The Attitudes of Iranian EFL Learners towards Cultural Familiarity

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards cultural familiarity. The study was carried out at Irandoostan Language Institute in Tabriz. 60 intermediate EFL learners were selected based on the results of Preliminary English Test (PET). The design of the study was quantitative. Subsequently, the cultural attitude questionnaire adopted from Abbasian, Kouhpayehzadeh, and Asgharpour (2016) was distributed among Iranian intermediate participants to fill out the questionnaire in 10 minutes. The attitude questionnaire includes 8 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "very much" to 4 "not at all" that participants should point out their attitude towards source and target culture. Furthermore, the questionnaire emphasized on four areas including history and geography, the values and beliefs, target cultural expressions, and life style and customs. The results of cultural attitude questionnaire through descriptive statistics indicated that more than half of the participants believed that knowing and learning about target culture is important in English classes. On the other hand, a lot of the participants did not consider source culture as an important factor in English learning classes. The obtained results have some implications for syllabus designers. Syllabus designers can create course books that incorporate different cultures and their culture factors, norms of both source and target culture in the teaching syllabus.

Keywords: Attitudes, culture, cultural familiarity

INTRODUCTION

According to Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015), culture can be characterized as "a 'social heredity' sent out from one generation to another generation with the accumulation of individual experiences, or a mode of activities differentiating people of one society from another society" (p.2). Culture cannot be well thought-out as a biological phenomenon even so a learned pattern of social behavior that is to be followed; that is to say, culture is a brilliant and exceptional phenomenon of human society with interesting diversity

continuously changing its patterns which is the extreme beauty of human society. It is safe to claim that culture creates beliefs, carries ideas, and shares knowledge on customs and values. All of these characteristics are communicated through language which is an integral part of culture (Ali et al., 2015). Thus, language is a "powerful and transformative tool of culture. Like culture, language is learned, it is shared, and it evolves and changes over time" (Banks, 2001, p. 268).

According to Kitao (1991), the underlying principle behind teaching culture not only within EFL courses, but also as a separate course is a manifestation of the great influence of teaching culture on the learners' attitudes and learning outcomes. What's more, the idea of teaching culture stemmed from the desire of most learners who want to continue their higher education abroad. This idea was emphasized by who stated that "cultural orientation is very important for students preparing to study abroad" (p.1). However, Bennett (1993) argued that if EFL learners master a foreign language without understanding its culture, they will end up fluent fool speakers who neither have an idea about the social content of a language nor about the philosophical one.

 In addition, Ali et al (2015) pointed out that certainly, cultural awareness has an important contribution in foreign language learning programs. They believed that learners can enhance communication skills only after the formation of familiarity with the cultural patterns of target language. For them with the intention of achieving cultural awareness, it is essential to expose learners to a cultural context by creating interactive/communicative activities by language teaching strategies. An assortment of multiple texts comprising cultural knowledge might be introduced to learners for the attainment of competence in using language patterns.

As discussed by Sharma (2017) and Pang (2001), studying culture in target language learning atmosphere motivates the learners as follow:

1. To receive broader range for the insight among individuals of different culture.
2. Create contented and agreeable teaching classes that inform the learners about the possible mistakes during interpretation, communication, comprehension and translation.
3. Cross cultural communication advance and support maintaining prosperity and peace in the world
4. Facilitate communication and co-operation.
5. Increase the communication ability of the learner with other culturally different individuals.
6. Increase the international and intercultural understanding level.
7. Mutual understanding and enrichment of language, business, sociopolitical affairs etc.
8. Identify and understand the linguistic and behavioral designs of the target and the native culture properly.
9. To attain agreement in the field of language learning and teaching

In addition, McKay (2003) emphasizes that culture affects language teaching in two ways including: first linguistic and second and pedagogical. Linguistically, it influences the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it affects the

choice of the language materials since cultural aspect of the language materials and the cultural underpinning of the teaching methodology are to be taken into account while determining the language materials. Let's say, while a number of textbooks offer examples from the target culture, some others make use of source culture materials. Similarly, Ali et al (2015) pointed out that indeed, cultural awareness has an important contribution in foreign language learning programs. They believed that learners can enhance communication skills only after the formation of familiarity with the cultural patterns of target language. For them with the intention of achieving cultural awareness, it is essential to expose learners to a cultural context by creating interactive/communicative activities by language teaching strategies. An assortment of multiple texts comprising cultural knowledge might be introduced to learners for the attainment of competence in using language patterns. By and large, the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching (2002) defines language attitudes as follows:

> The attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language. Language attitudes may have an effect on second language or foreign language learning. The measurement of language attitudes pro vides information which is useful in language teaching and language learning. (p.297)

Research carried out in the area of attitude and attitude formation reveals that attitudes and beliefs are associated, and attitudes and behaviors are also connected; furthermore, attitudes are fundamentally divided into likes and dislikes (Siragusa & Dixon, 2008). With the intention of being able to assess the students' attitudes, some definitions of the term 'attitude' are given. In a definition proposed by Al-Mamun, Rahman, Rahman, and Hossaim (2012), the term 'attitude' was described as a psychological construct which defines a particular behavior. To Brown (2001, as cited in Eshghinejad, 2016), attitude is exemplified by a large proportion of emotional involvement such as feelings, self, relationships in the community. Learning could not come about easily except students have positive attitudes toward it on one hand, and attitudes might initiate from life experiences, instead. As such, then attitude can affect success or failure in learning it plays a very vital role.

Generally, attitudes toward different cultures can be different from one approach to another. Two principal approaches to dealing with the various interracial tensions and stratifications are multiculturalism and colorblindness. Multiculturalism is a response to cultural and religious diversity (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2003). From one hand, it can be mentioned that multiculturalism suggests that group differences should be acknowledged, considered, and celebrated (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2003). In contrast, there is colorblindness, also known as race blindness. Colorblindness offers that racial categories do not matter and should not be taking into consideration (Richeson &

Nussbaum, 2003). The premise for this approach is that social categories should be dismantled and disregarded in an attempt to create equal treatment for all, as individual parts of a collective group (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2003). There is research to support and advocate both approaches.

Besides theoretical support, there needs to be some empirical background to support the practicality of the study. Therefore, the researcher has referred to the following related studies, to establish a practical basis to the variables under question. In one study, as discussed by Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011), they endeavored to clarify attitude and motivation. They tried to define what is an attitude and How is it formed, and that can it be changed, and how can we change it if it is unfavorable. They assert that range of individual preferences, beliefs, values, or attitudes is staggering. They believe that there are numerous details why this is true. Breer and Loccke (as cited in Oroujlou and Vahedi 2011) have tried a complete list: A complete explanation , of the extensive diversity in individual attitudes, would apparently include references to family socialization, peer group influence, specific events in the individual's past, sources of anxiety, basic strivings, mechanisms of defense, education, income, occupation, mass media, class affiliation, residence, religion, and host of personal variables including intelligence, age, sex, interests, and aptitudes. Let us now look at a specific definition of attitude.

In another study, Topala (2014) conducted a study on the effectiveness of the learning attitudes and reports great importance of it in the process of learning. Firstly, he points to the recent discussions concerning learning and its optimization through focusing on non-intellectual features which impact the performance. Afterward he clarifies and states that on the attitude and motivational features acted in the learning process, which have a "holistic" and "inter-determined" approach, in the sense of a constructive alignment (Biggs cited in Topala,2014), on the perceptions about meaning and relevance (Entwistle, as cited in Topala,2014), expectancies (Wigfield, & Eccles, cited in Topala,2014) and teacher and student approaches on the teaching performance, with all that it involves , from design to implementation to assessment and evaluation.

What's more, Jabeen and Shah (2011), also in a study examined the role of culture in learners 'attitudes. They reported that respondents had a strongly negative attitude towards the teaching of target language culture. They also assert that it gets evident that there are protuberant educational and economic background-based changes in learners' attitude towards the teaching of target language culture in the ELT classroom. They had found out that learning objectives had a vigorous role in determining / influencing learners' attitude towards the teaching of target language culture. Their results have supreme importance regarding language teaching practices.

Still, in another study, Karaman (2016) investigated a study on teachers and learners' attitudes towards culture and culture learning in a Turkish context. He states that his occasionally displays similar results and from time to time different results. He believes that in short, it can be said that learners learn and teachers teach what they perceive as important and only that much. Namely, language teachers and students consider the concept of intercultural competence more often. He further adds that if this reality is perceived by both parties then we are one step close to the reality of the practicality of

including cultural basics in classrooms. As perceived in the study, he says, learners are essentially prepared to receive and take in the cultural knowledge, therefore the next step is in our range and attainable. He asserts there are learners expecting who are fully aware of their serious need for new cultural knowledge and ready to obtain and comprise this knowledge as a complementary factor of their "communicative competence".

Ching Ho (1998) investigated the ability of culture studies to motivate the Taiwanese junior high school students to learn English. He tried to find out the relationship between students' interests in culture studies and their orientations, attitudes and motivations towards learning English. A sample of 480 students was asked to fill a questionnaire which aimed at evaluating their desire to learn culture studies in EFL classes. Results revealed that students were interested in knowing more about the English speaking countries. Additionally, culture studies are beneficial since they tried to increase Taiwanese students' motivation to learn English.

Also, Dweik and Al-sayyed (2015) investigated the attitudes of 156 EFL Jordanian students and 30 teachers towards including culture in EFL learning. To achieve the goals of their study, data were collected through questionnaires. Results indicated that both EFL teachers and students had positive attitudes towards teaching /learning the British culture during EFL classes.

It is worth to mention that learners' attitudes are amongst the most important factors influencing learning. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to find out the learners' attitudes towards cultural familiarity. Having this purpose in mind, the researchers tried to answer the following research question:

- What are the attitudes of Iranian intermediate participants towards the role of cultural familiarity?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 60 female Iranian EFL language learners with the age range of 18-21 participated in this study. The participants were selected from Turkish backgrounds. They were selected from five intact classes based on their performance on the proficiency test. They were chosen out of an accessible population pool of 80 Iranian EFL students. Those whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were through convenience sampling considered as the final sample. They have been studying English for more than 7 years at Irandoostan institute in Tabriz, Iran.

Instruments

To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their language proficiency, a sample of Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered. Yet, due to practical issues, only the reading and listening subtests of standardized preliminary English Test (PET) were administered to the intermediate learners. The reading test comprised 35 reading comprehension questions that participants answered in one hour and thirty minutes. Each of the items bear one score. In addition, the listening test comprised 25 listening

items including multiple-choice, gap-fill, and true/false items that participants answered in 36 minutes. Each of the items bear one score.

Moreover, a cultural attitude questionnaire adopted from Abbasian, Kouhpayehzadeh, and Asgharpour (2016) was distributed among Iranian intermediate participants to fill out the questionnaire in 10 minutes. The cultural attitude questionnaire includes 8 items on a 4 point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Very much" to 4 "Not at all" that participant should point out their attitude towards source and target culture. Besides, the questionnaire emphasized on four areas including history and geography, the values and beliefs, target cultural expressions, and life style and customs. The internal consistency of the questionnaire, calculated through Cronbach's alpha, was .865, indicating a high reliability of the questionnaire. The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by two experienced teachers.

Design

The design of the study was quantitative. The variables of this study were method on cultural familiarity and learners' attitudes.

Procedure

After obtaining the required permissions to conduct the study, first of all, the reading and listening subtests of standardized preliminary English Test (PET) as a proficiency test were administered to 80 Iranian intermediate participants to be sure of their homogeneity level. However, due to practical issues, and the focus of the present study, only the reading and listening subtests of Preliminary English Test (PET) were administered. The participants whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected; thus, the number of participants decreased to 60. Then, the participants completed the cultural attitude questionnaire adopted from Abbasian, Kouhpayehzadeh, and Asgharpour (2016), which was administered with the interval of one session after the PET test. The participants filled out the questionnaire in 10 minutes. The cultural attitude questionnaire includes 8 items on a 4 point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Very much" to 4 "Not at all" that participant should point out their attitude towards source and target culture. It should be mentioned that the internal consistency of the questionnaire, calculated through Cronbach's alpha, was .865, indicating a high reliability of the questionnaire. The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by two experienced teachers.

RESULTS

The research question concerned the attitudes of Iranian intermediate participants towards cultural familiarity. To compare the items of the cultural familiarity attitude questionnaire quantitatively, descriptive statistics was computed. The learners' attitudes towards culture familiarity by considering items' frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Frequencies of the Iranian EFL Participants'
Attitudes towards Source and Target Culture Items

	Very Much	Much	A little	Not at All	
Questions	*f (%)*	*f (%)*	*f (%)*	*f (%)*	*M (SD)*
Target Culture					
1. How important it is to learn about the geography and history of the target culture?	10(33.3)	7(23.3)	8(26.7)	5(16.7)	2.27(1.11)
3. How much do you like to learn about values and beliefs in the target culture?	12(40.00)	10(33.3)	4(13.3)	4(13.3)	2.07(1.01)
5. To what extent should English instructor be concerned with target cultural expressions such as literature, music, and movie?	12(40.00)	6(20.00)	3(10.00)	9(30.00)	2.10(.96)
7. How much do you think learners need to get information about life style and customs in the target culture?	5(16.7)	4(13.3)	8(26.7)	13(43.3)	2.20(1.03)
Source Culture					
2. How important do you think it is to learn about the geography and history of the source culture?	5(16.7)	6(20.00)	9(30.00)	10(33.03)	2.23(1.07)
4. How much do you like to learn about values and beliefs in the source culture?	9(30.00)	8(26.7)	6(20.00)	7(23.3)	2.37(1.10)
6. To what extent should English instructor be concerned with source cultural expressions such as literature, music, and movie?	10(33.3)	9(30.00)	7(23.3)	4(13.3)	2.17(1.05)
8. How much do you think learners need to get information about life style and customs in the source culture?	5(16.7)	7(23.3)	11(36.7)	7(23.3)	2.67(1.03)

According to Table 1, a lot of the participants (56.6 %) agree with learning about the geography and history of target culture. As well, most of the participants (73.3 %) want to learn about the values and beliefs of target culture. In addition, a large majority of the participants (60%) think that the English teacher should provide target cultural expressions such as literature, movie, and music, but most of the participants (44.33 %) do not want to learn about life style and customs of target culture. On the other hand, most of the participants (63.3%) do not agree with learning about geography and history of source culture, while a lot of the participants (56.7%) want to learn about the values and beliefs of source culture in the English classrooms. Moreover, a lot of participants (63.3%) think that English teacher should provide source culture expressions such as literature, music, and movie. Also, a few numbers of the participants (60%) want to learn about life style and customs of source culture in the English classrooms.

Therefore, it can be concluded that more than half of the participants believe that target culture is important in English learning classes, but a few number of participants do not think that target culture is important in English learning classes. What's more, a lot of the participants do not consider source culture as an important factor in English learning classes.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of cultural attitude questionnaire through descriptive statistics indicated that students had a more positive attitude towards target culture in language learning classes. The finding of the present study is in line with the findings of Rafieyan, Abdul Majid, and Eng (2013). They also provided positive support for this belief that language learners have overall positive attitudes toward the learning of target language culture. This positive attitude was evident within affective, behavioral, and more significantly cognitive domains. In the same way, the finding of the present study is consistent with the findings of Malessa (2011) who found that students had a positive attitude towards culture. The same, the finding of the present study is in line with the findings of Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) who found that culture learning is important in language learning classes. Students had a positive attitude about culture learning.

Also, the finding of the study conducted by Topala (2014) supports the findings of the present study in which he reached the conclusion that attitude and motivation are important factors in language learning. Yet, the finding of the present study is consistent with the findings of Dweik and Al-sayyed (2015) in which they found that both teachers and students had positive attitudes towards learning British culture.

On the other hand, the finding of the present study is not in line with the findings of Jabeen and Shah (2011) who found that most of students had a negative attitude towards learning target culture. It can be due to the fact that they also assert that it gets evident that there are protuberant educational and economic background-based changes in learners' attitude towards the teaching of target language culture in the ELT classroom. They had found out that learning objectives had a vigorous role in determining/ influencing learners' attitude towards the teaching of target language culture.

CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to investigate Iranian intermediate EFL learners' attitude towards culture familiarity. The results indicated that more than half of the participants believe that target culture is important in English learning classes, but a few numbers of participants do not think that target culture is important in English learning classes. What's more, a lot of the participants do not consider source culture as an important factor in English learning classes. Therefore, the finding of the present study suggests that developing cultural awareness in the language learning classroom is of paramount importance in which teachers can help their students distinguish between the cultural norms, beliefs, or habits of the majority within the speech community and the individual of their own culture. As well, students should be enabled to discuss the culture norms or beliefs of their own source culture with their foreign-speaking friends at the same time that they are provided with a real experiential content. In the present study, the attitudes of Iranian intermediate EFL learners towards culture familiarity was examined. Without doubt, eradicating the limitations imposed upon the present study, such as the small sample size or the amount of time, more research is needed to investigate various factors which might be associated with attitude, such as perceptions, intercultural competence, self-concepts and the like which all can have a role in students' cultural familiarity.

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