

دور السياق الثقافي في تعلم اللغة الثانية: دراسة نوعية استكشافية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية
كلغة أجنبية في جامعة دهوك

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The Role of Cultural Context in Second Language Learning: An Exploratory Qualitative Study of EFL Learners at the University of Duhok

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Keywords : cultural context, culture, language learning, second language acquisition, EFL, cultural awareness, intercultural communication, University of Duhok.

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المخلص

لا يقتصر تعلم اللغات على تعلم القواعد النحوية والمفردات والنطق فحسب، بل يُعد أيضاً نشاطاً اجتماعياً وثقافياً يتعلم فيه المتعلمون كيفية استخدام اللغة للتعبير عن معانيهم وقيمهم ومعتقداتهم وعلاقاتهم الاجتماعية. ومن ثم، أصبحت العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة قضية رئيسية في تعليم اللغات الثانية والأجنبية. وفي هذا الصدد، تبحث الدراسة الحالية تصورات متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) بشأن تأثير الثقافة في تعلم اللغة الثانية والتواصل لدى طلبة جامعة دهوك في إقليم كردستان العراق. واعتمد البحث تصميمًا نوعيًا استكشافياً قائماً على دراسة الحالة. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من 12 طالباً وطالبة من طلبة السنة الرابعة، ممن يتدربون على أن يصبحوا معلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، بواقع ثماني إناث وأربعة ذكور،

وقد تعلموا اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية لمدة تراوحت بين 8 و 10 سنوات تقريباً. واستخدمت العينة القصدية في اختيار المشاركين. وُجمعت البيانات باستخدام مقابلات شبه منظّمة تضمنت 10-12 سؤالاً مفتوحاً. وحُللت البيانات بالاعتماد على منهج التحليل الموضوعي ذي المراحل الست الذي اقترحه براون وكلاك (2006). وربط المشاركون الوعي الثقافي باكتساب المعاني السياقية، وتعزيز التواصل بين الثقافات، والتفسير السليم للغة، وتوسيع الآفاق. وأظهرت النتائج أن المشاركين يرون أن اللغة والثقافة متداخلتان بصورة وثيقة، إذ تعكس اللغة القيم والمعتقدات والتقاليد الثقافية وتنقلها. كما أشارت الدراسة إلى أهمية التنشئة الاجتماعية، والوعي الثقافي، والتواصل الفعال في تعلم اللغة الثانية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة إدماج الثقافة في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بوصفها جزءاً أساسياً من عملية التعلم، وليس عنصراً إضافياً. وتُقدّم الدراسة أن يستخدم المعلمون مواد تعليمية ذات سياق ثقافي، وأنشطة ثقافية، وتواصل أصيلاً، ومقارنات ثقافية، مع تجنب الصور النمطية الثقافية.

Abstract

Learning of languages not only includes the learning of grammatical rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation but it is also a social and cultural activity in which the learners learn how to use the language to express their meanings, values, beliefs, and social relations. The relation between language and culture thus has become a major issue in second and foreign language education. In this regard, the present study examines the perceptions of EFL learners regarding the influence of culture on second language learning and communication among the university of Duhok students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The research utilized a qualitative exploratory case-study design. The participants of the study were 12 fourth-year EFL pre-service teachers, with eight females and four males, who had learned English as a foreign language for about 8–10 years. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 10–12 open-ended questions. Analysis of data was done using the six-phase thematic analysis approach by Braun & Clarke (2006). The participants linked cultural awareness to the acquisition of contextual meanings, enhancing intercultural communication, proper interpretation of language, and widening perspectives. The results reveal that participants believed that language and culture are interwoven since language mirrors and conveys the cultural values, beliefs, and traditions. The study also points out the significance of socialization, cultural awareness, and effective communication in learning a second language. It



is concluded from the research that culture must be included in EFL education as part of the process rather than an extra element. It suggests that teachers should use culturally contextualized materials, intercultural activities, authentic communication, and comparative culture without cultural stereotypes.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Language and Culture Relationship. The relationship between language and culture has been of great interest to applied linguistic scholars, sociologists, communication scholars, and anthropologists. Language researchers and teachers have started realizing that the use of language is greatly associated with the culture and social values of the communities in which it is used. According to Kumagai (1994), culture has significant effects on language learning and communication approaches. The relationship implies that language cannot simply be viewed as an autonomous system of grammatical structures and vocabularies. Rather, language functions within social and cultural contexts that shape its meaning creation and interpretation.

Classic methods of learning the first and second languages relied heavily on behaviorist principles, imitation, repetition, and language drilling. In classic methods, the notion of language could have been perceived simply as a set of rules, vocabulary, and sentences. Modern approaches to the process of learning and teaching languages, however, have increasingly focused on the connections between language and society, identity, culture, and social interaction. Such an approach has resulted in an increased recognition of the importance of culture in the process of language education. The initial study demonstrates that there is a trend towards constructivism and critical theories of language learning.

It is also important to note that just because there is more emphasis on culture, language instruction should not just focus on providing learners with facts about the people or cultures involved in a target language. Thanasoulas (2001) believes that teaching culture is more than just giving learners factual information regarding a target culture. Learners must be given chances to learn about the connection between language, meaning, and social conventions. Teaching a foreign language may mean learning how to use grammar structures, sounds, meanings, and communication practices in both cultures of the learner and the target culture.

Culture, in its own right, is not an easy term to understand. It encompasses values, beliefs, customs, skills, practices, and artifacts that have some part to play in the way of life of a certain group. Condon (1973) has been cited and analyzed by the authors of the research in

relation to how he defines culture as a way of life. Culture is the context of cognitive and affective behavior.

In the same way, culture and communication are interdependent concepts as well. As indicated by Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981), cited by Kuo and Lai (2010), culture impacts not only the people communicating, but also the content of communication, the process itself, and its encoding and decoding. In this respect, it can be said that culture forms the necessary basis of communication since the meaning of language-based messages is dependent on culture.

The link becomes even more significant in learning a second and foreign language. The learner may have understood the grammar or the literal sense of the utterance, but he or she may misinterpret the meaning of the utterance, since he or she may not have the cultural or contextual background. Thus, cultural background can aid the learner in understanding the use of language in certain situations.

As mentioned in the original study by Thanasoulas (2001), and other writers such as Kramersch (2008), successful foreign language acquisition is achieved when the learner goes beyond linguistic form to cultural meaning and practice of language. Language teaching should not only be concerned with linguistic codes but also with the meanings and contexts of meanings.

In the same way, Liddicoat (2011), stress the connection between language and culture in second and foreign language communication. This research indicates that for learners to have an awareness of the interaction between culture and language is necessary whenever they use language. Thus, in language education, learners should be provided with occasions to study the interaction between linguistic and cultural aspects rather than considering these two aspects as being disconnected from each other.

According to Olusiji (2016), cultural learning entails comprehension of something, but not acquisition of it. Cultural learning necessitates engagement with linguistic and non-linguistic practices as well as with ways of living in a certain cultural context.

The relevance of cultural context is also related to intercultural communication. According to Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015), effective intercultural communication involves not only conveying information on cultural aspects but also explaining the reasons why people act and communicate in a certain way in cross-cultural communication and developing appropriate communicative skills to negotiate meaning in a culturally-specific context.





Social interaction also affects second language acquisition. The socio-contextual approach to second language acquisition is considered in the article written by Rubinfeld, Clément, Lussier, and Lebrun (2006). In this connection, it should be stressed that the role of L2 confidence, linked with lower levels of anxiety and self-perception of one's capabilities to deal with second language communication situations, is discussed. Regular contact with representatives of the L2 community, either face-to-face or via L2 media, can foster motivation, identification with the L2 group, production of language, and adaptation.

The notion of interaction is evident in the concept of Communities of Practice. According to Wenger (1999), people get knowledge and competencies by interacting with other people on a regular basis. Peer interaction, in the second language learning process, creates possibilities for practicing language, collaborating and problem solving, thus helping second language learners build up communicative competence. In turn, Tavares (2016) highlights the potential contribution of peer interaction in second language acquisition process.

These approaches are very important in terms of EFL instruction in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where English language learners learn a foreign language being in their native linguistic and cultural context. In this regard, knowledge about how those students perceive the relation between English and culture might be useful.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although there is increased awareness of the link between language and culture, language learning may focus more on linguistic accuracy, vocabulary, and form rather than on cultural learning. The student may thus acquire linguistic competence without acquiring enough competence regarding the use of language in particular cultural contexts.

This dichotomy could cause difficulties in real-life communication. The student may be linguistically aware of the meaning of a certain word or sentence but not socially or culturally aware of its meaning. This may cause misinterpretations in intercultural communication.

This problem is especially relevant in the context of EFL classes as learners might not have many opportunities to interact with representatives of different cultures. Cultural knowledge will thus be formed using textbooks, teachers, media, internet, and other indirect sources.

Moreover, multiculturalism should be used very wisely as discussed in the original study in terms of the presentation made by Zachrisson (2014) about the works of Sawyer and Kamali. Multiculturalism could be used in a way that it would reinforce the categorization of cultures.

For this reason, the current study examines how EFL learners perceive the significance of cultural knowledge and how language and culture are connected.

1.3 Research Questions

The following questions have been considered in this study:

1. Why is it important to learn about culture when learning a language?
2. What is the role of culture in second language acquisition?
3. Why are language and culture inseparable?

1.4 Aim of the Study

This research will be guided by a general objective that involves investigating the perceptions of EFL learners regarding the influence of cultural context on second language learning and use.

The objectives of this study are to: investigate reasons why learners perceive cultural knowledge as significant in learning a second language; investigate perceptions of learners on the importance of culture in second language learning; investigate perceptions of learners on the relationship between language and culture.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Intercultural communication will involve interactions between language learners and people from various cultural backgrounds. Thus, cultural awareness can be beneficial for the learners to understand and communicate with people from different cultures.

This study is useful for the EFL teachers in that it gives an idea about the learners' views towards cultural context and language learning. In this way, it might be useful for the teachers to understand that the language lesson includes not only language but also its cultural aspects.

The study is also potentially useful for future teachers and linguists because they will learn how important it is to think about cultural context when teaching language.

The original study considers itself to be the first study of this kind in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. However, this statement is true only if a systematic review shows this fact. Otherwise, it can be said that this study is helpful in filling up the gap in the existing literature regarding cultural context and EFL learning in the Kurdish higher education context.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This research is concerned with twelve pre-service EFL teachers at the University of Duhok, College of Languages, English Department, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

This research specifically deals with:

- cultural setting;
- cultural awareness;





- language and culture;
- second language acquisition;
- intercultural communication; and
- EFL learners' perceptions.

It is not the intention of this research to statistically quantify learners' cultural competence or causally relate cultural awareness with language proficiency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Culture

Culture may be viewed as a set of shared behaviors, beliefs, values, practices, and perceptions of the world that people learn through socialization. According to Condon (1973), culture is a way of life and has a significant impact on people's behaviors and thinking. Culture consists of ideas, customs, skills, arts, tools, beliefs, values, and material items that are responsible for people's way of living.

In addition, culture affects people's attitudes and perceptions. It provides the cognitive and affective background for people's understanding of their experience. As culture comprises behaviors that are practiced and passed on to people socially, habitual behaviors can become traditions and part of the cultural pattern.

Nevertheless, the relation between culture and stereotyping needs special attention. The discussion of Condon given in the original study points out that stereotypes may attribute characteristics to a person due to his/her membership in some particular culture. Stereotypes may affect people's thinking, speech, behavior, and interactions.

It is an important issue for language education since teaching culture should not result in students' perception that everyone belonging to a certain culture behaves similarly.

2.2 Language, Culture, and Communication

Language is one of the basic mediums of communicating culture. According to Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981), as cited by Kuo and Lai (2010), culture impacts communication in various ways since culture influences the communicator, the message, the method of communication, and the message interpretation. Consequently, there is a close link between language and culture and the process of communication.

It is important to understand the importance of linguistic understanding of messages across different cultures since such understanding may be impacted by cultural variations. An individual who understands the linguistic form but is unaware of culture may have problems in interpreting the message properly.

The connection can be illustrated as follows:

Culture -> Language usage -> Communication -> Interpretation of message

Conversely, language helps preserve culture.

2.3 The Importance of Cultural Context for Second Language Communication

Intercultural communication entails people of different cultures communicating with one another. People belonging to different cultures may have distinct orientations towards values, social conventions, and modes of communication.

According to Ali et al., successful intercultural communication is more than just the transfer of information on culture. It involves understanding the reasons for specific behavior and attitude formation in intercultural settings. In addition, effective communication entails negotiating meaning within a given context.

This point is especially relevant in relation to EFL learning. The learners require opportunities for developing not only language proficiency but also appropriateness in language use in diverse cultural settings.

2.4 Culture and Second Language Learning

The link between culture and language learning is also addressed by many scholars in the original study.

According to Thanasoulas (2001), teaching culture should not be confined to teaching only factual information about the target group. In addition to it, teaching culture means gaining insights into the connection between language, meaning and social norms.

Kramsch (2008) quoted in the original study says that language teaching cannot be confined only to teaching linguistic code; it should also include teaching meaning. Since language creates and makes meaning in cultural context, learning culture may help to understand language better.

Similarly, Liddicoat (2011), stress that teaching communication in second and foreign languages involves understanding how culture relates to language in every usage of language.

Olusiji (2016) maintains that it is important not to learn culture but to understand it. Understanding of culture involves understanding linguistic and non-linguistic practices and ways of life in a particular cultural context.

2.5 Cultural Activities and Language Learning

Olusiji (2016) examines the link between cultural activities and English language acquisition and provides findings from the Indian education system context. This paper indicates that including cultural activities in





English language curriculum may lead to improved English learning results.

While the context of India is not the same as that of Kurds, the implication behind pedagogy remains valid: learning a language can be facilitated by learners' exposure to language within meaningful cultural activities, rather than linguistic forms only.

This lends credence to the claim that cultural activities must be included in EFL curriculum so that learners could learn about uses of English in context.

2.6 Sociocultural Perspectives on Second Language Learning

Acquisition of second languages is subject to social and psychological variables. The sociocultural model of L2 acquisition that relates to Clément (1980) and elaborated by Clément et al. (2003) sees L2 self-confidence as a critical concept that underlies L2 behaviors and their social psychological correlates.

According to Rubenfeld et al. (2006), the value of regular and favorable contact with members of an L2 community should also be noted. Such contact can serve to maintain motivation, encourage identification with the L2 group, facilitate L2 production, and help adaptation in bilingual environments.

This idea is significant since cultural information is not obtained through only reading about culture but through interaction as well.

2.7 Communities of Practice and Peer Interaction

The Communities of Practice theory by Wenger (1999), offers an additional perspective in analyzing the process of learning the second language.

Communities of Practice presuppose that individuals acquire knowledge and skills as a result of participating in certain shared activities.

Concerning the second language learning, language proficiency is acquired through interacting with other participants of shared activity while pursuing common goals. Tavares (2016) emphasizes the importance of interaction with peers in the process of second language learning in academic settings and indicates the possibility of acquiring language skills as a result of collaborative activities including oral communication.

Valeo (2016) as cited in the original article also links academic participation to the process of developing ways of knowing, speaking and writing.

2.8 Self-Efficacy and Second Language Learning

Self-efficacy is yet another factor that comes into play when one thinks of language learning. As stated by Raoofi, Tan, and Chan (2012), self-

efficacy refers to the learners' belief regarding their capability to undertake and organize certain activities to achieve certain results.

The belief held by learners regarding their capabilities can impact their ability to engage in the task and their eventual performance. In the context of language learning, if students have confidence that they can communicate in the target language, they will be more willing to take part in communication.

This is important for cultural learning because effective intercultural engagement requires that learners are confident enough to interact with different people and different ideas.

2.9 Cultural Representations, Identity, and Intercultural Learning

Rubinfeld et al. (2006) point out that culture representation and identity are important elements in second language learning. The positive interactions with the members of an L2 community can have an effect on students' motivation, identification, language production, and accommodation.

In studying the issue of second language learning through the sociocultural lens, Zachrison (2014) emphasizes the need to consider learners' social surroundings when looking at their learning and language use. It is important to mention that the original study mentions the concept of investment introduced by Norton, which considers second language learning in terms of identity, social relations, and symbolic/material resources.

The learners might invest in learning another language as a means of gaining access to other symbolic/material resources.

2.10 Multiculturalism and the Risk of Stereotyping

Education in culture needs to deal with the issue of stereotyping as well. In the original work, Sawyer and Kamali's criticism of multiculturalism is referred to via Zachrison (2014). The authors' view is that multiculturalism may accidentally support cultural stereotyping, as it often leads to simplified interpretations of such groups as Arabs, Muslims, Africans, Latinos or Somalis.

It is worth remembering for all EFL instructors. Teaching culture does not mean explaining to the learners that people from a certain culture act in a certain way. Teachers need to make their learners understand diversity of culture and to be able to interpret behavior within the context.

2.11 Theoretical Framework

The current study is mainly based on the sociocultural approach to second language acquisition.

The approach presupposes that the process of language learning occurs in social, cultural, and communicational settings. Language acquisition





happens due to participation and interaction while comprehension of learners depends on the cultural setting of communication.

The current study is also grounded in the following conceptual approaches:

- Socio-contextual approach to L2 learning;
- Communities of practice;
- Self-efficacy;
- Social identity and investment; and
- Intercultural communication.

These approaches are different but similar. The combination of all of them forms a wide theoretical basis for understanding how cultural setting, social interaction, learner beliefs, identity, and communication might affect second language acquisition.

Conceptual connection may be presented in the following way:

Cultural setting + Social interaction + Learner beliefs → Language use and meaning-making → Second language acquisition → Intercultural communication

2.12 Research Gap

The reviewed literature makes a strong connection between language, culture, communication, social interaction, and L2 acquisition. However, the experience and perspective of the learners depend on the context.

Thus, there is a need to investigate the perspectives of learners themselves on their own perception of cultural context in connection to the learning of the English language. The present study aims at the mentioned issue by interviewing EFL pre-service teachers at the University of Duhok.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The methodology adopted for this study includes a qualitative research design through an exploratory case study approach. This research design was used because this particular study will try to gain some in-depth knowledge about the perception and experience of EFL learners about cultural context in second language acquisition.

Qualitative research design is suitable in this case because this study will address issues related to “why” and “how” and not measure the relationship statistically. It is also an approach that will give a chance to the participants to speak from their perspectives.

3.2 Research Setting

The research was carried out in the College of Languages, English Department at the University of Duhok in Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The chosen setting was based on the fact that English is considered a foreign language and the participants were learning English in their university curriculum.

3.3 Participants

The participants of the study were 12 EFL Pre-service Teachers (PST), among whom 8 were females and 4 were males.

All participants were senior undergraduate students at the English Department. All of them had learned English as a foreign language for about 8–10 years and were interested in language teaching or linguistics as their future career choice.

All participants were native speakers of Kurdish with Arabic as their second language and English as a foreign language. Their age varied from 21 to 24 years old.

Purposive sampling was used because all participants were chosen based on the characteristics related to the purpose of the study.

3.4 Research Instrument

The main tool used was a semi-structured interview guide containing 10 to 12 open-ended questions relevant to the research questions.

For example,

1. “Why do you think it is important to learn about culture when learning a new language?”
2. “In your experience, what role does culture play in acquiring English successfully?”
3. “Why do you believe language and culture are inseparable?”

The semi-structured tool enabled the researcher to be consistent throughout the interviews and ask additional questions whenever participants presented experiences and explanations of their own. The tool was piloted with three students who were not part of the final sample.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted in a quiet meeting room at the university. As per the original manuscript, interviews took place from October to November 2024 and lasted from 35 to 50 minutes. Interviews were carried out in English, with occasional switching of code to Kurdish, whenever participants felt they would be able to communicate better with the use of this language.

Interviews were recorded with permission of participants. The researcher also made brief notes during and shortly after interviews for observations and initial impressions.

Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and withdrawal rights from the study. Data gathering continued until the researcher realized there was no emergence of new themes.





3.6 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was provided from all participants. The participants were educated regarding the objective of the research, voluntariness, confidentiality, and right to withdraw from the study.

As per the manuscript, ethical approval has been obtained from the research ethics committee at the university. This must be included in the final version of the paper if appropriate documents are available.

3.7 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis based on the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was performed in this study.

The process included:

1. Data familiarization through re-reading of transcripts;
2. Initial coding;
3. Potential theme searching;
4. Theme review at the level of coded excerpts and dataset;
5. Theme definition and naming;
6. Report generation using excerpts related to research questions.

Transcripts were coded manually and then verified via NVivo computer program. Four participants underwent member checking, while peer debriefing was carried out for two of the colleagues in applied linguistics. Triangulation was used when analyzing the themes based on interviews, field notes and literature.

3.8 Trustworthiness

Several approaches were used to ensure the reliability of the research.

- Credibility was ensured by using member checking and peer debriefing.
- Dependability was assured by means of thematic analysis and recording of the analysis process.
- Confirmability was assured by comparing the data collected through interviews and field notes with literature.
- Transferability was achieved through providing detailed descriptions of the participants, settings, research design, and procedures.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview

Conclusions drawn from analyzing the interview answers revealed several interrelated themes associated with the interrelation of culture and second language learning.

Main themes identified are:

- 1.The importance of cultural knowledge in language learning;
- 2.Culture as a resource for contextualizing meaning;
- 3.The role of culture in second language acquisition;
- 4.The inseparability of language and culture; and

5. Cultural awareness and intercultural communication.

The findings provided below are derived from the answers in the manuscript.

4.2 The Importance of Cultural Knowledge in Language Learning

Results have shown that the respondents saw cultural knowledge as one of the critical parts of the learning process of another language.

The respondents saw cultural knowledge as the possibility of interpreting the words and phrases in a broader context. The answers given in the original article demonstrate that the learners see the understanding of cultural differences as giving them new ways of expression and thus contributing to the language learning process.

All participants were coded as Pre-service Teachers (PSTs), and each participant was assigned a number.

The following quotation from the PST-1:

“Language is one of the most critical elements of any culture as it is through the use of language that people interact, form relationships, and develop a sense of community.” PST-1

“Language is a critical tool of interaction among human beings. While all living beings have some form of communication, humans have developed their language of communication and thinking. Language enables people to express their feelings and ideas. Language is powerful enough to build societies, but it can destroy societies as well”. PST-1

This perception is in line with the idea expressed by Kramsch (2008) that language teaching should not be only about linguistic codes but also about meaning, since meaning is interpreted in the context of culture. This is also true with respect to the views expressed by Liddicoat (2011).

4.3 Culture as a Resource for Understanding Meaning

The results suggest that respondents perceived culture as an essential means to gain meaning.

Instead of regarding language as the accumulation of words and grammatical structures, respondents came to realize that language expressions derive meanings in certain socio-cultural environments.

The following quotation from PST-2:

“Culture refers to being an important and integral part of human society, which entails communication through the language of individuals in different situations. Culture also encourages cultural behavior and attitude in learners, as demanded by the need for communication in English as a foreign language.”

Such a result conforms with the claim put forward by Olusiji (2016) that culture does not mean the acquisition of knowledge by learners.





To grasp the notion of culture, one has to participate in linguistic and non-linguistic practices and the mode of living peculiar to a specific environment.

It also proves the claim made by Kuo and Lai (2010) that culture plays a role in encoding, interpreting, and understanding messages.

4.4 The Role of Culture in Second Language Acquisition

Culture was considered an essential aspect of second language acquisition by the participants.

These results indicate that culture can affect language use, communication, attitudes, and behaviors. Moreover, language acquisition was viewed by the participants as granting opportunities to get familiar with other societies and cultures as well as acting as a mediator between them.

The following quotation from PST-3:

"Language is the essential medium through which culture can be expressed. In transmitting the attitudes, customs, and beliefs of any culture, language serves as an effective tool in strengthening a sense of solidarity in the community. Language is the method by which culture is transmitted and maintained."

This result supports the findings of Ali et al. (2015), who state that successful intercultural communication presupposes ability to communicate within the context of culture.

It also corresponds to the research conducted by Rubenfeld et al. (2006).

4.5 Language and Culture Are Inseparable

The second strongest finding is the connection between language and culture.

Language was seen by the participants as a medium for expression of culture and the means of passing it from one generation to another. Language is also seen as an instrument used in building relations, community and identity, as well as maintaining cultural tradition.

The following quotation from PST-7, 9, 11, 12:

"Language encodes culture and acts as the vehicle through which culture can be passed on from generation to generation." PST-7

"While children come into the world ready to learn language, development is shaped by cultural and social interactions. The particular culture that personal developments take place in will have particular values, belief systems, and intellectual adaptations." PST-9

"Understanding the culture helps to place the proper interpretation of each word within its larger context, as you will be thinking in the foreign language.... As you learn about the language and culture differences

while learning a language, you will discover new ways to express those concepts. Culture is crucial in learning foreign languages." PST-11

"Engaging with another culture helps people gain a deeper knowledge of their own culture. Creativity increases through the study of foreign languages." PST-12

This view is strongly substantiated by Kuo and Lai (2010) since they speak about the close connection between language, culture and communication. It also coincides with Kramsch (2008) and Liddicoat (2011).

4.6 Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Communication

In addition to this, participants agreed on the importance of cultural awareness in interactions with people of different cultures.

It is clear from the results that lack of cultural awareness can result in decision-making problems or misconceptions in cross-cultural settings. On the other hand, having cultural awareness can assist people in making better and more informed decisions in interactions with people of different cultures.

The following quotation from PST-6:

"In our dealings within cross cultural scenarios, our ignorance may make us make wrong decisions. Cultural awareness enables us to lessen the risk of making wrong decisions and gives us an increased probability of making sound decisions".

In addition to above quotations the another PST mentioned that,
"Culture awareness is an important key for communicating with people from other cultures. As we know, communication is done using language; hence our knowledge of foreign languages helps us gain access to different societies and cultures". PST-8

Finally, the last PST stated that *"Learners act as mediators between the cultures."* PST-10

This observation is in line with Ali et al. (2015) who state that intercultural competence is not limited to cultural knowledge but involves understanding behaviors, attitudes, and meanings in cross-cultural interactions.

4.7 Learning Other Cultures and Understanding One's Own Culture

Furthermore, it can be seen from the findings that exposure to other cultures might motivate learners to reflect on their own culture.

From the participants' feedback, it is evident that engagement with individuals from other cultures will bring new perspectives. Therefore, exposure to various perspectives may make learners rethink the assumptions that they used to take as universal facts.

The following quotation from PST-4:





"Many times, interaction with people from different cultures gives you a different view of life. When you understand different cultures, you create new modes of thought and problem-solving".

This finding is significant considering the issue of cultural stereotyping discussed in the literature. If learners are exposed to differences between cultures without considering cultures as fixed and homogenous units, then this learning experience will facilitate reflection.

4.8 Benefits of Learning Languages and Cultures

There are various benefits that can be associated with the research findings on language learning and culture learning, such as improved communication abilities, different perspectives, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and knowledge of cultural diversity.

The following quotation from PST-5:

"The cognitive advantages associated with language learning are undeniable. Multilingual individuals possess excellent memory, problem solving and critical thinking abilities, increased focus, and multitasking capability, along with better listening skills."

5. Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Discussion of Research Question One: Why Is It Important to Learn About Culture When Learning a Language?

The results show that cultural knowledge was regarded by the participants as essential for language learners because it provides a way to grasp the language in wider contexts.

The results provide support for the arguments of Kramsch (2008) that teaching languages should not center only on linguistic codes, but also on meaning and cultural context. The results also agree with the idea of Liddicoat (2011) that the learners require the awareness of the connection between language and culture when using the language in a second or foreign environment.

In addition, Olusiji (2016) explains that cultural learning consists of knowing the way language and other practices work in specific cultures.

The similarity between the current results and other studies implies that cultural knowledge should not be regarded as a supplementary aspect to language learning. Rather, it should become an integral part of the process of meaning making through language.

5.1.2 Discussion of Research Question Two: What Is the Role of Culture in Second Language Acquisition?

The second research question looked into the significance of culture in the second language acquisition process.

The results show that culture impacts language use, communication, attitudes, and interpretation. The result is supported by Kuo & Lai (2010), which asserts that culture determines how communication takes place and how it is interpreted.

The results are also consistent with Ali et al. (2015) that assert that intercultural communication requires negotiations in cultural settings.

The other reason for the results is the significance of social interaction. The importance of positive contact within the L2 community has been proven by Rubenfeld et al. (2006), while the significance of peer interaction has been emphasized by Tavares (2016).

5.1.3 Discussion of Research Question Three: Why Are Language and Culture Inseparable?

Research question three concerned the connection between language and culture.

This research finding clearly corroborates the belief that language and culture cannot be separated. Language is used to convey values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and social relations, while culture shapes the use and meaning of language.

This is in line with Samovar et al. (1981), cited in Kuo & Lai (2010), who view culture and communication as inseparable.

This corroborates Kramsch (2008) who posits that language creates and interprets meaning in cultural contexts and Liddicoat (2011) who highlight the interplay between language and culture in communication.

This implies that EFL instruction should combine cultural meaning with linguistic forms. Instruction in grammar and vocabulary without helping learners appreciate the use of such forms in certain contexts will limit communicative competence.

5.1.4 Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence

The results indicate that cultural awareness was considered crucial when communicating with individuals of other cultures.

This result aligns well with the work done by Ali et al. (2015), where intercultural communication is defined as understanding why and how people act and communicate in certain ways.

It is necessary to note, however, that cultural awareness does not involve memorizing information about foreign cultures. As stated by Thanasoulas (2001), cultural education should go beyond the mere acquisition of facts. Olusiji (2016) emphasizes the need to understand cultural practices rather than cultural information.

Thus, it is recommended that EFL teachers design tasks which require interpretation, comparison, reflection, and communication but not memorization of cultural facts.





5.1.5 Social Interaction, Confidence, and Cultural Learning

This paper can also be analyzed with regard to the social aspect of second language acquisition.

According to Rubenfeld et al., (2006), frequent and positive contact with members of the community speaking an L2 may help in achieving motivation, identification, language production and adaptation.

Likewise, Tavares (2016) stresses the importance of peer communication in second language acquisition process. Working together towards a common goal allows students to communicate in meaningful ways and gain communicative competence.

Thus, the current results point to the importance of a dynamic approach to the study of culture. Students need to engage actively in this process by interacting, discussing, comparing and negotiating cultural knowledge and experience.

5.1.6 Self-Efficacy and Participation

Self-efficacy offers yet another valuable perspective as well. According to Raoofi et al. (2012), self-belief of the learner about his/her competence and the impact of this belief on the learning process and learner performance are crucial.

In the case of culture-specific language acquisition, learners will require adequate confidence to engage in communication where they come across new terms, views, and behavioral codes.

Thus, teachers have to provide such an environment where learners feel safe enough to use the English language with a minimum level of concern regarding their mistakes.

5.1.7 Cultural Identity and Investment

Findings could also be examined from the perspectives of identity and investment.

According to Zachrison (2014), in his discussion about the works of Norton, social identity, language learning, and investment in a second language are all interconnected. Learners could make an investment in learning another language since there would be a hope for gaining more symbolic and material advantages.

From this point of view, the case of the University of Duhok is relevant in the sense that by learning English, students would gain more opportunities academically, professionally, internationally, and interculturality.

English learning does not mean that the learners have to give up their Kurdish cultural identities. Instead, learners can gain more resources without neglecting their cultural identities.

5.1.8 Avoiding Cultural Stereotyping

The research also brings up a critical problem: culture-based teaching can unconsciously lead to stereotyping.

The conversation regarding Sawyer and Kamali by Zachrison (2014) points out the danger that multicultural teaching can sometimes lead to creating fixed categories of people and encourages individuals to see others through the lenses of culture.

Thus, culturally responsive EFL teaching must stress the diversity, dynamism, and internal complexity of cultures. The teacher must not say things like “all English people...” or “all Kurds...” and instead teach learners to look at diversity, context, individuality, and circumstances.

This is especially relevant in the case of intercultural education where the aim is to learn more about the subject matter and not to substitute one stereotype with another.

5.1.9 Implications for EFL Teaching at the University of Duhok

The results can be applied in practice when teaching English as a foreign language.

First, cultural themes need to be embedded in all the parts of the curriculum, not just some of the classes.

Second, teachers should use authentic material in order to let students observe how English is used in authentic contexts.

Third, it is essential that students should be encouraged to compare English cultural practices with Kurdish cultural practices. Comparison will help to highlight both similar and dissimilar aspects.

Fourth, role plays, simulation, discussion, and problem solving will help to establish an environment in which intercultural communication can occur.

Fifth, it is important that learners are exposed to various models of English language use, instead of encouraging them to adopt only one of them as “proper” English.

Finally, teachers should encourage learners to choose consciously which variety of English and what cultural knowledge would be appropriate for their needs. The original study rightly stresses the importance that learners should not have only one particular cultural style forced upon them as the only proper model.

5.2 Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of cultural context on second language acquisition through the perceptions of pre-service teachers in the EFL program at the University of Duhok.

The results indicate that cultural awareness is perceived to be an essential part of learning English. Cultural awareness was related to the comprehension of language in context, interpretation of meanings,





communication with individuals belonging to different cultures, and widening perspectives.

Additionally, this study shows that participants see no separation between language and culture. Language serves as a medium for the expression, transmission, and preservation of culture, whereas the cultural context impacts the use and meanings of language. This result is compatible with the research carried out by Kuo & Lai (2010), Kramsch (2008), Liddicoat (2011), and Thanasoulas (2001).

Furthermore, this study found that learning about culture should be viewed as a process of gaining knowledge instead of memorizing cultural information. This idea coincides with the one mentioned by Olusiji (2016).

Social interaction is another factor. From the standpoint of theories formulated by Rubenfeld et al. (2006), Tavares (2016), Wenger, and other sociocultural paradigms, it is possible for language skills to be acquired through interaction and participation.

This research finds that culture should not be considered a secondary part of EFL education. It should become an integral part of language instruction via contextualized communication, authentic sources, intercultural practices, reflection, and interaction.

However, cultural education should not involve stereotypes, nor should it establish one cultural paradigm as the only appropriate one. Students need to learn about other cultures but remain conscious of their own cultural backgrounds and make decisions regarding what kind of English and what cultural background is suitable for their needs.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

Limitations that could affect the interpretation of the findings include:

First, there were only 12 participants who took part in this study. A smaller sample size is good enough for an exploratory study, but it reduces the generalizability of the findings to all EFL students.

Second, all the participants came from one university, and the same academic setting. Hence, their perceptions may vary from those of other EFL learners from other universities or regions.

Third, the participants included only the final year or fourth year pre-service teachers. Their academic experience or interest may have influenced the way they perceive culture and language acquisition.

Fourth, the research study used mainly self-reported interview data. Perceptions of the participants cannot prove their intercultural communicative actions.

Fifth, the current study concentrates on perceptions of the students rather than the assessment of language proficiency and performance.

Sixth, this study is carried out in a unique Kurdish EFL context. Hence, the transferability of the findings to other educational and cultural contexts should be taken into consideration.

5.4 Recommendations for EFL Teachers

From the results of the research and the existing literature, EFL teachers need to:

1. Include culture in English lessons;
2. Provide authentic materials to illustrate how the language is used in culture;
3. Incorporate activities for intercultural communication;
4. Apply role-playing and simulation activities for culturally appropriate communication;
5. Teach pragmatic features of English, including greetings, making requests, being polite, disagreeing and conversation management;
6. Encourage comparisons between Kurdish and English cultures;
7. Avoid cultural stereotypes and generalizations;
8. Offer opportunities for peer interaction;
9. Cultivate a positive environment where students feel encouraged and develop self-efficacy; and
10. Consider the objectives of their students' learning English.

All the above suggestions correspond to the ideas of Ali et al. (2015), Thanasoulas (2001), Liddicoat (2011), Olusiji (2016), Tavares (2016), and Raoofi et al. (2012).

5.5 Recommendations for Curriculum Designers

Curricula for EFL teaching ought to integrate cultural studies into various language skills rather than limiting culture to one unit.

Reading texts can be culturally relevant. Listening texts can expose students to a variety of speakers and interaction scenarios. Activities involving speaking can make use of intercultural situations, whereas writing tasks can help the learner explore various cultural viewpoints.

The curriculum designer must avoid depicting English culture as a monolith. The reason is that the English language is international and students must be exposed to various English-speaking and English-using communities.

5.6 Recommendations for Teacher Education

Teacher education courses must be designed in such a way that English teachers-in-training are able to incorporate culture and language into classroom practice.

Teachers-in-training should understand how cultural beliefs impact communications and stereotyping, and what intercultural activities can do to raise critical consciousness.





The ability to conduct classroom discussions about similarities and differences should be developed as well.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should:

1. Enroll larger groups of participants;
2. Enroll students from various universities of the Kurdistan Region;
3. Make comparisons between learners in various academic years;
4. Consider EFL teachers' views about cultural instruction;
5. Rely on classroom observation in addition to interviews;
6. Inquire into the effectiveness of particular cultural instruction activities;
7. Be conducted using mixed-method designs;
8. Consider cultural awareness and pragmatic competence;
9. Consider the connection between cultural awareness and proficiency in English; and
10. Make comparisons between EFL learners in Kurdish and in other linguistic and cultural environments.

Other areas of research may include particular cultural aspects of language learning, such as politeness, humor, idioms, gestures, requests, disagreement, turn-taking, and intercultural pragmatics.

5.8 Suggested Conceptual Framework

The literature review and results of the current research indicate the following theoretical connection between variables:

Cultural Context



Cultural Awareness



Understanding Contextual Meaning



Social Interaction and Communication



Second Language Acquisition



Intercultural Communicative Competence

The theory behind the model is provided by Kumagai (1994), Kuo & Lai (2010), Ali et al. (2015), Rubenfeld et al. (2006), Tavares (2016), Raoofi et al. (2012), Olusiji (2012).

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following questions are based on the original interview framework and have been refined for clarity:

1. Why do you think it is important to learn about culture when learning a new language?
2. What role does culture play in learning English successfully?
3. How can cultural knowledge help learners understand English expressions?
4. Why do you think language and culture are inseparable?
5. How can cultural awareness affect communication with people from other cultures?
6. What problems might learners experience if they lack cultural awareness?
7. What benefits can learners gain from learning about other cultures?
8. How can learning another culture help you understand your own culture?
9. What cultural topics should English teachers include in their lessons?
10. What challenges might teachers face when teaching culture?
11. How can teachers avoid cultural stereotyping?
12. What recommendations would you give English teachers concerning culture and language learning?

Appendix B: Recommended Thematic Analysis Matrix

Research Question	Theme	Possible Codes	Evidence
RQ1	Importance of cultural knowledge	of contextual meaning, understanding expressions, communication	Interview quotations
RQ2	Role of culture in L2 learning	language use, communication, attitudes, behavior	Interview quotations
RQ3	Language culture	and identity, values, traditions, meaning	Interview quotations
RQ3	Cultural awareness	intercultural communication, interpretation	Interview quotations
RQ1–RQ3	Social interaction	peer interaction, participation, confidence	Interview quotations

