

AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING EFL AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

This paper examined EFL teachers' and students' perceptions and practices of culture teaching and learning in a Saudi university from an intercultural perspective. Employing descriptive research, this study sought to glean data through a questionnaire that tapped into the perceptions of and attitudes towards the target culture in the EFL classroom and the teaching of English literature, as entertained by language instructors (N = 25) and EFL college students (N = 33). Findings showed that teaching and learning EFL is greatly influenced by the perceptions of intercultural language learning. The results revealed that EFL instructors and students recognized the central role that literature can play in culture learning in EFL classes. The participant students in the study also believed that EFL instructors and language course developers need to integrate cultural content in the language curriculum, especially within the literature curriculum, and to emphasize the dynamic relationship between acculturation and ELT in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: intercultural competence, English as a Foreign Language, Teaching, Learning, University education

1. INTRODUCTION

Current models of communicative competence demonstrate that there is much more to learning a language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness (Bachman 1990). Linguistic communication lacking in the appropriate cultural sensitivity may well result in producing humorous incidents, and can result in miscommunication and misunderstanding. According to Kramsch (1993, 1), culture

“is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.”

Sociologically, culture is a very broad and general concept, so to get to know a given culture means to gain extensive knowledge of a particular community of people living in a particular area of land. It seems useful to make a distinction between the so-called uppercase-C culture and lowercase-c culture. The big-C genre of culture is usually easy to explore, as it constitutes all the factual knowledge about fine arts in a particular human community such as literature, music, dance, painting, sculpture, theater, and film. The small-c culture, on the other hand, comprises a wide variety of aspects, many of which are inter-connected, including attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, customs, celebrations, rituals, politeness conventions, patterns of interaction and discourse organization, the use of time in communication, and the use of physical space and body language.

Some such lowercase-c cultural aspects can be grasped and learned as they are observable, while other dimensions, hidden, intricate and delicate, are imparted to us from birth, and therefore, are deeply internalized and subconscious and are often noticed only in contrast with

another culture. It is mainly these non-tangible cultural aspects that have an enormous influence on people's way of thinking and their linguistic/non-linguistic behavior and that, importantly, determine the expectations and interpretations of other people's linguistic/non-linguistic behavior. A person who encounters an unfamiliar culture will lack knowledge of such behaviors, which may lead to amusing situations, and even conflict, caused by miscommunication. This happens because these aspects of culture are unspoken rules created by a community. Because these cultural rules are full of meaning and "allow people to anticipate events, they often acquire a moral rigidity and righteousness that engender stereotypes and even prejudices" (Kramsch 1995, 2).

Indeed, incorporating target culture knowledge in EFL learning and teaching is essential in the second/foreign language classroom in general because language, as Willems (1998) pointed out, maintains culture and culture produces language. Researchers such as Liddicoat (2000), Willems (1998), Kugler-Euerle (1997), Wilss (1995) and Kiyitsioglou-Vlachou (1988) strongly support the integration of language and culture and the development of a culture-based conception of translation. Approaches for integrating language and culture and ways for enhancing culture oriented communicative language teaching were proposed by researchers like Liddicoat (2000), Soto, Smrekar and Nekkcovel (1999), Kiyitsioglou-Vlachou (1998), Simpson (1997) and others.

Prodromou (1988), in a questionnaire study of 300 Greek students, found that over half of the students believed that native speaker instructors should have some knowledge about the students' native tongue and culture. Duff and Uchida's study (1997) of four EFL instructors revealed considerable complexity in instructors' socio-cultural identities and a lack of awareness that they were implicitly transmitting cultural messages to their students.

Despite the findings of these studies, there is still a general lack of information about how instructors and students view the teaching of culture and how these views are reflected in their teaching.

2. CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM STUDIED

Integrating culture in the language classroom through teaching English literature can be understood as important and necessary. Practically, however, many problems arise when implementing culture-embedded literature teaching in the foreign language classroom in Saudi universities. For instance, teachers' limited foreign experiences, limited knowledge of the target culture, lack of methods and materials, lack of time, and fear of controversy over teaching values and attitudes have been globally recognised as impediments to culture/literature teaching in some communities (Arries, 1994; Bragaw, 1991; Damen, 1987; Hadley, 1993; Mantle-Bromley, 1993). An identified problem in relevant literature with regard to culture teaching is that acculturation methodology is vast, and a great many techniques have been employed in order to strip away the layers of obfuscation blotting out the term 'culture' (Bessmertnyi, 1994).

A growing body of prior research in English language education and acculturation focuses on 'non-native English speaking' teachers of English (Amin, 1997; Braine, 1999; Kachru, 1992; Kahmi-Stein, 2004; Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1994). Much of this research problematizes the ownership of English and the privileged position of the inner circle of English-speaking countries such as the U.K., the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Wee, 2002; Kachru, 2006b). Harumi (2002), quoting Kachru (2006a, p.11), contends that the globalization of English naturally promotes not only the "Englishization" of other world languages but also the "nativization" of English. Harumi further maintains that the widespread dissemination of English as an international language, whatever the dialects it is spoken in, has stripped the

English-speaking peoples off the sole ownership of the language because English today has "ceased to be a vehicle of Western culture; it only marginally carries the British and American way of life" (Kachru, 1986, p.92).

This study aims at identifying the impediments that hinder culture teaching as embedded in the teaching of English literature to EFL students in Saudi Arabian universities as perceived by a sample of teachers and students. Therefore, the problem object of the study can be expressed in the following research question:

What are the attitudes of faculty and students in the English Department of the College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University (KKU), Abha, towards culture-embedded literature teaching?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Method

The method of research utilized in this study was the descriptive method. The descriptive research design with qualitative data from the open-ended section of the questionnaire can provide useful information about the distribution of a wide range of characteristics and relationships between variables of the study. Employing such a method aimed to "use questionnaires to collect data from participants in a sample about their characteristics, experiences, and opinions in order to generalize the findings to a population that the sample is intended to represent." (Gall, et al., 1996, p. 289) This approach of research can provide a basis for decisions that are significant for the evaluation of current educational practices (Patton, 2002).

3.2. Instrumentation

The questionnaire designed for the purpose of the study explored the perceptions of and attitudes towards the target culture in the EFL classroom and the teaching of English literature, as entertained by language instructors and EFL college students. The questionnaire (in two formats, one for teachers and the other adapted for students) was designed to elicit instructors and students' views on three major aspects identified in relevant literature: (1) feelings about both the importance of teaching culture and literature in EFL classrooms; (2) perceptions about culture in the current literature curriculum; and (3) inhibitors and impediments to EFL literature teaching in Saudi universities.

As the survey was intended to be exploratory for instructors' and students' views on the use of literature as a tool for culture teaching in EFL, independent variables, such as instructors' length of experience and nationality, although noted, were not critical factors. The lack of model-building, which usually includes independent variables and dependent variables, i.e. attitudes, may appear to be a major weakness in this study; however, given the general dearth of similar studies, the questionnaire serves as a source of information gathering. The questionnaire included both a Likert scale answer option as well as space for an open-ended response on most items.

In this way, participants with time and interest in the survey topic were able to expand on their answers, while those with little time or interest could simply circle numbers on the Likert scales. In this sense, the advantages of both close-ended responses, i.e. those readily quantified and easily analysed, and open-ended responses, i.e. those providing more useful and insightful data,

could be maximised. The main disadvantage of open-ended questions, i.e. unmanageably large amounts of data, was minimal because of the small sample size.

Because several of the questions required more than an informal, superficial understanding of terminology, examples were provided as part of the question to ensure understanding where informants can add more details or comments in the comments spaces below.

3.3. Validity of the Instruments

Inter-rater validation indicated the instruments were valid enough to collect the data they were meant to gather.

3.4. Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire has been determined using the Kuder-Richardson formula (21) (Brown, 1997, p. 202). The reliability co-efficient computed for the 35 items was 0.76, which is fairly high.

The questionnaire was preliminarily administered to 7 faculty members and junior staff members to determine its reliability, employing a test-retest method. The reliability of the survey was determined using the Kuder-Richardson formula (21). The reliability co-efficient computed for the survey items was 0.87, which is high enough to make the survey reliable for administration.

3.5. Participants

English language instructors at the College of Languages and Translation, KKU, participated in this study. Twenty-five instructors had taught for more than ten years, and their teaching experiences ranged from 5–15 years; some had more than 15 years' experience in TEFL. Of them, 40 % were Ph.D. holders, and the remaining 60 % were MAs. Participant teachers, most of them, taught at universities, though some taught at junior colleges (two-year post-secondary institutions), and some spanned a wide spectrum of learning institutions ranging from high school to university, with a wide experience in ESL and EFL.

Participant students in the questionnaire study were 33 in number, enrolled in levels five and six of study (upper-intermediate level); their mean age was 20.3 years. The participant students' native language was Arabic. Although no identical proficiency test was given to the students, the researcher could assume that all student informants were equivalent in terms of proficiency, based on information provided from the academic advisor on their grade point averages (GPAs).

4. RESULTS

Informants responded to the survey questions on a five-point scale, from 'Very Important' (scored 1) to 'Unimportant' (scored 5) or, in the case of questions referring to specific teaching/learning practices, from 'Always' (scored 1) to 'Never' (scored 5). In either case, a low group score, in the range of 1–2, indicates a significant commitment on the part of the instructors to the views or the practices mentioned, and a high score, in the range of 3–4, indicates a lack of commitment.

As for the open-ended questions requiring written responses, approximately 95 % of the instructors answered some or all of the question items that allowed open-ended comments, while 85 % of the student sample filled out this section.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these open-ended responses covered a remarkable range of examples and ideas. The first five questions dealt with informants' attitudes towards the teaching/learning of culture as part of their language classes (See the questionnaire attached).

Table (1): frequencies, percentages, weighted percentages, and Chi² for teachers' responses to section one of the questionnaire

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Weighted percentage	Chi ²
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
1	10	41.8	11	42.9	4	14.1	2.291066	*67.33
2	12	48.1	9	37.8	4	14.1	2.340058	63.24*
3	15	60.8	8	31.1	2	8.1	2.527378	145.52*
4	18	72.3	6	25.1	1	2.6	2.697406	**263.82

* significant at 0.01; ** significant at 0.05

Table (1) above shows the Chi² values for the items from 1 to 4, all being significant at 0.01, which indicates that all informants agreed to the items of this section positively, suggesting that instructors think that it is important to include aspects of culture in their teaching of English language.

While no teacher thought it was unimportant, a mean of 8.5 respondents circled 'a neutral response' suggesting that some instructors remain in doubt about the importance of culture in EFL classrooms, despite the wealth of research advocating a role for culture.

In open-ended responses, teachers indicated that novels, short stories, and drama are the major genres of creative writing that can best depict a particular culture in a given language; as such, informants, from amongst teachers, indicated that these genres have to be extensively included in the English literature component of the BA programme in the college.

Table (2): frequencies, percentages, weighted percentages, and Chi² for students' responses on section one of the questionnaire

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Weighted percentage	Chi ²
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
1	13	38.6	10	30.8	10	30.5	2.080692	*4.36
2	28	86.7	4	11.8	1	2.9	2.853026	451.04*
3	10	61.1	11	34.9	2	6.0	2.570605	169.84*

4	16	44.4	11	35.1	6	19.6	2.239193	30.03*
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* Significant at 0.01

Table (2) above shows the Chi2 values for the items from 1 to 4, all being significant at 0.01, which indicates that all informants agreed to the items of this section positively, suggesting that students, too, deemed it important to include aspects of culture in their language curriculum.

While no teacher thought it was unimportant, a mean of 9 respondents circled ‘a neutral response’ suggesting that some EFL students remain dubious about the significance of incorporating culture as a component in the EFL curriculum.

Students indicated that novels and stories are extensively loaded with culture, and they ought to study many of these courses across the language curriculum, in lieu of the intensive skills courses they are immersed in.

Table (3): Frequencies, percentages, weighted percentages, and Chi2 for teachers’ responses on section two of the questionnaire

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Weighted percentage	Chi ²
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
5	20	78.9	1	4.9	4	16.2	2.335329	58.07*
6	21	82.9	2	8.1	2	9	2.392216	83.40*
7	17	70.7	5	22.5	3	6.9	2.637725	221.54**
8	21	83.1	1	4.8	3	12.1	2.323353	53.40*

* Significant at 0.01; ** significant at 0.05

In section 2, which tapped into the perceptions about culture in the current literature curriculum, most informant teachers – as shown in table 3 above – scored strongly towards the positive end with considerably less deviation. No instructors in this study claimed to never teach culture, but a few instructors circled ‘neutral’ indicating that their classes contained minimal cultural information.

Table (4): frequencies, percentages, weighted percentages, and Chi2 for students’ responses on section two of the questionnaire

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Weighted percentage	Chi ²
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		

5	24	72.5	6	19.8	2	7.8	2.646707	237.22*
6	18	54.8	8	25.7	6	19.5	2.353293	71.18*
7	21	64.1	9	27.2	3	8.7	2.553892	159.28**
8	24	72.5	6	19.8	2	7.8	2.646707	237.22*

As is shown in table (4) above, student informants were of the same opinion as their teachers: they positively agreed that the current curriculum provided culture teaching, and that their teachers also taught culture while they were teaching language, but a few (mean number of respondents = 7) were not convinced that enough culture was taught in the language curriculum. Those students explained, in the open-ended spaces, that the current literature curriculum is not adequate to provide an appropriately balanced quantity of culture learning; they indicated that even some of the literature courses have been tuned to address Islamic topics, such a course titled 'Islam in World Literature', which cannot be claimed as teaching the English culture. In section 3, which sought to recognise the inhibitors and impediments to EFL literature teaching in Saudi universities, the following tables show teacher and student informants' responses to the items of this section:

Table (5): frequencies, percentages, weighted percentages, and Chi² for teachers' responses on section three of the questionnaire

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Weighted percentage	Chi ²
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
9	10	40.4	11	44.9	4	14.7	2.257485	53.36*
10	12	50.0	6	24.4	7	25.6	2.248503	41.75**
11	14	56.0	5	19.8	6	24.3	2.314371	78.44*
12	18	71.6	5	21.0	2	7.5	2.640719	228.69*

* Significant at 0.01; ** significant at 0.05

With all Chi² values being significant at 0.01 as is shown in Table (5) above, the figures demonstrate that teachers were cognizant of their perceptions of the inhibitors and impediments of teaching culture within literature in the BA curriculum provisioned for EFL students in the College of Languages and Translation, at KKU.

Nearly half the informants do not agree that the barriers cited are deemed inhibitive impediments except for item 12, addressing availability of material and teaching technology, such as video and audio clips. They think so because (1) some courses do not give them the opportunity to use drama video clips for introducing the target culture to the students in attractive formats, (2) literary texts available cannot be integrated with audio-video material easily due to time constraints in the classroom as well as lack of lab facilities, (3) teachers do not incorporate video clips available with these courses due to native cultural barriers, mostly associated with religious or socio-religious factors; and, finally, (4) the literature course instructors do

not provide their students with supplementary material (e.g. texts, graphics, advance organisers, audio, video, etc.) that integrate culture and literature learning.

Table (6): frequencies, percentages, weighted percentages, and Chi2 for students' responses on section three of the questionnaire

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Weighted percentage	Chi ²
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
9	15	45.8	13	39.0	5	15.2	2.296407	47.32*
10	8	24.0	16	49.00	16	49.48	1.973054	39.17**
11	16	48.8	7	21.0	10	30.2	2.185629	40.28*
12	9	27.2	11	35.7	12	37.00	1.898204	5.79*

* Significant at 0.01; ** significant at 0.05

In table (6) above, all Chi2 values are significant at 0.01, except for item 11 which is significant at 0.05. This indicates that informants perceived the following factors as inhibitors and impediments to integrating culture within English literature teaching in KKU in the following order according to the perceptions of the informants as determined by Chi2 and weighted percents:

1. lack of enough native-language speakers on the teaching staff;
2. lack of time and adequate material covering overt and covert cultural aspects within literary texts;
3. socio-cultural and religious factors;
4. lack of teaching technology enabling culture learning in classrooms.

The large difference in the mean scores between Section 1 and section 3 suggests that although participant instructors thought cultural content available within the current literature curriculum was important, and they did tend to teach it, it is actually planned only some of the time, due to time constraints and lack of literary texts rich in the culture of the English language. Presumably, instructors plan other parts of a lesson more rigorously than the parts that include culture. The reasons also have to do with the cultural and religious composition of Saudi society. Most students responded negatively in the open-ended part of section three when they were asked about whether it is culturally and religiously appropriate for them to view dramatic video clips with music and female actresses. They think so because they tend to believe that drama in videos expose exhibits women in nudity, which is not culturally acceptable for them. This pattern, where culture is perceived as important, yet is taught less rigorously, also appeared in Lessard-Clouston's study of Chinese instructors of English (1996) in which 69% of the instructors seldom or never taught culture despite their belief in its importance.

In open-ended responses, teachers also believed it is difficult to teach the covert aspects of culture, while they can teach overt culture more readily. Overt culture refers to those surface elements of culture that are visible and apparent, while covert culture comprises those aspects which are not readily visible or understood. Levine and Adelman (1993) used an iceberg illustration to explain the concept with the visible portion representing elements such as

language, food and appearance, while the larger, hidden part includes cultural aspects such as beliefs, attitudes and values (p. xviii). Participant instructors tended towards teaching overt elements of culture more often than covert ones, but not with a slight preference for overt rather than covert culture at times, depending on the material and cultural content of literary texts.

The question on whether instructors include covert culture brought out a remarkable variety of responses, although a full one-quarter of the instructors seldom or never include covert culture as part of their teaching. In open-ended responses, twelve instructors mentioned some discussion of religious beliefs, while others mentioned aspects of society, marriage, dating, social life, privacy, without explaining the values they teach associated with these elements.

The implications of such responses suggest that the native culture of the students (Saudi culture) is more reserved and religiously hard-lined than the English language cultures. While there is plenty of evidence that this is true, postmodern beliefs suggest that such cultural constructs cannot encompass the diversity that exists, not only within an individual culture, but within individuals themselves (Spack, 1997a). Therefore, instructors leave themselves open to criticism of stereotyping with such statements.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of and attitudes towards the role of literature courses in the teaching of culture in the foreign language classrooms in a Saudi university, as perceived by teachers and students in the English department. This paper has stressed the importance of incorporating culture in language learning, especially within the literature curriculum, and the dynamic relationship between acculturation and ELT in Saudi Arabia.

It can be concluded that EFL instructors and students in Saudi Arabia already recognize the important role that literature can play in culture learning in EFL classes. Identifying the importance of literature in the conveyance of culture is commensurate with prior research, which can be implicitly or directly be used to acculturate EFL learners into the English language culture (Lessard-Clouston, Hall, 1981; Nostrand, 1974, Seelye, 1984; Brooks, 1968; 1975; Lessard-Clouston, 1997; Kramersch, 1993) in a more contextualised fashion. Recent research also recognises that literature can efficiently induce intercultural competence (Savignon, 2007; Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Deters, 2009; Mohammadzadeh, 2009; Tay, 2010; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Cronjé, 2011).

Furthermore, EFL instructors need to integrate cultural information as part of their language teaching, since it appears to be introduced more randomly than other aspects of their teaching. The reason is that there is no overt, explicit courses in developing cultural awareness in the EFL programme in ELT colleges, except for a language awareness course, which taps into cultural technical terminology without delving deep beyond the introduction of cultural terms.

As elaborated in the literature review section, learning culture is often done through teaching literature (Harumi, 2002; Ilieva, 2005; Deters, 2009; Tay, 2010; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Cronjé, 2011), but still acculturation requires more rigorous courses specifically geared towards cultural teaching. These findings, too, are consistent with prior research which suggests that culture must be integrated with language learning programmes to develop cultural and linguistic competencies (Harumi, 2002; Ilieva, 2005; Deters, 2009; Göbel & Helmke, 2010). According to Dirven and Putz (1993), and many others (Byrnes, 1991; Hinkel, 1999; Kramersch, 1998; Valdes, 1995), language teachers should concern themselves with the teaching of cultural competence in addition to language, for it is now commonly believed that

"misunderstandings that can occur between people of different cultures may not be reducible exclusively to language difficulties, but may be also attributable to different sets of experiences, different expectations and even profoundly different ways of thinking" (Stephens, 1997, p. 123).

The less rigorous approach to culture teaching as embedded in language teaching material, the rigid socio-religious inhibitors, the lack of appropriate literary texts, and the lack of time and technology suggest that culture learning – all such factors play a secondary and less supportive role to language learning at large in current English language programme. In other words, the more absent these factors are, the more effective language learning becomes. This being the case, acculturation and language learning are integrally related, with culture teaching being not any longer viewed as an ‘add-on’ but rather as an ‘integral part’ of second/foreign language learning" (Courchene, 1996, p. 1). This finding is also compatible with prior research which has recognised a relationship between acculturation and language education (Roberts, et al., 2001; Kubota, 2003; Kramsch, 2003; Zaid, 2011). The present study, commensurate with earlier research (Damen, 1987; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004; Zaid, 2011) has identified that "language learning materials and foreign language teachers are influential bearers of culture in the second/foreign language classroom" (Zaid, 2011, p. 1).

In the same vein, instructors also need to adapt their teaching style to commensurately accommodate to the cultural expectations of the students. In many ways, these adaptations should emphasise the importance of culture in EFL, at the cost of their own socio-cultural identity. They also need to address the inhibitors and barriers to culture teaching within literature courses with more facilitative and enabling alternatives or curricular adaptation or change that will help to activate culture learning for the students.

6. FURTHER RESEARCH

Suggested research in culture teaching requires that more adapted research on large-sized samples be conducted. Both non-native English-speaking instructors and ESL instructors may express different views about the teaching of culture, which could prove useful for either model-building or textbook authors and publishers, which requires an orientation towards reconsidering the TEFL course-texts available in Saudi Arabia. Thus, teachers by using literature teaching derived from the different varieties of English (e.g., American, British, Australian, New Zealandish, South African, etc.) within language learning curriculum more than it is being used will lead EFL students to understand more effectively the representations of the different English cultures to be found in these varied literary texts, and will induce them to achieve higher levels of multicultural literacy, which makes them more effective intercultural communicators.

Further research is also required to verify whether there is a direct nexus between openness to cultural and linguistic patterns and the ability to learn a second or foreign language. Such a link could take on special significance at a time when the nature of intercultural competence is receiving widespread international attention.

Therefore, new evaluation and investigation methods will be necessary to collect data to investigate the effects of acculturation on EFL learning and the overall ELT curriculum development. One approach would be to look for relationships between language learners' openness to different cultural perspectives and their progress in second/foreign language acquisition/learning.

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