in this study.

Yes

No

Participant's Information

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

2. Your age?

17 - 22

23 - 28

29 - 34

35 - 40

3. Your stage at university?

First Stage

Second Stage

Third Stage

Fourth Stage

4. How many years have you been studying English language?

12 - 15 years

16 - 18 years

More than 18 years

5. There is close relation between English language and the American or British culture.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
6. Learning about the American or British culture is important for improving my English language.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
7. American or British culture should be part of English language teaching program.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
8. I receive instruction from my teachers about the American or British culture.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
9. When I struggle in learning about the American or British culture, I receive help from my teachers and classmates.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
10. My university provides me with resources to learn about the American or British culture.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
11. American or British Magazines, newspapers, TV shows, movies, YouTube videos etc. are great sources to learn about their culture.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
12. I search on the internet to learn about American or British art masterpieces.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree
13. I communicate with American or British people to learn about their cultures.
 Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

هۆشيارى خويندكارانى زانكو له رۆلى كولتور له پروسهى فېربوونى زماندا

پوخته

بۆ فېربوونى زمانى ئینگىلىزى و پهبههنديکردن له بارودۆخى جياوازدا به سهركهوتوى، قوتابيانى زمانى ئینگىلىزى پهبويستيان به فېربوونى كلتورى قسهكهرانى زمانى ئینگىلىزى ههيه سههرهراى شارمهز ابوونيان له لايهنى زمانهوانى زمانى ئینگىلىزىدا. له راستيدا كلتور ههروهك چۆن بهشيكى گرنكى ژيانى مرۆفهكانه ئاواش بهشيكى گرنكى زمانى مرۆفهكانه. بهلام ئيمه نازانين ئايا قوتابيان چهنده دهبارهى ئهم راستيه دهزانن، ئايا چهنده ههولى فېربوونى كلتورمهكه دهمه و ئايا زانكوكانيش له لايهن خويانهوه تچهند سهراوه بۆ قوتابيان دابين دهكهه تا يارمهتيان بدهن فېرى كلتورمهكه بين. بۆ وهلامدانهوى ئهم پرسيارانه، ئهم تويزينهويه له تيروانينهكانى قوتابيانى بهكالوريوس لهه بارهيهوه دهكۆلئيهوه. پرسيارنامهيهكى چوار ليكيزت بهكاردههينئيت بۆ وهگرتهى وهلام له 45 قوتابى قوناغى سنيهم له بهشى ئینگىلىزى. ئههجامهكان دهريدهمخهه كه زۆرينهه قوتابيان ئاگادارى رۆلى كلتورن لهسهه فېربوونى زمانى ئینگىلىزى، ههروهها شيوازى جياواز بهكاردههين بۆ فېربوونى كلتور. له كۆتايدا، چۆنيهى سوودمهگرتهه له دههههجامهكان تاوتوى و پهبشيار دهكرين. وشه سهههكيبهكان: فېربوونى زمانى ئینگىلىزى؛ فېربوونى كولتور؛ خويندكارانى زمانى ئینگىلىزى؛ خويندكارانى زانكو؛ ئینگىلىزى وهك زمانى بيانى.

وعى طلبة الجامعة بدور الثقافة في عملية تعلم اللغة

خلاصة

لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية والتواصل في سياقات مختلفة بنجاح، يحتاج طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية إلى التعرف على ثقافة الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية على الرغم من إتقان المعرفة اللغوية للغة. في الواقع، تشكل الثقافة اللغة كما تشكل حياة المتحدثين بها. ومع ذلك، نحن لا نعرف إلى أي مدى يعرف الطلاب بهذه الحقيقة، وإلى أي مدى يحاولون التعرف على الثقافة، وهل يتوفر الجامعات الموارد للطلاب حتى تساعدهم على تعلم الثقافة. للإجابة على هذه الأسئلة، تستكشف الدراسة الحالية تصورات طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في هذا الصدد. ويستخدم استبياناً من أربعة مقياس ليكتر للحصول على إجابات من 45 طالباً في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. وأظهرت النتائج أن غالبية الطلاب يدركون دور الثقافة في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، ويستخدمون أساليب مختلفة لتعلم الثقافة. وأخيراً، تتم مناقشة كيفية تطبيق النتائج والتوصيات أيضاً.

الكلمات الدالة: تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية؛ التعلم الثقافي؛ طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية. طلاب الجامعة؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.