

## English Language Teaching and Cultural Implications in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

Culture and language are inseparable. Language is used both as a means of communication as well as a carrier of culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language (Wei, 2005). While teaching a foreign language, a teacher needs to accustom himself with the culture of the target language and the culture of learners. However, teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of culture as a part of language study. This study focuses on perception and practices of teachers regarding culture and English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. The data were collected from 121 (60 male and 61 female) teachers of different cultural background through a questionnaire on their perceptions and implication of teaching target culture in the classroom through English language courses. It was revealed that all teachers have knowledge about the aspects of the target culture to some extent, but how they deal with the target culture is affected highly by the curricular considerations and limitations.

**Keywords:** culture, foreign language teaching/learning, intercultural classroom

### 1. Introduction

It is a common belief that language and culture are interlinked. Language reflects values of a certain society. Culture is, therefore, a key component in language teaching. Together with learning a foreign language, people learn target culture as well. Learning a language without its culture is said to be turning a person who can speak a foreign language without understanding its social, cultural or philosophical aspect of target culture. So, teaching a foreign language means incorporating knowledge of the target culture as well. It also leads to cultural complications in a foreign language learning classroom. McKay (2003) suggests language learning process is influenced by culture linguistically (semantic, pragmatic and discourse) and pedagogically (learning material containing cultural content). There has been a variety of definitions of culture. Lederach (1995, p. 9) defines culture as “the shared knowledge and schemes created by set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to social realities around them”. Klingner et al. (2005) think culture as a system of shared beliefs, customs, behaviors and artifacts.

Recent researches (Bada, 2000; Byram & Kramersch, 2008; Dai, 2011) reflect the importance of teaching culture in teaching foreign or second languages over the last few decades. The attention of the language teachers has been drawn to the fact that a language and culture cannot exist separately, so it is necessary to have knowledge of the target language before understanding and teaching it. Samovar, Porter & Jain (1981, p. 24) opines that language and culture are interdependent and inseparable as culture dictates who is going to whom, about what, and how the communication will proceed”. So, communication is based on culture as it helps people to encode and decode message under certain conditions and considering the situations whether the message is sent or noticed or interpreted. Understanding a culture helps a teacher to plan a lesson, design appropriate activities, and suitable for intercultural learning environment to teach the target language. Also, teachers may involve students in such activities which motivate the students to understand the importance of target language culture in communicating meanings and references in communication of a native speaker. It's a teacher's duty to integrate culture in language class, keeping in view the globalization and its impact on various aspects of the society, to impart awareness about various cultures in the world. This facilitates the learners to be competent in language use in cultural context. Furstenberg (2010) discusses that culture not only provides factual process but also shapes human behavior and interaction in specific situations. It means that culture is an ever-changing

phenomenon and can be observed in through various expressions. Such variation in culture and expressions influence language and vice-versa as language is the medium of expression. Therefore, culture and language are inter-dependent, influence and shape each other. Through language people express their culture which entails their history and ways of living and thinking (Brown, 2009). In the words of Jiang (2000), there is no culture without a language and vice versa. So, culture and language are intrinsically interwoven that we cannot separate them. As a language teacher, one cannot neglect culture of the target language in a language classroom (Dai, 2011; Zhao, 2011). However, the question is that to what extent culture should be part of a foreign language learning course.

In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language in all the educational institutions, especially at university level, it is a compulsory component of the studies. Arabic culture is a rich culture and has its own history, traditions and taboos. English language teachers face problems to certain extent while teaching English language and explaining the cultural context in various situations. The present research focuses on the perception and applications of English language teachers regarding cultural complications in their classrooms.

### *1.1 Culture and Language Teaching*

Culture is a multi-dimensional term which has been defined in numerous ways by experts. It is considered a set of beliefs, values and attitudes shared by a group of people. However, Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi (1990) discuss four important aspects of culture which are aesthetic aspect, sociological aspect, semantic sense, and pragmatic sense which refer to arts, customs, perceptions, and communication respectively.

Culture is rooted in language so language teaching is given a high level of importance in educational system. Language and culture coexist, and culture is an indispensable part of communication process. A learner cannot exhibit his competence in a foreign language unless he is aware of the cultural aspects and know how to agree or disagree with people, how to make a request, express opinion or gratitude, etc. (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Therefore, culture, keeping in view the relationship with language, may be introduced in English language classroom.

For an allusive communication with the members of foreign cultures, Byram & Morgan (1994) argue that a learner may be engaged in activities focusing on understanding and contradictions of concepts in theirs and a foreign culture. Kramsch (1993) stresses that cultural instructions should be a part of language teaching program and should include intercultural activities considering culture as an interpersonal phenomenon. Describing the relationship between language and culture, Brown (1994, p. 165) describes “two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. Learner must be taught language in a cultural context to facilitate them in everyday interaction in a target culture. While discussing teaching culture in a foreign language classroom, Bada (2000) highlights that learners may face problems in understanding meanings and communicating with the native speakers, if they are not exposed to the target culture. Teaching language in cultural context will make learners to know the ways the native speakers use language under certain circumstances. Pulverness (2003) opines that without having the cultural knowledge, learning a foreign language seems senseless as such kind of communication are merely words without knowing the people and situation in which such words are spoken. Furthermore, McDevitt (2004) suggests that it would be a challenge to understand what people say without cultural understanding. Human nature is characterized by the language which he uses to communicate in a specific cultural context, so a teacher’s role is very important in making students understand culture of the target language.

In addition to the above, there are other aspects as well which might be considered while teaching culture in a language classroom. A teacher is required to be objective and non-judgmental while teaching a language (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Buttjes (1990) enlists reasons for inseparable connection between language and culture:

- There is no universal phenomenon or sequence of language learning process and it may be different in different cultures.
- A competent learner of a foreign language needs to be competent in interaction in different social situations.
- Children’s utterances may be influenced by a set of social values in using form, function and content of a language in a situation.
- A teacher is responsible for teaching not only grammar but also social context and situations in which word, phrases or utterances are used.
- A native speaker uses paralinguistic features linked with that specific culture while using language in a specific context.

In the same way, Bada (2000, p. 101) comments that the need for cultural awareness in language teaching courses arises from the fact that “most language learners if not exposed to cultural elements may encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers”. Therefore, some language courses are based on interdisciplinary approach to facilitate the teacher and the learners to understand cultural context (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002). However, Modiano (2001) discusses that English being a lingua franca is spoken in many countries so the cultural elements if not included in the curriculum of an English language course will not affect the learning process.

Kitao (1991) highlights, firstly, culture as a motivational tool in learning a foreign language which provides a reason to a learner to learn a foreign language. Secondly, cultural awareness provides a link between abstract sound and form of a foreign language to real situations and people. Thirdly, learners like to participate in culture-based language activities. Fourthly, the use of culture based activities in language education enhances a learner’s interest in cultures of different countries. According to Ritlyová (2009), learners improve their perception of both cultures, foreign and theirs, by learning a foreign language. Tomalin and Stempleski highlight reasons for teaching culture which are “to increase cultural awareness, and to promote cross-cultural interaction” (1993, p. 11). Thus, integrating culture into a language teaching program create awareness, appreciation and acceptance of other cultures.

However, it is a debatable issue that how and to what extent a foreign culture should be taught in a foreign language classroom. The learners must be aware of their home culture to avoid dominance of the target culture. Therefore, it’s a teacher’s responsibility to create an intercultural learning integrating cultural elements into language instructions. For this, a teacher must be fully conscious of both cultures, home and target cultures, to avoid misunderstanding by advocating one culture onto the other. To integrate, a teacher must have knowledge of local and target cultures and knows strategies to integrate cultural elements in a lesson.

There are various approaches towards teaching various aspects of the target culture or develop certain skills in learners. Risager (1998) enlists three approaches which are the intercultural or multicultural, transcultural, and foreign cultural approach. Each approach reflects a different aspect and supposition. The intercultural or multicultural approach discusses a substantial element of comparison, transcultural approach considers the foreign language as an international language, whereas the focal point in foreign cultural approach is the target culture only. Jiyong (2004) argues that the best strategy for a teacher integrating culture and language would be the cultural context. A teacher, keeping in view of learning objectives, may adopt any one of these approaches while teaching a foreign language

The knowledge and skill to communicate, understand and engage with people of other cultures is called Intercultural competence (ICC). ICC helps one to understand thinking, feeling of person from another culture without any prejudices (Rathje, 2007). Fantini (2006, p. 1) discusses ICC as “the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself”. Furthermore, Guilherme (2013, p. 297) considers intercultural competence as “the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own”. According to Liddicoat et al. (2003, p. 43), intercultural learning (ILL) involves “integration of language, culture and learning into a single teaching and learning approach”. ILL considers language, culture, and learning as interlined and inseparable elements of learning process. They further confirm that the concepts of “language”, “culture” and “learning” are pivotal in curriculum and material designing in a language course. Liddicoat et al. (2003, p. 46) define goals of ILL which are “understanding and valuing all languages and cultures, understanding and valuing one’s own language(s) and culture(s), understanding and valuing one’s target language(s) and culture(s), understanding and valuing how to mediate among languages and cultures, and developing intercultural sensitivity as an ongoing process”.

Therefore, learning a foreign language means how to communicate, understand and be flexible in a foreign culture. At the same time, one need to ponder on socially accepted norms in their culture and the target culture. This creates intercultural awareness.

### *1.2 Relevant Studies*

During the last decade, a lot of research focuses on the inseparable nature and relationship between culture and language (such as Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 2001; Pulverness, 2003; McKay, 2003) which reflects that language learning grounded in culture may guide the learners to develop a sense of multiculturalism and they may have an improved sense of achievement in learning a foreign language (Byrnes, 2008; Rubio, 2007; Tochon, 2009).

Byram & Risager (1999) investigated FL teachers' views in England and Denmark and found that they lacked the background knowledge of the target culture, so the students faced problems in expressing themselves in the

classrooms. They also observed the respondent were of the view that their primary responsibility is to teach language and not to teach culture. Whereas, Stapleton (2000) found that English language teachers in Japan supported teaching of culture in a language classroom as they know the importance of culture in language teaching.

In another study conducted by Aleksandrowicz-Pędich et al. (2003) in ten European countries, it was indicated that there was a consensus upon the integration of intercultural awareness-raising into the teaching process. They found out that those teachers who benefited from various stays abroad and education in a multicultural environment held a clearer view of the importance of the issue.

Onalan (2005) conducted a research on Turkish EFL teachers' regarding their perceptions on the place of culture in teaching practice. His research found that teachers were aware of the importance of culture while teaching a foreign language, but they mentioned that their primary concern is to teach language and not the culture. Onalan argues that EFL teachers' perception of FC in general is composed of sociological facets such as values, beliefs, traditions, rather than elements related to language.

In Saudi Arabia, Al-Qahtani (2003) reported that Saudi EFL teachers held a positive attitude toward introducing the target culture as they were aware of the importance of developing their students' cross-cultural understanding. Despite these positive views, this study showed that the teachers were limited in their involvement in culture teaching because of the concern that exposing students to other cultures might have a negative impact on their cultural and religious beliefs.

Al-Asmari (2008) conducted research on pre-service EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia and found that "despite the high conceptual awareness of the inseparability of language and culture developed clearly by the instructors, the place of the target culture in language teaching was found minimal, incidental, and inconsistent" (p. 300). There is an indication that academic EFL instructors' conceptual awareness of the importance of foreign culture in EFL education does not necessitate translating this awareness into action in practice. In pedagogy, therefore, the instructors' approached foreign culture statically in the form of information, facts, and artifacts. Target culture is rarely integrated in EFL teaching courses (i.e., language macro-skills); rather, it is often replaced by local aspects (Al-Asmari, 2008).

### *1.3 Research Questions*

- 1) How important do teachers think culture is in learning English as a foreign language?
- 2) What cultural complications do English language teachers face in their classrooms?
- 3) How do cultural implications lead towards an intercultural ELT classroom?

## **2. Method**

To know the teachers' perception regarding foreign culture and its practices in an English language classroom, a questionnaire (see annexure) was designed by the researchers using five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was piloted, and some changes were made. It was executed to all teachers (121) at English Language Centre of the university. The questionnaire consisted of teachers' attitude towards cultural elements (aesthetic, sociological, semantic, and pragmatic or sociolinguistic) in teaching/learning process and actual practices of cultural awareness and teaching, and constraints in an English language classroom.

## **3. Results**

The data collected through a questionnaire comprising perceptions of cultural aspects and classroom practices was tabulated on five-point Likert scale (5-maximum—1-minimum). The following sections discuss perceptions, classroom activities, and intercultural classroom based on the questionnaire statements.

### *3.1 Perceptions*

The first part of the questionnaire discusses the perception of teachers regarding culture in a foreign language classroom. The data/responses of the teachers have been discussed in three steps; statements most favored, acceptable, and less favored. The first chunk of statements reflects teachers' perception regarding the important role of culture in language teaching process. They responded that the target language culture should be part of the language learning program (4.46), it enhances students' understanding of their own cultural identity (4.16), language skills of students may improve by integrating language and culture (4.14), and teaching culture motivates students (4.04). Sharing culture of the target language may motivate the students to learn a foreign language in a humanizing manner. It may also enhance the learning process at the same time. A culture-based language learning environment will help the students to identify similarities and differences in cultures which will lead them towards cultural understanding and harmony through language.

Secondly, the teachers mentioned that students will be more tolerant if they are introduced to the culture of the target language (3.96), understanding target culture may help students in creating critical thinking regarding target and local cultures (3.82), and it may change students' attitude towards his/her own culture (3.78). Exposure to world cultures may enhance exposure of students of other cultures and comparing it with their own culture may lead them to tolerance in learning foreign languages. To achieve such objectives and enhance learning process, teachers responded that the cultural elements may be expanded in a foreign language classroom (3.58). It will open new avenues of understanding people around the world through language.

The teachers didn't favour that the target culture should be introduced and taught at advanced level only (2.96), students' own culture and identity is at risk while teaching them a foreign culture (2.86), and introducing culture in a language classroom may hinder the language learning process (2.60). Monolingual or mono-cultural students may face problems in understanding other cultures and they may consider other cultures inappropriate as compared to their own culture. So, when they learn language of that specific culture, they are either de-motivated or learn it in a negative manner. It is, therefore, inevitable for teachers to guide the students to a certain level of intercultural knowledge. This would motivate them learn another language and understand cultural differences. This would also help them to become a global citizen by knowing characteristics of other cultures and languages. Therefore, a teacher's role in a foreign language learning classroom has got a pivotal position to create an intercultural environment by making students understand and communicate with people of target culture.

### *3.2 Classroom Activities*

In the second part of the questionnaire, teachers opined on culture in foreign language classroom activities. Being aware of importance of intercultural learning environment, they consider students' culture in their teaching style (4.22) and include cultural information about English speaking countries in their classes (4.14). While discussing language skills, they discuss certain aspects of their own experiences in the foreign culture (4.12) and focus on specific aspects of cultural points which are different in Arabic and English-speaking countries (4.10).

The teachers responded positively to some extent that the students are aware of the cultural differences (3.92), they include cultural content in their EFL lessons (3.82), and share their own experiences in the foreign culture (3.66). As the recent research focuses on the point that culture cannot be separated from language and it should be part of language curriculum. The teachers who are aware of this fact include cultural elements in their lessons. At the same time language communicate thinking and acting styles of the people of that specific culture. They also opined that they involve students in discussion while comparing different elements of target culture with the local culture (3.72), they introduce the students to the target culture as presented and discussed in the textbook (3.56), and discuss about the cultural shocks (3.50). This point is in agreement with Byram & Kramsch (2008) who asserted that without cultural context language is functionless. Culture being a part of the curriculum will provide the students proper language patterns use in a variety of situation, time and place.

### *3.3 Intercultural Classroom*

Though teachers are aware of the cultural differences and incorporation of cultural aspects in their teaching, conduct of cultural content or target culture based activities have some restrictions. Being aware of Arabic culture, they least favoured the statements that they ask students to explore on their own certain elements of the target culture (3.44), discuss negatively specific elements of the target culture (3.32), and introduce real life target cultural objects in their classroom (3.30). They also expressed that they discuss in detail various aspects of cultural differences in their class (3.22), and teach the textbook which covers the cultural differences (3.20). The reasons may include that they don't have much time to discuss cultural aspects of the target language in detail as they must cover the syllabus, or they don't have sufficient knowledge of the target culture. Another problem could be students' assumed knowledge and attitude toward a new culture which presents new patterns of thinking and behavior and characterizing the target culture as "strange". Byram & Kramsch (2008) are of the same point that language teachers may have a fear of stereotype thinking patterns of the students regarding their own culture and the target culture. At the same time, students may assume based on their own understanding various aspects of the target culture which may not be true.

Regarding the familiarity and selection of cultural aspects in a language classroom to create an intercultural learning environment, teachers responded that they are familiar with all the aspects of a culture but the aspects they deal in the classroom were limited to daily life activities, living conditions, environment, food, shopping, education, youth culture, and values and beliefs. On the other side, they have limitations to discuss international relations, traditions, folklores, history, politics, different ethnic or social groups, and other cultural expressions like music, dramas, art, etc.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study focused on identifying EFL teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards teaching of culture in English language classroom. It was found that the EFL teachers in Saudi universities understand the importance culture in teaching English and they are aware of integrating culture and language in their teaching. They understand differences in various cultures and know how to discuss such cultural differences and incorporate these differences in curriculum which they think is the starting point to teach and develop multicultural learning environment to develop cross-cultural awareness.

The present study is in line with the previous studies conducted by various researchers (like Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004; Zaid, 2011). The teacher and the curriculum or activities are the main constituent to create a cross-cultural environment in the EFL context. The teachers perceived that sharing culture of the target language may motivate the language learner and thus enhancing the learning process by observing similarities and differences among various cultures and societies. They perceived that exposure to a foreign culture may help students to compare it with their own culture which may lead them to understanding and tolerance.

In response to the second part of the questionnaire, the teachers opined that they should discover new ideas and ways to introduce cultural elements in their language teaching classes. However, they expressed their limitations in teaching culture in the language classroom mentioning the reasons including students' exposure to the target culture, negative attitude towards the target culture, curriculum and time constraints. However, considering the international role of the English language and globalization, culture is considered as a fifth language skill. Incorporating the cultural concepts in language teaching enhance awareness on cultural elements, accept or be flexible on cultural aspects which might be different to student culture. Therefore, to promote cultural equality, Modiano expresses that "the ideologies which underpin globalization and the vision of cultural pluralism are more in tune with a lingua franca perspective as opposed to ELT platforms based on culture-specific varieties" (2001, p. 159). To create a multicultural classroom, teachers may find out ways, besides certain limitations, to make use of cultural diversity to enlighten the learners to create necessary connections between students' culture and the target language culture through curriculum and classroom activities.

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**Appendix**

**Questionnaire on Cultural Implications in English Language Teaching in Saudi Universities**

*This questionnaire is a part of a research study. The purpose of the survey is to find our cultural implications in English language teaching in Saudi universities. Please take few minutes to complete the survey. The data will be kept confidential.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Present Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Teaching Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male / Female                      Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Qualifications: \_\_\_\_\_ Professional Qualifications: \_\_\_\_\_

**Note:** *There are three sections in this questionnaire covering perceptions, classroom activities, and personal. First two sections have five options (Strongly Agree – SA, Agree – A, Neutral – N, Disagree – A, and Strongly Disagree – SD). Please read the options and circle / highlight the most appropriate option.*

No.	Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
<b>Perceptions</b>						
1	It is important that the target language culture may be part of the language learning program.					
2	It is important to teach foreign language and foreign culture in an integrated way.					
3	Students will be more tolerant if they are introduced to the culture of the target language.					
4	Foreign language teaching should enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity.					
5	Teaching culture motivates students.					
6	Introducing culture in a language classroom may hinder the language learning process.					
7	Language skills of students may improve by integrating language and culture.					
8	The cultural elements may be expanded in a foreign language classroom.					
9	Learning about a foreign culture can change the student's attitude towards her/ his own culture.					
10	Students' own culture is at risk while teaching them a foreign culture.					
11	Understanding target culture may help students in creating critical thinking regarding target and local cultures.					
12	The target culture should only be introduced and taught at advanced level only.					



Classroom Activities						
13	My students are aware of the cultural differences.					
14	I include cultural information about English speaking countries in my classes.					
15	I intentionally include cultural content in my EFL lessons.					
16	I focus on specific aspects of cultural points which are different in Arabic and English-speaking countries.					
17	I discuss in detail various aspects of cultural differences in my class.					
18	I consider students' culture in my teaching style.					
19	I introduce the students to the target culture as presented and discussed in the textbook.					
20	I share with my students about the cultural shocks.					
21	I ask students to explore on their own certain elements or aspects of the target culture.					
22	I talk to my students about my own experiences in the foreign culture.					
23	I ask my students to describe an aspect of their own culture in the foreign language.					
24	I introduce real life target culture objects in my classroom.					
25	I involve students in discussion while comparing different elements of target culture with the local culture.					
26	I comment on the way in which the foreign culture is represented in the classroom materials.					
27	I discuss negatively specific elements or aspects of the target culture					

### Familiarity with the target culture

		very familiar	sufficient familiar	not sufficient familiar
a.	History, geography, political system			
b.	Different ethnic and social groups			
c.	Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drinks, etc.			
d.	Youth culture			
e.	Education, professional life			
f.	Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions			
g.	Literature			
h.	Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art, etc.)			
i.	Values and beliefs			
j.	International relations, with students' own country and other countries			

### Cultural aspects I deal in the FL classroom

		I deal with it extensively	I touch upon it once in a while	I never touch upon it
a.	History, geography, political system			
b.	Different ethnic and social groups			
c.	Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drinks, etc.			
d.	Youth culture			
e.	Education, professional life			
f.	Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions			
g.	Literature			
h.	Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art, etc.)			
i.	Values and beliefs			
j.	International relations, with students' own country and other countries			

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