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Exploring the Perceptions of Kurdish EFL University Students towards Culture as the Fifth Language Skill

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Abstract

Culture has been defined and viewed in different ways. These differences are due to its involvement with various facets of human life. Some of these definitions and viewpoints are related to the process of teaching/learning a language and understanding the habits of the native speakers of the language. In this regard, many linguists consider it the fifth language skill alongside the other four traditional skills that help language learners to master the language better. This paper addresses this issue by exploring the perceptions of Kurdish EFL university students concerning the role of English culture in learning the language. The researcher attempts to achieve this aim by providing a theoretical background about culture and culture as the fifth language skill and utilizing a questionnaire to a sample of senior undergraduate students selected for this purpose. The findings of the study show that cultural awareness has an essential role in the process of English language learning. Hence, culture should always be integrated with the process because it is an inseparable part of language teaching/learning. Teaching culture is as crucial as teaching other aspects and skills of the language.

Keywords: Cultural competence, language skills, fifth language skill, shared traditions, social practices, cultural values, cultural awareness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to find a straightforward definition of culture. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) collected 164 definitions to culture and categorized them into specific groups: broad definitions that focused on content; definitions that focused on social heritage or tradition; normative definitions that focused on rules or ways of doing things; psychological definitions that focused on adjustment or problem-solving; structural definitions that focused on patterns and organizations; genetic definitions that focused on culture as a product or thing; as well as incomplete or metaphorical definitions that they called “on-the-side stabs in passing” at definitions.

Moreover, there are many components of culture that make it even more challenging to define. For example, the material culture which refers to methods by which people share goods, services and technology; a subjective culture which means ideas and knowledge shared in a group; and social culture which refers to shared rules of social behaviour and institutions (Chiu & Hong, 2006).

Even in anthropology, which basically deals with such issues, there is misery in defining culture. LeVine (1984, p. 67) states that “anthropologists who converse with scholars in other disciplines are often asked what culture is... culture is often treated in quantitative social science as representing the unexplained residuum of rigorous empirical analysis, an area of darkness beyond the reach of currently available scientific searchlights”. Besides, Tomalin (2008) defines culture as covering common traditions, values, and ways of behaving of a particular community.

Recently, as cited in Cohen (2009), a group of scholars agreed on the properties of culture (Lehman et al., 2004; Triandis, 2007). For example, Triandis (2007, pp. 64-65) says “there are many definitions of culture... Nevertheless, almost all researchers see certain aspects as characteristics of a culture. First, a culture emerges in adaptive interactions between humans and environments. Second, culture consists of shared elements. Third, culture is transmitted across periods and generations”. This view of culture matches with its other recent definitions. For instance, Fiske (2002, p. 85) wrote “culture is a socially transmitted or socially constructed constellation consisting of such things as practices, competencies, ideas, schemas, symbols, values, norms, institutions, goals, constitutive rules, artefacts, and modifications of the physical environment”.

Besides, culture has a significant role in language teaching/learning because it is associated with the habits and values of the people who use the language. Many educators and professionals claim that it is not possible to teach language without teaching culture. In this regard, foreign language teachers are expected to have the role of “professional mediator between foreign languages and culture” (Byram & Risager, 1999, p. 58). This guidance helps language learners to be more acquainted with the culture of people who speak the language and their communities (Byram, 1997; Byram & Flemming, 1998; Byram & Morgan, 1994; Choudhury, 2014; Damen, 1997; Tomalin, 2008; Tran, 2010).

This paper aims to describe the role of culture in language teaching/learning and address the issue of considering it as the fifth language skill. The researcher attempts to achieve this aim by collecting necessary data on the subject and present it throughout this paper. The research question that he intends to answer is “what is the role of English culture in learning the language and why culture is considered as the fifth language skill”. He is curious to explore the perceptions of Kurdish EFL university

students about this issue. The answers to these questions would be very significant in devising a decent understanding of their insights about the role of culture in their learning process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to its significant role in language teaching/learning, culture is perceived as the fifth language skill amongst the other four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Vernier et al. (2008, p. 268) consider culture as the fifth language skill and believe that cultural awareness “enhances students’ overall learning experience”. Kramsch (1993, p. 1) explores that culture has a crucial role in language teaching. He does not only call it the fifth language skill, but rather something that is “always in the background, right from day one”. On the other hand, Hong (2008, p. 8) claims that “while teaching a language, the aim should be to develop both linguistic and cultural competence”. Tseng (2002) reveals that if you want to learn a language successfully, you need to be familiar with the culture of that language.

Tomalin (2008) sheds light on the reasons for thinking about culture as the fifth language skill, especially in learning English as a foreign language. He points to two reasons; one of them is the international role of the English language, and the other one is globalization. He argues that the English language has an essential role in the curriculum and is becoming a life skill that is taught as a core curriculum subject. In today’s globalization and technological developments, people who want to work internationally should know a lingua franca which is, of course, the English language.

Tomalin (2008) continues to make his argument clearer by saying that the fifth language skill teaches you the attitudes and techniques to adjust your use of English to learn, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. Throughout cultural awareness, language learners will be able to use language to accept differences, be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things that are different from theirs. This familiarity makes a change, even in their behaviour, which is articulated through language use. Moreover, McDevitt (2004) believes that when we study another language, we can understand the people and the society of that language. It means that language and culture are inseparable; none of them is complete without the other.

The fifth language skill, culture, is highly related to foreign language learning because learners with cultural knowledge of the foreign language can realize and appreciate cultural differences. Acquaintance to culture encourages them to study the target language more interestingly and gives meaning to their learning. As a result, their learning will be the real one. It will be related to the situations in which the language is used and to real people and places. Furthermore, this skill helps learners to appreciate and be tolerant of differences around them. It creates a kind of awareness that helps them accept particular assets of other cultures (Mirza, 2017).

Culture is critical in teaching/learning the English language. Teaching English could involve teaching the cultures of English-speaking countries, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia, where English is the primary language. When our students have the opportunity to use English outside the classroom, it is similar to be with someone from cultures where English is not a primary official language but widely used by the public. In this regard, Cates (2004, p.

31) discovers that English language learning means much more than just the study of a linguistic system; it can also be seen as “an international language for communication with people from around the world” and a subject for “learning about the world’s peoples, countries, and problems”. Even if two non-native speakers communicate in English, cultural awareness is necessary for both of them. This consciousness is what [Ziesing \(2001\)](#) calls the link between cultural literacy and language fluency. Thus, foreign language learners cannot communicate effectively only with linguistic competence. They also need specific intercultural competencies.

Therefore, linguistic competence is not enough for language learners to be able to communicate with others in a foreign language. They also need to have some kind of background information about the culture of people who use the language such as their geography, occupations, pastimes, and historical events and personalities. Besides, each culture has its own unique rules regarding formal and informal speech and conversational routines. In addition to memorizing vocabulary and grammar, anyone becoming proficient in a foreign language must know the sociocultural rules native speakers use when they communicate with one another. If one does not know the cultural component of language, s/he will face problems in communication. For example, a standard error of language learners is to translate each word or expression literally without considering culture. This deviation sometimes confuses in understanding the real meaning and purpose of the original text ([Neff & Rucynski, 2013](#)).

3. METHODS

The method of data collection used in this paper is a questionnaire. The researcher selected this method because it is the best way to achieve the aim of the study. He asked the participants of the study to reflect on the items of the questionnaire based on a Likert-type linear scale because it is the most widely used and reliable rating scale to measure attitudes of the participants and lets them express how much they agree or disagree with the statements ([Likert, 1932](#)). The rating scales are as follows:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

The data attained from the results of these rating scales provide a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of the participants than a simple “yes/no” or “agree/disagree” response. By using this method, the researcher can get better results and can analyse the responses in a better way. Below are the details of the main steps and procedures followed:

3.1 The Questionnaire

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Kurdish EFL university students concerning the significance of English culture, the fifth language skill, in learning the language. To achieve this aim, the researcher set a questionnaire and

distributed it among fourth-year students of the Department of English Language at the University of Halabja.

3.2 The Sample

The sample of this study is fourth-year students of the English language department at the University of Halabja for the academic year (2019-2020). The researcher selected only the fourth-year students because they studied the English language for four years and have more knowledge about the topic of the paper, culture, than the other three stages and one of the courses of their fourth-year study is about the culture which is entitled “cross-cultural communication”. The total number of the students is 49 from which 45 students participated in filling out the questionnaire and 4 of them were absent. The age range of the students is between 20-26 years old. Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of the students according to their ages and sexes. As tables show that the real age range of the fourth-year university students is between 21-23 years old and the number of female students is more than the number of males.

Table 1. Distribution of the students according to their ages.

Age	Frequencies	Percentages
20	4	8.9%
21	12	26.7%
22	8	17.8%
23	17	37.8%
24	2	4.4%
26	2	4.4%
Total	45	100%

Table 2. Distribution of the students according to their gender.

Gender	Frequencies	Percentages
Female	27	60%
Male	18	40%
Total	45	100%

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher adopted the following list of questionnaires and used them as the input for preparing the questionnaire of this study:

- Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) which is adapted from [Horwitz \(1988\)](#).
- Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) which is adapted from [Oxford \(1989\)](#).
- Foreign Language Teacher Beliefs Questionnaire, adapted from [Mills \(2013\)](#).

The questionnaire is divided into two parts; the first part is devoted to collect personal information about the students regarding their age, sex, and stage. The second part is dedicated to exploring the perceptions of the students regarding the significance of English culture in learning the language. It consists of 26 statements. The students were asked to respond to each statement based on a [Likert \(1932\)](#) type scale. The scales are 5=Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, and 1=Strongly disagree).

The researcher used the “Google Forms” platform to make the questionnaire available online and saved its link on the computers of the sound lab of the English

language department. He gave the students information about the topic of the paper and the necessary instructions on filling the questionnaire. Moreover, he was with the students while they were filling the questionnaire. He explained the whole questionnaire for them not to leave any room for misunderstanding of the items of the questionnaire. He answered any question students had about any item while they were filling out the questionnaire. He did his best to get objective and precise responses from the respondents.

Since the responses were collected online, and the whole data were quantitative, the researcher used Google Forms, Google Sheets and Microsoft Office Excel to analyse the questionnaire forms. First, he collected the responses from the students via an online form that he created before by using Google Forms. After that, he took all the percentages of the questionnaire items from the Google Forms file and presented them in a table (see Appendix). Then, he copied the results of all the questionnaire forms from Google Sheets to Microsoft Office Excel to calculate the averages of all the items, as shown in the last column of the table in the Appendix. Later, he discussed the results and drew conclusions based on the results he got from the questionnaire. Finally, he provided specific recommendations and suggestions to show how should culture be treated in learning the English language.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher is going to present the results of the questionnaire and work out necessary discussions about them. The percentages, averages and modes of the rating scales for the statements are provided in the Appendix. The table in this appendix summarizes the data in detail as obtained from the respondents. Based on these data, the researcher elaborated ample discussions that help answer the research questions and achieve the aim of the study.

An accurate and thorough inspection of the data in the above table makes it clear that the students have some kind of familiarity with English language culture and can explain why a particular expression is used in the English language with a cultural reference. However, the majority of them responded to the first two statements with almost similar scales, which means they are not completely satisfied with their familiarity with English language culture and explanation of using particular expressions with cultural reference.

The students believe that it is necessary to know about English speaking cultures to be able to speak English. Most of them strongly agree with the third statement, which is about this issue. This statement got the second-highest average (4.5) among all of the items of the questionnaire after the sixth one, which is also about the integration of culture in language learning. Furthermore, both statements got the maximum mode (5). These high rates show the importance and necessity of culture in language learning.

Most of the students assert that the knowledge of English culture they get from their university classes is not enough to make them familiar with the culture and the people who use it. The statement about this issue got the lowest average (2.5) and the minimum mode (2) among all the items of the questionnaire. This low rate means that the knowledge they get from university classes does not satisfy their needs. This interpretation is also reflected in their responses to the fifth statement in which about

half of them keep being “neutral” in deciding if this knowledge helps them to acquire their intended level of language proficiency.

Integrating English culture with English language learning would be beneficial to the students to learn the language better and faster. Almost all the students agree with this statement; most of them even strongly agree with it. It got the highest average (4.6) among all the other statements and the maximum mode (5). This high rate emphasizes the importance of culture in learning any language. That is why it is referred to as “the fifth language skill” in this paper and many other sources cited in the introduction part of this study. Moreover, most of the students consider it as “the fifth language skill” in their responses to the last statement of the questionnaire. The mode for this statement is (4).

Awareness of English culture motivates the students in learning the language and makes them feel the value of foreign language learning. Besides, it enhances their English language comprehension and even makes others understand them better. These statements got almost similar averages and the same mode (4) in the students’ responses to the questionnaire.

Cultural awareness helps the students to have productive discussions in English language classes and promotes their communication competence. Even it helps them bridge cultural gaps between the target culture and their own culture and understand their own culture and identity better as well as foreign culture and identity. Furthermore, it develops their critical thinking skills. These statements got nearly similar averages and high modes of (4) and (5).

Cultural knowledge helps the students to interact with native speakers of the English language better and promotes tolerance among cultures. Many of them think that people have a positive attitude towards English culture in their country. The majority of the students believe that cultural knowledge helps them get better job opportunities.

The respondents confirm that university curriculum and textbooks should teach cultural reasons for a particular expression used in the English language. This pedagogy is as critical as teaching grammar and other areas of language. Also, most of the students agree that awareness of English culture prepares them better for international English language tests. Finally, most of the participants of the study consider culture as the fifth language skill, and they believe that cultural knowledge even develops the other four language skills.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the questionnaire results, the researcher reached certain conclusions; It is indispensable to know about the English-speaking cultures to be able to speak the English language. The students are acquainted with English language culture, but this familiarity is minimal. Knowledge of English culture that the students get from university classes is not enough to make them familiar with the culture and the people who use it.

The researcher found out that integrating English culture with English language learning is very helpful in learning the language better and faster. Moreover, cultural awareness motivates students and makes them value foreign language learning. It helps

them understand others and be understood by others better. It helps them bridge cultural gaps between English culture and their own culture.

Furthermore, based on the researcher's investigation on the topic of this paper and the conclusions reached, he recommends the following:

- The students should make themselves more familiar with the English language culture.
- Students should be given more cultural knowledge through university classes.
- It is necessary to integrate culture with English language teaching/learning.
- Teachers should explain English expressions with a cultural reference where possible.
- University curriculum should pay more attention to cultural studies, apart from the other areas of language.

Subsequently, this research study is limited to explore perceptions of Kurdish EFL university students concerning culture as the fifth language skill at the University of Halabja, college of basic education, department of English language, fourth-year students. The researcher has selected this small sample because the aim and scope of the study are limited. Moreover, he intended to explore the perceptions of a small number of EFL students.

- Other researchers who are interested in researching culture can conduct similar researches on the following topics:
- Selecting the same sample in the other universities of the region.
- Selecting a more extensive range of sample among all or several universities of the region.
- Exploring the effect of cultural knowledge that EFL students get from university classes on developing their awareness of English culture.
- The effect of integrating culture with foreign language learning.

Finally, the researcher concluded that culture is an inseparable part of language teaching/learning. Teaching culture is as crucial as teaching other aspects and skills of the language. It is one of the essential language competencies. It even aids the other four language skills. That is why it is considered as the fifth language skill.

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APPENDIX

Percentages, averages and modes of the questionnaire statements.								
No.	Statements	1	2	Scales			Averages (out of 5)	Mode
				3	4	5		
1	I am familiar with English culture.	8.9%	8.9%	48.9%	28.9%	4.4%	3.1	3
2	I can explain why a particular expression is used in the English language with a cultural reference.	0%	8.9%	55.6%	33.3%	2.2%	3.3	3
3	It is necessary to know about English speaking cultures to be able to speak English.	0%	4.4%	4.4%	31.1%	60%	4.5	5
4	The knowledge of English culture I get from my university classes is enough to make me familiar with the culture and the people who use it.	17.8%	35.6%	26.7%	15.6%	4.4%	2.5	2
5	The knowledge of English culture I get from my university classes helps me acquire my intended level of language proficiency.	2.2%	15.6%	46.7%	28.9%	6.7%	3.2	3
6	Integrating English culture with English language learning would be beneficial to learn the language better and faster.	0%	0%	6.7%	26.7%	66.7%	4.6	5
7	Awareness of English culture motivates me in	0%	6.7%	15.6%	48.9%	28.9%	4	4

	learning the language.							
8	Awareness of English culture makes me feel the value of foreign language learning.	0%	8.9%	24.4%	42.2%	24.4%	3.8	4
9	Awareness of English culture enhances my English language comprehension.	0%	8.9%	6.7%	53.3%	31.1%	4.1	4
10	If I have knowledge of English culture, others can understand me better.	0%	0%	11.1%	51.1%	37.8%	4.3	4
11	Awareness of English culture helps me overcome difficulties in understanding the language.	0%	8.9%	8.9%	46.7%	35.6%	4.1	4
12	Awareness of English culture helps me have productive discussions in English language classes.	2.2%	0%	17.8%	48.9%	31.1%	4.1	4
13	Awareness of English culture promotes my communication competence and meaning-making in the English language in any context.	2.2%	2.2%	15.6%	48.9%	31.1%	4	4
14	Awareness of English culture develops my critical thinking skills while learning the language.	0%	2.2%	15.6%	40%	42.2%	4.2	5
15	Knowledge of English culture helps me bridge cultural gaps between English	0%	8.9%	22.2%	44.4%	24.4%	3.8	4

	culture and my own culture.							
16	Studying English culture helps me understand my own culture and identity better as well as foreign culture and identity.	0%	11.1%	31.1%	33.3%	24.4%	3.7	4
17	Knowledge of English culture helps me interact with native speakers of the language better.	0%	2.2%	11.1%	46.7%	40%	4.2	4
18	Familiarity with English culture helps me promote tolerance and reduces stereotypes about other cultures.	0%	4.4%	20%	46.7%	28.9%	4	4
19	Knowledge of English culture helps me get better job opportunities.	6.7%	8.9%	40%	31.1%	13.3%	3.4	3
20	People have a positive attitude towards English culture in my country.	6.7%	11.1%	40%	31.1%	11.1%	3.3	3
21	Teachers should explain English expressions with a cultural reference.	2.2%	2.2%	15.6%	37.8%	42.2%	4.2	5
22	My curriculum and textbooks include cultural reasons for a particular expression used in the English language.	2.2%	6.7%	44.4%	42.2%	4.4%	3.4	3
23	Teaching cultural aspects of the English language is as essential as teaching grammar and	2.2%	11.1%	17.8%	31.1%	37.8%	3.9	5

	other areas of language.							
24	Awareness of English culture prepares me better for international English language tests, such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC...	0%	8.9%	17.8%	37.8%	35.6%	4	4
25	Knowledge of cultural aspects of the English language would be useful to develop the other four language skills.	0%	11.1%	17.8%	53.3%	17.8%	3.8	4
26	To the best of my knowledge and based on what I studied in the “cross-cultural communication” course so far, I consider culture as the fifth language skill.	2.2%	0%	28.9%	35.6%	33.3%	4	4