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Culture in Teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia from Learners' Perspective

Nasir Uddin¹

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the attitude of Saudi Arabian undergraduate English students towards the American and British culture by studying their attitude to materials with relevant cultural contents in their textbooks. As strict followers of Islamic principles, the learner might be misunderstood to be reactive to the cultural contents of the nations of completely different culture. However, primary data shows that the learners are more tolerant in their attitude to the English culture than they socially appear to be, but they are keen to learn English as a language with relatively less interest in its cultural aspects.

Keywords: Learners' Attitude, Language and Culture, Textbook Contents.

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1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is a challenging task. There has been a plethora of theories and issues in teaching EFL in non-English speaking, monolingual settings like the Middle East, Japan, China, Bangladesh, etc. Culture in EFL is one of the most debated issues. Although “language and culture are two inextricably related entities” (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984) and language is described as a “vehicle of culture” (Hofstede, 1986), English Language Teaching (ELT) experts have bifurcated into two schools: one claims that English should be taught with “reference to the socio-cultural norms and the values of an English speaking country”, and the other advocates that teaching English should be “independent of its nationality bound cultural context” (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984). Culture has an intertwined relation with language (Pulvernes, 2003) and so the learners who are not familiar to cultural issues find it difficult to communicate effectively with the native speakers. According to Tijani (2011), cultural unawareness may lead to regrettable misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication as a word or a group of words may bear different cultural connotations. On the other hand, learners' own culture and cultural context should be prioritized more because learners' ‘cognitive ability develops in their own cultural context’ (Jacknic, 2008: as appeared in Gholami and Rahman, 2012), and they relate language and its semantics with their own cultural phenomena.

¹ Lecturer, Department of English, Saudi Arabia. Email: nasir.nsu.bd@gmail.com.

The issue of culture in English Language Teaching (ELT) has little been studied from learners' perspective. What do the learners feel, how they react to the native English culture loaded textbook contents has not been studied in Saudi Arabian context. To what extent a certain type of study material is preferable to the learners' is in fact a considerable issue. From this concern, this paper will consider the issue of culture in teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia, through Saudi Arabian learners' perception of target language (TL) cultural contents in their textbooks and suggest an effective to-do list for the teachers to facilitate English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia.

This paper followed quantitative method of study to through a structured questionnaire survey in order to find out the degree to what the learners accept their study material. It investigates learners' motivation to TL culture as well. It is displayed through the survey data analysis that the learners possess very strong travel motivation for learning English but their attitude to textbook cultural contents are less positive. The author believes that this study will be inspiring for the future researchers to find out more about this area of study and will facilitate ELT and developing material appropriate culturally and contextually.

1.1 Definitions of culture

Culture is 'socially acquired knowledge' that plays the central role in cognition (Alptekin, 1993). It is a way of life – the behavioral pattern, beliefs and values that a group of people inherit from their past generation and practice without much reflection. Thus the culture of a certain population continues generation after generation. Hofstede (1984: p.51) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of a group of people from another." Banks, McGee & Banks (1989) defined culture from a wider social and psychological perspective:

"It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways."

Human beings are more cultural than linguistic, ethnical, or psychological stereotypes (Gu, 2014). Culture dominates every tangible and intangible aspects of human life. The ideas of good and bad, dos and don'ts, or rights and responsibilities are shaped by the culture one is born and brought up in. People's perception of reality helps them to determine their courses of future actions and preparations, and at the same time their perception is developed in them within their cultural context. Language is an ever-existing phenomenon, a reality which is intricately connected to culture. However, when a language crosses its national boundary and is used as a lingua franca for international communication, it cannot have any specific cultural attachment as culture means "the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time" (Brown, 2000: p.177).

1.2 Cultural aspects of Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Arabian society like many other Arab countries is a collectivist society, and its culture is deeply rooted in Islamic principles and traditional tribal system. Aldraehim, Edwards, Watson & Chan (2012) state:

Islam plays a significant role in Saudi's culture by defining the social manners, traditions, obligations, and practices of society. Kinship and tribal system still impact on the individual's place in society and could affect their success or failure.

Family is valued as the strongest social unit. Family interest is emphasized over the interest of the individual. Unlike English speaking countries, there is no movie theatres, discos, casinos, bars etc. as these are strictly prohibited in Islam. Men accomplish out-of-home duties and women mainly do their part at home. They also receive education and join the workforce but they have to do it within the national, social and religious boundary specially set for women.

There is no co-education system as Islam puts margin on male female relations. Children from the beginning of their institutional education study about Islam besides other disciplines. So usually the individuals irrespective of gender, tribe and social position are supposed to grow up with Islamic knowledge and consequently they develop a mind to maintain themselves in Islamic ways of life which are poles apart from that of native English speaking countries.

In spite all these socio-cultural aspects, people these days are up-to-date with different cultures from the different nooks and corners of the world through satellite television channels, internet, and social media. Besides, their interactions with expatriates from different countries might help them develop a wider and liberal view about the world and its cultures.

1.3 English learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a monolingual country where English is a foreign language with little use in social interactions as Arabic is the medium of formal and informal communication (Khan, 2011 & Al-Zubeiry, 2012). In Saudi Arabian setting, learning and teaching of English is formal classroom-based. It is taught as a compulsory academic subject from class seven in the junior high school to undergraduate classes (Uddin, 2014; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013), and there is no scope of learning English through informal interactions outside the classroom. Language teaching experts always suggest creating life-like situations through interactions and activities in the classroom which the learners find similar to outside-the-classroom situations (Purba, 2011; Prodromou, 1988) but there is scarcely any situation in reality that put the learners to speak English. In Saudi Arabia, learners find learning English a challenge, and most of them are unable and unwilling to read English (Khan, 2011). But the scenario is changing gradually. To develop this situation and to motivate the learners, the government is spending huge amounts of money in hiring quality English teachers from abroad and providing stipend to all the native students (Uddin, 2014, Al-Issa, 2011, & Khan, 2011). At the same time, current job market, especially multinational companies and other private companies and firms are also placing more emphasis on the applicants' fluency and accuracy in English communication skills.

1.4 Hypothesis

From the studies mentioned above, this paper hypothesizes that the students of Saudi Arabian universities will not accept inclusion of Anglo-American cultural contents. There is strong probability that the learners will demand their lessons to be about English language (Prodromou, 1992) and aim to become successful bilingual (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984) not bicultural, and also because the learners might find it risible for it matches little with the culture they have been grown up in. Their stand will be in favor of including their own cultural contents in classroom lessons.

2. Literature review

Language cannot be culture independent as it is a vehicle of culture. Learning a new language is then to learn about a bit of culture of the native speakers of that language. Izadpanah (2011) studied Iranian English teachers' views about culture and its inclusion in teaching language and propounded that the knowledge of culture that is inherent in language is vital for the language users, but in EFL contexts it may trigger assimilation to some extent especially if the L2 is more dominant worldwide. Thus promotion of assimilation can loosen the internal citizen bonding and open nooks to let the dominants in. So, it puts the teachers in dilemma whether to teach language without culture to produce speakers without communicative understanding or helping linguistic imperialism to take place.

Both culture and language are social elements; and success of communication as well as learning of successful communication depends on social contexts; in fact, it is the social context in which the learners are learning a language other than their mother tongue. Gholami, Abd Rahman and Mustapha (2012) mention that social context significantly influences second language learners' attitude and

motivation, and without considering the context, learning outcomes cannot be satisfactory. The study concludes that “we need to provide and prepare more opportunities and chances to help learner learn the L2 more efficiently and practically”, and that “social contexts are essential triggers in EFL contexts and can bring opportunities”. EFL context and culture are usually different from L2 context and culture, and so the culture of the learners should be given equal or more importance in the L2 teaching learning process because L2 is supposed to be used mostly in learners' cultural periphery.

Strongly emphasizing the inseparability of culture and language, Purba (2011) guides the EFL teachers to include realistic elements such as “notions like when and what people eat; how they make a living; the attitudes they use to show approval or disapproval, educational attitudes, time and space patterns, work values, etc.” Culture has been metaphorically presented as “a body of ready-made solutions” to peoples' problems, and “a cushion between man and his environment.” Purba (2011) renounces the idea of becoming communicatively competent solely by mastering linguistic elements avoiding cultural notions.

Prodromou (1992) finds out that 84% of EFL students in Greece want their English lessons to be about English language only. Beside English language, science and society, and social problems have been demanded by the learners as to be the dominating contents in their English lessons. They believe that the foreign teachers should know about the culture and language of the students. In such contexts, going against learners' mindset will risk learners' motivation for language learning. So, cultural foreground here is a priority in developing classroom materials.

Bandpay (2013) highly recommended teaching culture as a part of teaching an FL. The researcher posits that incorporating cultural materials into classroom teaching is most important prerequisite for the language teachers. It is teachers' responsibility to make learners aware of the cultural issues of both native and target language culture so that learners can develop an ability to recognize and appreciate the differences between the two cultures. It is also admitted that if the learners are from a cosmopolitan society, they will be more open to accept the cultural contents in their lessons. But learners from a conservative culture may oppose such inclusion and in that case teachers have to take learners' social factors in consideration in choosing teaching contents for the learners.

Cultural perspectives of the EFL learners may cause constrictions in EFL teaching-learning process when TL cultural features distant to that of the EFL learners get into the teaching learning process. Even very highly experienced teachers struggle to ensure quality in their teaching when learners judge TL cultural points from an uncritical angle. And it will be somehow impractical to expect learners to be thoroughly critical in thinking and judging something new. But in course of time, with proper guidelines, tolerance or acceptance may develop.

3. Methodology

As the study aims to investigate learners' attitude about TL cultural contents, participation of 260 (154 male and 106 female) undergraduate students aged between 18 and 23 has been investigated. 184(70.77%) of them are from urban area and 76 (29.33%) are from countryside. Learners have been chosen from the department of English and their English language proficiency level ranges from pre-intermediate to intermediate. All of them were requested to respond to a structured questionnaire of 15 statements. It was optional for the learners, and no one was forced to respond to the survey. A 5 point likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) has been applied. The questionnaire was prepared in English, but an Arabic version was administered among students. Translation into Arabic was done by an expert translator. Translation was performed because it is speculated that translation of questionnaires in the respondents' mother tongue can avoid ‘language-base interference’ to a great extent (Cheng and Dornyei, 2007). The researcher administered the survey among the male students, and assistance from a female colleague was requested and received through her husband to get the survey done by the female students, as the male teachers are not allowed to be

in person in female classes. 10 questionnaires responded by the male and 7 by the female students were not taken into consideration as those were incomplete and unclear.

4. Findings and discussions

The first three statements (1, 2 & 3) of the questionnaire have been brought into play to know about the learners' attitude towards English music, movies, newspapers and magazines. Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990, as cited in Purba, 2011) tagged cinema, literature, music and media as the aesthetic elements of culture which Frank (2013) labeled as cultural products. Little surprisingly, the findings seem to mismatch the daily lifestyle, activities and opinions. The following figure (below) shows the overall findings of the study in percentage.

Figure 1:

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly agree	
	Overall %		Overall %		Overall %		Overall %		Overall %	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
1. I like English music		25.93		17.28		13.17		26.34		17.28
	29.17	21.21	20.83	12.12	13.19	13.13	23.61	30.30	13.19	23.23
2. I like English movies		7.41		5.76		8.23		38.27		40.33
	8.33	6.06	9.72	00	9.72	6.06	34.72	43.43	37.5	44.44
3. I like English magazines and newspapers		15.64		25.10		27.57		21.40		10.29
	20.14	9.09	31.25	16.16	24.31	32.32	18.75	25.25	5.56	17.17
4. I like to travel to English speaking countries.		6.17		5.76		11.52		25.51		51.03
	8.33	3.03	9.72	00	14.53	7.07	22.22	30.30	45.14	59.60
5. I like English.		8.23		3.70		11.52		34.57		41.98
	8.33	8.08	4.86	2.02	13.89	8.08	38.19	29.29	34.72	52.53
6. As a result of learning English, our people can forget the importance of our social culture.		33.74		32.1		16.87		10.29		6.99
	33.33	34.34	28.47	37.37	20.83	11.11	6.94	15.15	10.42	2.02
7. Because of learning English, our people may become indifferent to our social values.		46.5		26.34		15.64		7.82		3.7
	38.89	57.58	31.25	19.19	16.67	14.14	8.33	7.07	4.86	2.02
8. I think with the influence of English, people are losing confidence in their own identity.		40.74		27.98		24.28		3.29		3.7
	33.33	51.52	30.56	24.24	27.08	20.20	3.47	3.03	5.56	1.01
9. The contents of my text books reflect British or American culture.		12.76		11.93		39.51		25.93		9.88
	13.19	12.12	9.72	15.15	40.97	37.37	23.61	29.29	12.5	6.06
10. I like British or American culture related contents in my text books.		12.76		15.21		20.58		38.27		13.17
	16.67	7.07	18.75	10.10	25.69	13.13	25.69	56.57	13.19	13.13

11. British or American culture related contents inspire me to study English.	12.76	11.93	28.4	32.51	14.4
12. I think American or British culture related contents are demotivating for the learners.	17.36	6.06	11.11	13.13	26.39
13. The text book contents should reflect our own culture.	20.58	31.28	30.86	8.23	9.05
14. I feel alienated or detached when I read my English books because the contents do not match my culture.	21.53	19.19	29.17	34.34	31.25
15. Foreign culture can be taught in a separate course like Cultural Studies, not with English language.	11.11	11.11	8.33	15.15	12.5
	11.11	11.11	8.33	15.15	12.5
	23.87	24.28	17.28	18.93	15.64
	20.83	28.28	24.31	24.24	15.28
	8.23	9.877	23.04	24.69	34.16
	8.33	8.08	4.86	17.17	27.78
			16.16	25	24.24
				34.03	34.34

It is obvious from their response that the respondents are highly positive about English movies. On the other hand, they are less positive to English magazines and newspapers. A considerable number responded with 'not sure'. Regarding English music, the number of students that have for and against English music is almost equal to the number that have gone for and against English magazines and newspapers. Now the question is why they are more positive to movies, not to music, newspapers and magazines. Both movies and music are available via satellite TV. Channels and internet. It requires specific studies to determine but it may be hypothesized the they prefer movies more because movies contain a story, acting and display of real life, and the language used in movies is contextual and realistic. On the other hand, the lyrics of music are more of emotional, imaginative and utopian nature. Singing also eliminates some features of real life spoken language such as tone, pitch, aspiration, intonation etc. Therefore they might find music more challenging than movies. They need to put less effort and labor for movies than music, and it is a common human trait that they love the things that are less laborious, less demanding and easy-going.

The subjects of this study responded very positively to show that they like the English Language itself and they are exceedingly interested in traveling to English speaking countries (statements 5 & 4). Their travel motivation and liking English language for instrumental reasons have been substantiated in *Moskovsky & Alrabai (2009)*, *Al-Zubeiry (2012)* and *Alsamadani & Ibranian (2015)*. While responding to 'I like to travel to English speaking countries.' 51.03% (female 59.60%, male 45.14%) agreed strongly, 25.51% (female 30.3%, male 22.22%) agreed. If their responses to 'agree' and 'strongly agree' are accepted as positive, it stands out that approximately 76% (female 90%, male 67%) are interested in traveling to English speaking countries. For that purpose they need to learn English and their responses to 'I like English.' correlate with their response to travel interest. 41.98% (female 52.53%, male 34.72%) chose 'strongly agree', and 34.57% (female 29.29%, male 38.19%) chose 'agree', which means approximately 76% (female 83%, male 73%) respondents bear positive attitude towards English language. 11.53% are not sure; and it may be predicted that proper motivation and student-centered classroom teaching may turn this 'not sure' number into positive ones.

This fascination for traveling to English speaking countries can be analyzed in connection with their love for English movies. As an aesthetic form of culture, movies bear the beauty, attractions, adventurous nature, luxury and beautiful places that attract the audience and motivate them to travel to the places

shown in movies. Tanskanen (2012) and Tuclea & Nistoreanu (2011) also confirm that movies create attractive images of tourism destinations and influence travelers' destination selection. For traveling to any country, learning the language of that country is always advantageous. As traveling is a matter of a short period of time, the language issue can be managed by translators and travel guides. But travelers' knowledge of the language of the travel destinations is incomparably beneficial. Hence, learners' positive attitude to English movies, English language and traveling to English speaking countries are interconnected.

The next three statements (6, 7 & 8) in the questionnaire are almost similar in meaning. These repetitive statements were included to explore learners' confidence level in their own cultural and social values and identity. In response to "As a result of learning English, our people may forget the importance of our social culture", the maximum percentage of learners strongly disagreed, the second highest percentage disagreed and the third highest percentage remained 'not sure'. In response to "Because learning English, our people may become indifferent to our social values", relatively greater number of students showed their positivity towards English and maintained confidence in their own social values. To opine on "I think with the influence of English, people are losing confidence from their own identity", it comes out that a sum of 68.72% (female 75.76%, male 63.89%) students do not concur that learning English can affect their confidence in their own identity.

The responses reflect that learning English has no negative effect on the learners' self-identity, social norms and cultural values. It can be explained from the learners' awareness of and confidence in their socio-cultural norms and beliefs. They are not at all ethnocentrically threatened by learning English. They treat English as a language, a tool or instrument to achieve some future goals. Even though language study incorporates studying culture to some extent, they are not threatened by that, and that is probably because they understand that knowing someone else's mores doesn't mean immersing into it.

Statement no 9 in the questionnaire searches for the learners' idea about the nature of their textbook contents. 35.81% (female 35.35%, male 36.11%) think that their text books reflect British or American culture. This number includes 25.93% (female 29.29%, male 23.61%) 'agree' and 9.88% (female 6.06%, male 12.5%) 'strongly agree' to statement no. 9. Most significant percentage (39.51%: female 37.37%, male 40.97%) of the subjects went for 'not sure'. This huge indeterminate response requires to be addressed it may be because of their less understanding of the textbook contents resulting from their inappropriate level of English language proficiency. Studies prove that the Saudi tertiary level English students' English proficiency is not up to the expectations (Moskovsky & Alrabai, 2009; Al-Zubeiry, 2012; Al-Qahtani, 2016). Further studies are imperative to know about the indeterminate state of the learners.

Statements 10, 11, 12 and 14 of the questionnaire maintain a strong correlation. The two counter statements to statements 10 and 11 are statements no. 12 and 14. Statement no 12 asks if they think British or American cultural contents are demotivating for the learners or not. Though the positive responses are around 50% in all these 4 statements, the percentage responding 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' is very low, which indicates lesser degree of learners' determination in these issues and that is unlike their responses against other statements.

A clear difference between the participants' attitude to English language and British-American culture has been established from their responses to language related statements and culture related statements. An important number of them view culture and language from different points of view. The students were more determined in responding to the statements that inquire of their attitude to English language and their thinking about the effects of English language in their society. But they seem to be less confident and determined in responding to culture issue, especially responding to the statements that ask their opinions about American or British culture related contents in their textbooks whereas, they are found more confident and determined in responding to the statement that their textbook contents should reflect their own culture.

It is evident from the gathered data that the learners love their own culture a lot, and they possess unshakeable confidence in their own culture. But they love English language as it is a passport to vast knowledge and information, important for higher education, for traveling across the world, and they like English movies because it is useful for learning English. They want to study English language without English cultural contents in their lesson as evidenced from their response to statement no 15 in the questionnaire.

In responding to culture related statements, a big percentage of the subjects responded 'not sure'. This deserves special attention. Further studies should be attempted to explore this domain of learners' mind and that in turn will help the teachers and educationists to devise more appropriate materials for them, and will make the learners more determined and decisive.

This important number of students can go either for language culture integration in textbooks or against depending on the teachers' understanding and appreciation of learners' needs and psychological orientations, employing suitable teaching approaches.

Between the responses of male and female students, a line of difference is evident. In responding to any statement, female students are found to be more confident and determined. When they responded positively, they responded 'strongly agree' remarkably more than their male counterparts. In case of expressing their likings for English movies, their aim of traveling to English speaking countries, their desire for English language and their attitude to English cultural contents in textbooks, their responses were noticeably more assertive than the male students, and in maximum cases, they responded less with 'not sure' than the male students did. A proper exploitation of this assertive and decisive quality can boost their language learning motivation and in the long run contribute to their language skills to a great measure.

5. Suggestions

As per above findings and discussion this study suggests developing materials prioritizing learners own local and cultural issues. As in their schema they have knowledge of their own culture, they will find their cultural related materials more easy going and interesting; and this in return will motivate learners more to study. It will lessen their feeling of alienation and detachment that a large number of them feel dealing with TL cultural contents.

Textbooks may include chapters on their own historical events, traditions of different Saudi tribes, responsibilities as citizens, development of their own county, tourism and travel destinations around the world, lifestyle of the learners' country and others together so that they can find theirs and evaluate that of others, and so on. Further studies are imperative in developing suitable materials for Saudi Arabian learners.

This study also recommends more use of visual materials such as documentaries, movie clips, videos on different attractive travel destinations etc. to make the classroom environment lively and interesting. In case of discussing other cultural issues while teaching English, teachers should make it clear that knowing about someone else culture is not acculturating in that. As most of the learners are aware of it, the 'not sure' learners will feel more assured and their 'psychological defense mechanism' (Rivers, 2011) will be less active.

An intercultural perspective can make learners easy to other cultural aspects. If the TL culture is presented side by side in the form of a comparative study, learners will find it less interfering and their understanding of TL culture will grow along with their skills in English.

This paper recommends the material developers to take this suggestion into consideration. Further studies are essential to be more confident in this suggestion.

6. Conclusion

Culture is always a very important issue in language learning and teaching, and will remain so. And the question of ‘Whose culture? What culture?’ will remain alive. But course of actions should be determined based on the context of study, learners’ motivation, learners’ priority and their socio-cultural milieu. In case of Saudi Arabia cultural contents should be dealt with more caution. Though the learners are more outgoing, assertive and liberal than they seem to be outwardly, there is still some scope for giving a second thought before discussing cultural issues openly. The learners’ responses to the questionnaire survey bear the proof that they have very unshakable confidence in their own identity and culture, and they are threatened by the TL cultural contents. With confidence in their own culture, they have informed through the questionnaire reply that they want more familiar study material containing their own cultural aspects. In such circumstances, material development and implication of the materials in real classroom settings need to be studied more rigorously. Considering the learners’ psychology, teaching techniques in action could further be modified to benefit learners more by sustaining their attention and motivation to learning English. This paper also marks the influence of satellite, internet and social media on the psychology of young generation, prominently in the female youth. Further studies are imperative to come to more precise resolution owing to the ever-dynamic nature of language and culture.

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