

Effects of Learning Culture on English-Language Learning for Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract

This quantitative study aimed to investigate the influence of incorporating English-culture learning into English-language learning by observing the perspectives of Saudi EFL learners. It illustrated if there is an effect of learning culture on English language competence to the students of Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University . The study's methodology included a questionnaire administered to 70 undergraduate female students in the English department at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. Results show that Saudi students recognized that culture and language are related to each other and the learning process cannot be fully realized without consideration of both aspects. Moreover, the study found that learning the English language with its corresponding cultural elements will enhance the speed and enjoyment of Saudi students' learning process. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that learning a foreign language not only involves studying syntactic structures or learning new vocabularies, but also should incorporate some cultural elements. From Saudi students' point of view, the only difficulty that might face them is the differences between Arabic and English cultures. Finally, this study recommends that further research can investigate the effect of culture on learning from the teachers' point of view

Keywords: English foreign language (EFL), Language integrating, incorporation, intercultural communication, Saudi students

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1.Introduction

The study of foreign languages globally and particularly in Saudi Arabia seldom incorporates cultural aspects of the target (i.e., international) language. Although many researchers argue that culture cannot be separated from language, most such second-language learning programs are concerned more with teaching the language rather than the culture. Because of this deficiency, learners are prevented from fully understanding the foreign language as a native speaker. In sum, foreign language learning not only means learning the language but also learning its cultural background (Atkinson, 1999; Diaz & Boynton, 1995).

Cultural aspects of a language include knowledge, clothing, and habits of people living in a particular society in which the language is spoken. Culture has a significant effect on the language and how people use it. Therefore, it is crucial for students to understand the target culture in order to learn the foreign language (Zhan, 2016). It has been found that teachers should encourage their students to relate their language with the real-life situations in order to use the target language adequately.

Since one aim of teaching a foreign language is to develop cultural knowledge and to understand the latter's effect on communication, learners who are learning English as a foreign language need to have cultural awareness in order to build proficiency in intercultural communication of the target language. Jokikokko (2005) argues that having an appropriate intercultural competence helps learners to identify even the non-verbal signs of the target language, such as gestures and codes. Thus, understanding the culture underpinning the English language allows English as a foreign language(EFL) learners to communicate appropriately with native speakers.

Many previous studies have explained the importance of incorporating the culture with the foreign language in language-learning classrooms (e.g., Cunico, 2005; LaBelle, 2000; Torii-Williams, 2004). Because English-language teaching is an essential element in Saudi higher education, and learning the culture is significant in facilitating the language-learning process, there is a demand for research in the area of integrating culture with learning English language in the university level.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The current study sought to investigate the perspectives of Saudi students as EFL learners in English department on the effect of incorporating cultural learning with their English language learning. The results provide essential information about integrating the culture with learning English in Saudi universities. In particular, the results support the aim of the study to transfer the data to university instructors so they may become aware of the importance of teaching the target culture along with teaching the English language.

1.2 Research Questions

The present study aimed to investigate the influence of incorporating English-language culture learning into English language learning. Moreover, the study used a questionnaire for its in-depth analysis of Saudi EFL students' perception about culture and language learning in a Saudi context. Thus, this study aimed to

identify EFL learners' views about learning the English culture in addition to the English language and sought to do so by addressing the following research questions:

1. Is there any effect of learning culture on English language competence to the students of Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University?
2. How do Saudi EFL learners in Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University perceive the importance of integrating English-language culture into English-language learning?
3. What are the SAU Saudi EFL students' difficulties when incorporating English-language culture into English-language learning?
4. What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the results?

2.Literture Review

2.1 Culture

Culture can be defined as a set of norms, traditions, art, ethics, beliefs, knowledge, laws, and other habits (Tylor, 1958). Tylor (1958) explains it is essential that persons acquire culture in the same society. This includes visible features, such as food and clothes, as well as invisible ones such as thoughts, attitudes, and knowledge (Williams, 1985).

Culture involves both cognitive and affective behavior. It has a pronounced effect on people's attitudes and in turn it has a significant influence on practical aspects of people's lives, such as their hobbies. In short, it is a kind of habit that people practice as their traditions (Kuo & Lai, 2006).

Kuo and Lai (2006) argued that without understanding the culture, you couldn't understand the life around you. Culture is essential in developing our society and building relationships with other people. If we do not appreciate it, we will lose it directly.

2.2 The Relationship between Culture and English-Language Learning

Culture cannot be separated from language. They are intertwined, and they affect each other (Kuo & Lai, 2006). Kuo and Lai (2006) affirm that cultural learning and linguistic knowledge are essential elements in achieving success, whether inside or outside the classroom.

The National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project (1996) found that students cannot learn a new language accurately until they have mastered the culture of that language. This explains that cultural understanding is needed to achieve a high level of foreign language proficiency. Singhal (1997) similarly indicated that foreign language learning couldn't be completed if cultural learning is neglected; she argued that teaching culture to students is vital and it furnishes a sophisticated context for learners to use the language.

Kramersch (1993) stress the significance of context in foreign cultural instruction. Teachers should not only provide explanations of the linguistic aspects but should also illustrate language usage with various examples. It is important that learners of foreign languages must become foreign culture learners as well. Thus, in the foreign language classroom, we cannot split learning activities and cultural influence from what is learned (Scovel, 1991).

Gobel's (2010) study showed that Japanese EFL students were more concerned to learn the relationships between English language and culture. Gobel states that EFL Japanese classes must include information about the culture of the foreign language and suggested that EFL Japanese teachers should have good knowledge about the culture of English language to use it ideally in their classes.

It has been postulated that EFL learners have difficulty in using the foreign-language knowledge appropriately in different situations, even if they have acquired an adequate amount of cultural awareness. This is because of their lack of foreign culture realization. Alsamani's study (2014) investigated the cultural features that needed to be incorporated in Saudi EFL classrooms. Alsamani used a Culture-Awareness Diagnostic Test and a Culture-Awareness Needs Assessment Questionnaire to examine students' attitudes. The study's findings revealed that there is a strong need for the students to learn about the target culture, and the students showed a great interest in learning about English culture and its people. Eventually, it is recommended that EFL education programs should include culture in their classrooms.

Moreover, Brdarić (2016) confirms that teaching culture is necessary to be included in EFL classrooms due to the goal of teaching a foreign language is intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The study investigated the incorporation of culture into the *Croatian National Curriculum* at the secondary school level and the EFL classroom. It analyzed the textbooks and determined the views of teachers of English on ICC in language teaching and clarified whether their educating is in consistence with the Croatian National Curriculum. The results illustrate that EFL teachers perceive the importance of foreign language teaching; however, there is still no complete coherence of the results given in the Croatian National Curriculum and what instructors promote in their school practice.

2.3 Difficulties Integrating English Culture in English Learning

The more you use the culture in teaching and learning, the more difficult it becomes. One challenge is that there is no single national culture. We can see people belong to any number of cultural groupings (e.g., gender, social class, work status) and there is a failure to identify this to a stable group of stereotypes (Choudhury 2013).

Choudhury (2013) claims that the difficulty facing teachers is how they can protect their students from being influenced by the target culture and losing their own identity. To avoid such a problem, students should be encouraged to learn the similarities between their culture and the target culture to reach a common comprehension.

2.4 Strategies for Teaching the Target Language Culture

Language learning strategies are the techniques and approaches that language learners use to learn the second language. The effective use of strategy leads to higher achievement of language fluency (Ellis, 1997).

Different strategies have been used for teaching cultures—such as drama, social media, and games. Krashen (1999) promoted observations through movies and other authentic materials that are used to teach culture. Similarly, Kovacs(2017) argues that more concentration must be placed

on the activities dealing with culture inside the classroom such as TV shows, films, news broadcasts and other authentic materials that are useful to introduce culture. To combine culture and language learning, teachers can use skills-oriented and learner-centered approach. Presentations and role-play activities also are used to teach culture if they are about traditions and customs of the second-language culture. These kinds of strategies change the learning situation from one in which students learn grammar and vocabulary to one that reflects the natural use of language by its native speakers (Dema & Möller, 2012).

In addition to its visible effect in changing our social life, the use of technology has a significant influence on the ways of teaching and learning. Technology allows teachers the opportunity to create more effective teaching materials for learning the language and language culture. One of the alluring benefits of technology is that it provides authentic communication in an interactive environment that facilitates the teaching of culture (Lee, 2009).

3 Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the effect of incorporating English-culture learning into English-language learning by observing the perspectives of Saudi EFL learners. This is a quantitative study for which a questionnaire was used as an instrument for collecting data. It was designed in a paper-based format. This study is descriptive, and the method of analysis is statistical analysis where the SPSS version 22.0 is employed. The participants are selected carefully based on their English proficiency. That is why the students of sixth, seventh and eighth levels are suitable for this study.

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted in Fall semester 2018-2019 at Prince Sattam University's College of Science and Human Studies in Hotat Bani Tamim, Saudi Arabia. The participants in the study comprised 70 undergraduate female students. The age of the participants ranged between 20 and 22 years. They are at sixth, seventh, and eighth levels in third and fourth year.

3.2 Instrument

3.2.1 questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants and was treated anonymously to provide the opportunity for them to express their attitudes toward the effects of learning culture on learning the foreign language for EFL Saudi students. The questionnaire was designed with a 5-point scale (strongly agree/agree/neutral/disagree/strongly disagree). It was divided into two sections: the first section included demographic factors to provide further insights of students' profiles (each student's name was optional) and level. The second section included 10 statements related to the main dimensions of the study, and was divided into four further subsections: (a) the effect of learning culture on English language competence, included two statements; (b) the importance of integrating English language culture into English learning, which included four items; (c) the difficulties of incorporating English language culture into English learning, that consisted of two statements; and (d) teaching culture for EFL students, included two items.

3.2.2 reliability

Reliability reflects the degree to which an evaluation procedure gives consistent results each time it is analyzed. The reliability of the questionnaire was established by using Cronbach's alpha as a measure of consistency coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha of all the questionnaire's dimensions was 0,768. Accordingly, it was adequately designed for the participants and reliable overall.

3.2.3 validity

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was piloted, and some minor changes were made based on the suggestions of the reviewers. However, the two professors agreed that the questionnaire was valid and well-planned for measuring what it was designed for.

4.Results and Discussion

4.1 Results Related to the Sample of the Study

Table 1 . *Level of the Participants*

Level of Participants	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 8	22	31.4	31.4	31.4
7	20	28.6	28.6	60.0
6	28	40.0	40.0	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 shows that 28 of the students, representing 40% of the sample, are from level 6, while 20 of the students, representing 28.6% of the sample, are from level 7. The other 22 students, representing 31.4% of the sample, are from level 8. Sargeant (2012) noted that the subject sampled must be varied to have the ability to deliver critical facts about the topic being studied.

4.2 Results Related to the Questions of the Study

To identify the influence of integrating English language culture learning into English language instruction, the researchers have calculated percentages and frequencies for the respondents of the sample. The results are illustrated in the following tables.

Question 1: Is there any effect of learning culture on English language competence to the students of Prince Sattam University?

Table 2.I *Prefer to Learn English Culture While Learning English*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	4	5.7	5.7	5.7
Disagree	11	15.7	15.7	21.4
Agree	40	57.1	57.1	78.6
strongly agree	15	21.4	21.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that most of the respondents preferred to learn English culture while learning the English language. It illustrates that 57.1% agree and 21.4% strongly agree, while 15.7% disagree and 5.7% are neutral. It presents that most students who answered this statement started to realize that it is necessary to learn culture to achieve successful foreign language learning.

Table 3. *I Have Learned English Culture While Learning English Language*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	9	12.9	12.9	12.9
strongly disagree	1	1.4	1.4	14.3
Disagree	5	7.1	7.1	21.4
Agree	44	62.9	62.9	84.3
strongly agree	11	15.7	15.7	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning a foreign language. Kuo and Lai (2006) argue that knowing the forms of language are not only the way for conveying the meaning; so is the cultural context that creates the sense. The relationship between culture and learning foreign language should be taught in the classroom and merged into EFL teaching. Therefore, Table 3 shows that 78.6 % have learned the English culture while learning English language, and they confirmed the idea that they cannot determine the language without learning its culture. On the other hand, 8.5% haven't learned the culture with language.

Overall, the main finding of the previous discussion is that the respondents recognized that there is a noticeable effect of learning the culture on their English language competence. This confirms that learners of foreign language can't communicate thoroughly with native speakers unless they master the cultural context. Thus, cultural instruction enhances learners' communicative competence and motivates them to be familiar with international society from English-language culture instruction (Sung & Chen 2009).

Question 2: How Saudi EFL learners perceive the importance of integrating English-language culture into English learning?

Table 4. *Learning a Culture of a Specific Language Is Important*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	2	2.9	2.9	2.9
Disagree	6	8.6	8.6	11.4
Agree	45	64.3	64.3	75.7
strongly agree	17	24.3	24.3	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Language is not only sending or receiving linguistic items but also has a social function in a cultural context. Therefore, Table 4 shows that 24.3% agree and 64.3% strongly agree, while

8.6% disagree with the importance of learning the culture besides learning the language. Scovel (1991) noted that students couldn't master the language entirely unless they master the cultural context in which it operates; therefore, teaching culture is necessary for foreign language learning.

Table 5. *Learning English Culture Makes the Learning Process More Enjoyable*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	5	7.1	7.1	7.1
	Disagree	5	7.1	7.1	14.3
	Agree	33	47.1	47.1	61.4
	strongly agree	27	38.6	38.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

According to the importance of integrating culture with the language learning process, as shown in Table 5, 47.1% agree, and 38.6% strongly agree with the idea that learning culture reinforces the enjoyment of the learning process. However, 7.1% of the respondents disagree, and 7.1% are neutral with this issue. This proves that English-language cultural learning broadens the students' international perspectives. Moreover, students will be interested incorporating the words of the language with the costumes of people using that language (Sung & Chen, 2009).

Table 6. *Learning English Culture Helps Me to Learn English Quickly*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Neutral	8	11.4	11.4	11.4
	strongly disagree	2	2.9	2.9	14.3
	Disagree	5	7.1	7.1	21.4
	Agree	34	48.6	48.6	70.0
	strongly agree	21	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Today, students' English proficiency is becoming more critical in our universities. One thing that facilitates the quickness of English learning is to learn more about English-language cultures. Therefore, Table 6 above shows that 78.6% of the students agree and strongly agree, whereas 7.1% disagree, 2.9% strongly disagree, and 11.4% are neutral. Tsou (2005) says that learning culture inside the classroom may help increase the level of students' motivation toward learning the English language quickly.

Table 7. *Learning English Culture Helps Me to Learn the English Language Effectively*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	8	11.4	11.4	11.4
strongly disagree	2	2.9	2.9	14.3
Disagree	6	8.6	8.6	22.9
Agree	36	51.4	51.4	74.3
strongly agree	18	25.7	25.7	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 shows that 25.7% of the respondents strongly agree and 51.4% agree with the statement, but 8.6% disagree, 2.9% strongly disagree, and 11.4% are neutral with this idea. Results clearly show that cultural knowledge is a pivotal in attaining linguistic proficiency. Learning English culture is beneficial for the learners to learn English language and practice that language in confidence with native speakers inside or outside their countries.

After all, culture and language are intertwined, and one effects the other. The more cultural concepts the learners learn, the more language abilities they gain. Effectiveness, quickness, and enjoyment are essential aspects in integrating learning culture with learning the English language for EFL Saudi learners.

Question3: What are the Saudi EFL students' difficulties in incorporating English language culture into English learning?

Table 8. *Learning English Culture Is Difficult for Me*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	10	14.3	14.3	14.3
strongly disagree	4	5.7	5.7	20.0
Disagree	31	44.3	44.3	64.3
Agree	18	25.7	25.7	90.0
strongly agree	7	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 8 shows that 44.3% disagree and 5.7% strongly disagree with the difficulty of learning English culture. On the other hand, 25.7% and 10% of participants agree and strongly agree with the statement, respectively. This result illustrates that students mostly don't find difficulty in learning English culture. Sung and Chen (2009) argue that merging language with its culture will facilitate the learning process and enable the learners to communicate easily with native speakers.

Table 9. *The Differences Between Arabic and English Culture Make It Difficult to Learn*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	10	14.3	14.3	14.3
strongly disagree	6	8.6	8.6	22.9
Disagree	19	27.1	27.1	50.0
Agree	24	34.3	34.3	84.3
strongly agree	11	15.7	15.7	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

The differences between Arabic and English culture always create difficulty in learning English culture. Table 9 illustrates that 34.3% agree and 15.7% strongly agree with this statement. However, 27.1% disagree, and 8.6% strongly disagree. This proves that the differences between English and Arabic culture make it difficult for students to learn.

Overall, the results show that students mostly don't find difficulty in learning English culture. However, it shows that the differences between English and Arabic culture make it difficult for students to learn the language. Choudhury (2013) claims that the difficulty facing teachers is how they can protect their students from being influenced by the target culture and losing their own identity. Thus, the challenge lies in how to handle both languages with their cultures without losing the native one. Both students and teachers must follow a correct way in integrating the culture with the language to avoid such difficult.

Question4: What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the results?

In relation to the pedagogical implications that can be drawn from the study, the researchers have calculated percentages for participants responses of the statements “Using cultural items such as films, websites, and magazines are good ways for learning culture” and “Teaching culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction.” The results are illustrated in the following tables:

Table 10. *Using Cultural Items Such as Films, Websites, and Magazines Are Good Ways for Learning Culture*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	4	5.7	5.7	5.7
strongly disagree	1	1.4	1.4	7.1
Disagree	3	4.3	4.3	11.4
Agree	33	47.1	47.1	58.6
strongly agree	29	41.4	41.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Table 10 shows that the majority of participants agree with the statement “Using cultural items such as films, websites, and magazines are good ways for learning the culture.” Results shown in Table 10 are 47% agree, and 41% strongly agree, while just 4.3% disagree and 1.4 % strongly disagree. Besides, 5.7% were neutral. This result proves that the use of media and the internet are useful in learning the culture. Students can use electronic items such as films and websites to learn from.

Table 11. *Teaching Culture Should Become an Integral Part of Foreign Language Instruction*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	6	8.6	8.6	8.6
strongly disagree	1	1.4	1.4	10.0
Disagree	8	11.4	11.4	21.4
Agree	38	54.3	54.3	75.7
strongly agree	17	24.3	24.3	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

The results of the statement shown in Table 11 indicate that 54% agree and 24% strongly agree. However, 11.4% disagree and 1.4% strongly disagree with the statement, while 8.6% of the participants were neutral. This shows that teaching culture should be treated as a basic course in foreign language instruction.

We can conclude that teaching culture is an integral part of the process of foreign language instruction. Also, the use of visual media and the internet are very beneficial in teaching and learning the culture. Krashen (1999) encouraged teachers to use different strategies such as media, and drama and he emphasized that technology is useful in facilitating learning the culture with the language inside the classrooms.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

Regarding the effect of learning culture on English language competence, the results show that learning culture is necessary for achieving successful foreign language learning. Saudi students recognized that culture and language are intricately entwined so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. If any either one of them is separated, the other remains incomplete. Thus, in EFL classrooms, students should be taught English with the cultural competence so that the students can acquire the target language with cultural background and correspond in real-life situations (Sung & Chen, 2009).

The results of the current study also confirm that effectiveness, quickness, and enjoyment are significant features in integrating learning culture with learning the English language for Saudi EFL learners. This emphasizes that if Saudi learners relate the English words with the costumes of the English language, they will learn the words quickly with an enjoyable mood.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that the majority of Saudi students don't have any difficulty in learning English culture. However, they confirm that the differences between Arabic and English culture might cause some problems to them in mastering the target culture. Therefore, culture in teaching and learning English as a foreign language must be involved perfectly. Technology and media are useful strategies in learning English culture with the English language.

5.2 Pedagogical and Research Recommendations

Based on the main results, the following pedagogical recommendations can be made:

1. In addition to the verbal aspects of communication, non-verbal clues of communication should be incorporated into EFL classrooms. Teachers should train students to be alert to the cultural context in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Some practical introduction of varieties of non-verbal clues would be beneficial.
2. Since students will need contact with a variety of cultures with English as the primary medium, it is very imperative for them to develop an awareness of the other cultures and, at the same time, develop a cognitive knowledge of their own culture. To do so, materials need to be included as many cultural perspectives as possible rather than only introducing American or British perspectives as a model.
3. Learning the second language depends not only on students, but also on teachers, their knowledge about the culture of the second language, and the way that they use it in teaching the second language. It is essential that while giving the cultural background knowledge, teachers should learn enough before teaching, and they should know politics, economics, geography, history, art, religion, literature, and other aspects of social life.
4. Also, teachers should learn the everyday language, idiom, and proverbs because they reflect the culture behind the language. They can get this knowledge by reading books, movies, literature, communicating with foreign friends, and so on. Moreover, teachers should not only introduce cultural knowledge but also compare the difference between the two languages. Thus, students can learn the foreign culture clearer.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the review of the literature and the findings of the present study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. In this current study, a questionnaire was used to collect data. Further research can use different instruments to measure the effect of learning the culture on learning the foreign language. Interview and case study can be used to instigate the result of the questions more effectively.
2. This study was conducted on a small number of EFL students; further studies need to be done on a larger number of students with different language proficiencies and from different academic levels.
3. This study aimed to investigate the effect of learning culture on learning a foreign language from students' points of view; further studies can investigate the impact of learning culture on learning foreign language from teachers' points of view.

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