DOI 10.47176/kurmanj.6.1.1

Original Article

SRPH

KURMANJ, 2024; 6(1): 1-6

The Importance of Cultural Education in English Language Teaching: Perspectives from Iranian Teachers

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Received: 30 October, 2023
Accepted: 08 March, 2024
Published: 25 March, 2024

ABSTRACT

In the realm of English language instruction, the intrinsic link between language and culture has consistently been a subject of interest from various viewpoints. Presently, the primary objective of foreign language education is social interaction, surpassing mere linguistic exchange. Despite the profound interrelation between language and culture in foreign language acquisition, cultural learning has not been incorporated into curriculum objectives. This research aimed to explore the perceptions of Iranian English teachers regarding the importance of cultural instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Data were gathered using a questionnaire adapted from Han (2010), distributed among 35 Iranian English teachers in Mashhad (15 males and 20 females) to gain insights into their views. The results indicated unanimous agreement among the teachers on the importance of cultural instruction in EFL settings. The findings underscored that language teaching and cultural instruction should be intertwined.

Keywords: *English Language Teaching, Cultural Instruction, Social Interaction, Iranian Teachers' Perceptions*

Introduction

The process of teaching a second or foreign language extends beyond merely enhancing learners' linguistic abilities; it also encompasses the instruction of the target culture [1]. This is because language and culture are closely intertwined, and understanding a language also involves understanding the culture inherent in the language [2]. As such, foreign language instruction often addresses cultural issues, and teachers are often called upon to explain the cultures associated with the language being taught [3]. As highlighted by Englebert (2004) [4], the act of teaching a foreign language is intrinsically linked to imparting knowledge about the culture of that language. The interconnection between culture and language is undeniable, as emphasized by Kramsch (1991) [5], who posits that they exist within a unified realm of experience. Moran and Lu (2001, p. 35) further elaborate that the language's words, expressions, structures, sounds, and scripts are a reflection of its culture, just as cultural products and practices mirror the language [6]. Hence, language serves as a portal into the culture. Culture encapsulates the lifestyle of a group of people, encompassing their ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools during a specific time period, as defined by Brown (2007, p. 380) [7]. Sercu (2005) asserts that teaching a foreign language in a classroom setting entails introducing learners to a culturally distinct world [8].

The primary objective of studying any language is to be able to communicate, either orally or in writing [9]. This is particularly true for foreign language acquisition, where the goal is to use the language appropriately in intercultural communication [10]. However, mere words are insufficient in this endeavor. As Baker (2015) points out, it is the cultural context that imbues words with value and significance. This suggests that for meaningful communication to occur, culture must be woven into the

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[DOI: 10.47176/kurmanj.6.1.1]

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fabric of foreign language instruction and learning [11]. Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) propose that the aim of cultural instruction is to heighten learners' awareness and expand their understanding of both the target culture and their own [12]. Kaikkonen (2014, p.64) further asserts that the paramount goal of foreign language education is to facilitate learners' transcendence beyond the confines of their native language and culture [13].

While the fusion of language and culture in foreign language education is crucial, the development of cultural learning and teaching within curriculum objectives has been overlooked [14,15]. Genc and Bada (2005) argue that the absence of cultural instruction results in learners recognizing that their skills, grammar, or vocabulary alone is insufficient for meaningful communication [16]. This suggests that without the appropriate cultural knowledge of the target language, the process of teaching and learning a foreign language remains flawed and incomplete. However, factors such as time constraints, lack of knowledge, and inadequate training often deter teachers from incorporating culture into language classrooms. Furthermore, in certain contexts, an excessive focus on teaching the culture of the foreign language may be perceived as promoting the foreign culture at the expense of the local one.

Review of literature

Culture holds a crucial role in the advancement of language learning. As defined by Williams (1995), culture is the totality of a way of life [17]. Kenneth Chastain (1988) describes culture as the manner in which people live, signifying different things to different individuals. Samovar, Porter [18], and Jain (1981) emphasize that culture and language are intertwined, as culture determines how people encode meanings in various contexts [19]. The discourse on the relationship between language and culture has been ongoing, with diverse perspectives emerging from multiple disciplinary viewpoints over the years. Numerous studies have been conducted to demonstrate the impact of teaching foreign language culture in the classroom, identifying several beneficial strategies and techniques for classroom implementation.

A study by Bayyurt (2000) in 25 different EFL classrooms in public and private primary and secondary schools in Istanbul, Turkey sought to understand the attitudes of non-native EFL teachers towards the cultural norms of the foreign language they were teaching. The findings indicated that while teachers were keen on enhancing their students' awareness of the target language's cultural values, there was a concern that non-native teachers might not be fully cognizant of these cultural values [20].

Sercu (2002) explored whether Flemish, English, French, and German teachers support intercultural objectives and are willing to promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence through their foreign language teaching. The data analysis revealed that Flemish foreign language teachers were supportive of interculturalizing foreign language and were willing to develop intercultural communicative competence in their students [21].

Mao (2009) examined the factors that necessitate and influence the teaching of culture in EFL classrooms to present a model of culture teaching in China. He argued that to ensure successful cross-cultural communication in real situations and to achieve a better understanding of the English language, it is crucial to reconsider the importance of cultural factors in EFL classrooms and to include the teaching of culture into the teaching of English [22].

Ho (2009) studied the place of cultural content in tertiary EFL teaching in Vietnam and the effect of intercultural language learning on learners' EFL learning. He critically analyzed the underlying assumptions about culture in two traditional EFL textbook units currently used in a Vietnamese university. The cultural components of the units were then proposed through a set of standards for intercultural language learning drawn from the literature. The proposed cultural components were expected to raise learners' cultural awareness and engage them cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively in culture learning [14].

Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011) explored the degree to which EFL teachers retain their home culture, and the influence of six demographic factors (age, length of bilingualism, knowledge of other languages, length of teaching experience, gender, and marital status) on their attachment to their home culture. The study involved 342 male and female teachers who completed a questionnaire on home culture dependency. The findings indicated that teachers did not exhibit a strong attachment to their home culture, and those with more exposure to foreign cultures showed moderate attachment to their home culture. Younger teachers were found to be less attached to their home culture compared to older teachers, who demonstrated greater appreciation and respect for their own culture. Teachers who knew another language (Asian or European) in addition to Farsi and English showed less attachment to Iranian culture. The study also found that the longer the

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teaching experience, the stronger the attachment to home culture. However, gender did not significantly affect the teachers' attachment to their home culture [23].

Khajavi and Abbasian (2011) conducted a study to examine the cultural pattern of English language materials taught at schools in Iran to determine whether these materials are appropriate in terms of national identity and globalization. The content analysis of the materials revealed that the authors avoided the cultural patterns of foreign countries, resulting in textbooks that are neutral in terms of teaching foreign language culture [24].

Mohammadi & Izadpanah (2019) investigated the relationship between Iranian learners' sociocultural identity and their EFL learning. The study involved 360 intermediate and advanced English learners in Zanjan. A questionnaire of Identity adapted from Cheek (2013) was used to assess the learners' sociocultural identity. The data analysis indicated a negative relationship between learners' sociocultural identity and their EFL learning [25].

Today, many studies in foreign language teaching focus on the role of culture and the development of cultural awareness in EFL classrooms. Although much research has been conducted on cultural awareness in EFL classrooms from various aspects, there is limited research examining it in an Iranian EFL context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the status of teaching culture in an Iranian educational context. The study seeks to answer the following question: What are the perceptions of Iranian English teachers regarding the necessity of teaching culture in EFL contexts?

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 35 Iranian EFL teachers in Mashhad who were chosen randomly. The participant group comprised both males (15) and females (20), ranging in age from 20 to 39. Within this group, 21 teachers were aged between 20 and 29, while 14 were aged between 30 and 39. In terms of teaching experience, 18 teachers had less than 5 years, 13 had between 5 and 9 years, and 4 had between 10 and 20 years.

Instrument

To achieve the study's objective, a questionnaire was adapted from Han's (2010) work [26]. The questionnaire was initially prepared and sent to schools and trainers in the teaching college. After a pilot run and group discussion, the questions were refined. The survey questionnaire was developed, taking into account previous surveys on teachers' perceptions of cultural teaching conducted in a European context. For instance, the researchers of CULTNET, a network of researchers focusing on intercultural aspects in foreign language education, conducted an international survey in 2001. Additionally, a research project led by Michael Byram and Karen Risager between 1992 and 1994 in England and Denmark, which explored teachers' views about culture, was also considered. The original questionnaire consisted of 6 parts with 26 questions. However, for this study, only 12 questions related to teachers' perceptions toward teaching culture were adapted from Han's (2010) study. The questionnaire comprised 12 items formatted in a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). To assess the content validity of the questionnaire, subject matter professors were asked to review and validate it. Furthermore, to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha index was estimated, and it was found to be .955.

Data collection and Analysis Procedure

A questionnaire, adapted from Han's (2010) work, was distributed to 35 Iranian English teachers, including 15 males and 20 females, to gauge their perceptions regarding the importance of teaching culture in EFL contexts. A validated semi-structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items was administered to various Iranian English teachers. The Likert-scale items were assigned a numerical value ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Upon gathering the data from the participants, the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software, version 26.00, was employed for data analysis. Descriptive statistics and mean values were calculated for each item, and one-sample t-test analyses were performed to assess teachers' perceptions regarding the necessity of teaching culture in EFL contexts.

Result

As per the data presented in Table 1, it can be observed that the average scores for Items 1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 were significantly above the midpoint (3=theoretical mean of the population). Conversely, Items 3, 4, and 6 scored significantly lower than the mean score. Items 2 and 9 hovered around the mean, with no significant difference between teachers' responses and the theoretical mean score of the population. Overall, the teachers' perceptions toward teaching culture in EFL contexts were positive, with the majority agreeing on its necessity in the EFL classroom.

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As per Table 2, significant disparities were observed between the teachers' responses for Items 1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 and the theoretical mean of the population (3); with t = 17.405, p = .000 < .05 for Item1, t = 22.494, p = .000 < .05 for Item5, t = 14.102, p = .000 < .05 for Item7, t = 22.494, p = .000 < .05 for Item8, t = 13.047, p = .000 < .05 for Item 10, t = 15.099, p = .000 < .05 for Item11, and t = 26.492, p = .000 < .05 for Item12. This implies that teachers' views on the following were positive and exceeded the theoretical mean of the population (3): the importance of cultural education in a foreign language classroom (Item1), their desire to enhance intercultural competence through teaching (Item5), the belief that foreign language teaching should not only introduce foreign cultures but also deepen students' understanding of their own culture and identity (Item8), the idea that providing cultural information increases students' tolerance towards other cultures and peoples (Item7), the notion that every subject, not just foreign language teaching, should promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence (Item10), the responsibility of a foreign language teacher to present a realistic image of a foreign culture, including its negative aspects (Item11), and the suggestion to include a section on 'how to teach culture' in the teaching methods course (Item12).

Significant differences were found between the teachers' responses for Items 3, 4, and 6 and the theoretical mean of the population (3); with t = -4.188, p = .000 < .05 for Item3, t = -13.356, p = .000 < .05 for Item4, and t = -9.337, p = .000 < .05 for Item6. This suggests that teachers' views on the following were negative and below the theoretical mean of the population (3): the belief that intercultural competence cannot be acquired at school (Item3), the idea that it is impossible to teach the foreign language and foreign culture in an integrated way (Item4), and the notion that cultural teaching has no effect whatsoever on students' attitudes (Item6).

There were no significant differences between the teachers' responses for Items 2 and 9 and the theoretical mean of the population (3); with t = .205, p = .839 > .05 for Item2, and t = -1.725, p = .095 > .05 for Item9. This indicates that teachers' responses to the following were around the theoretical mean of the population (3): the assertion that students must possess a sufficiently high level of proficiency in the foreign language before they can teach culture or address the intercultural dimension of foreign language teaching (Item2), and the belief that when they only have a limited number of teaching periods, culture teaching has to give way to language teaching (Item9).

Table 1 - An Analysis of the Perceptions of Iranian English Educators Regarding the Integration of Culture in EFL Instruction

Items	Frequency	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Q1	35	4.7000	.53498	.09767
Q2	35	3.0333	.88992	.16248
Q3	35	2.3000	.91539	.16713
Q4	35	1.4667	.62881	.11480
Q5	35	4.7667	.43018	.07854
Q6	35	1.5333	.86037	.15708
Q7	35	4.6000	.62146	.11346
Q8	35	4.7667	.43018	.07854
Q9	35	2.7000	.95231	.17387
Q10	35	4.5000	.62972	.11497
Q11	35	4.5667	.56832	.10376
Q12	35	4.8333	.37905	.06920

Table 2 - An Analysis of the Perceptions of Iranian English Educators Regarding the Integration of Culture in EFL Instruction

Items	t-value	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95%confidence Interval of the differences
				Lower Upper
Q1	17.405	.000	1.70000	1.5003 1.8997
Q2	.205	.839	.03333	-.2991 .3657
Q3	-4.188	.000	-.70000	-1.0419 -.3582
Q4	-13.356	.000	-1.53333	-1.7681 -1.2985
Q5	22.494	.000	1.76667	1.6060 1.9274

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Q6	-9.337	.000	-1.46667	-1.7879 -1.1454
Q7	14.102	.000	1.60000	1.3679 1.8321
Q8	22.494	.000	1.76667	1.6060 1.9273
Q9	-1.725	.095	-.30000	-.6556 .0556
Q10	13.047	.000	1.50000	1.2649 1.7351
Q11	15.099	.000	1.56667	1.3545 1.7789
Q12	26.492	.000	1.83333	1.6918 1.9749

Discussion

The examination of the data regarding the perceptions of Iranian English teachers on the importance of cultural education in EFL settings revealed a consensus on its necessity. As indicated by Items 1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12, the majority of teachers held the view that cultural education is as crucial as language instruction in a foreign language classroom. They expressed a desire to foster intercultural competence, believed in the interconnectedness of foreign and local cultures, and felt that cultural knowledge enhances students' tolerance. They also agreed that all subjects should contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, and that teachers should present a realistic, including negative aspects, image of foreign cultures. They further suggested the inclusion of a section on 'how to teach culture' in textbooks.

However, as per Items 3, 4, and 6, teachers disagreed with the notions that intercultural competence cannot be acquired at school, that it is impossible to integrate language and cultural teaching, and that cultural instruction has no impact on students' attitudes. Regarding Items 2 and 9, teachers held neutral views on the prerequisites of cultural instruction, such as the need for students to have a high level of language proficiency before cultural teaching can commence, and the trade-off between cultural and language teaching when teaching periods are limited. Thus, it can be concluded that Iranian English teachers significantly value the integration of cultural education in EFL contexts.

Conclusion

The primary challenge confronting Iranian learners is the insufficient cultural exposure in their English courses. It's crucial for language learners to understand culturally appropriate ways of addressing people, greeting, expressing needs, and agreeing or disagreeing. When EFL teachers involve students in activities related to the target culture, they seize an opportunity to optimize the learning process. In essence, these activities enable teachers to assign diverse dynamic roles in the classroom and social setting. Therefore, merely learning grammar and structure is not sufficient for mastering a foreign or second language. It's important to note that comprehending the cultural context of everyday conversation extends beyond the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences. Students need to be informed about both the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of the target language. Teachers need to be adequately trained to meet the learners' needs. To prepare language teachers to understand the importance of culture, teacher education programs should be revised and potentially include courses like intercultural communication to equip prospective teachers with intercultural awareness and competence. As language teachers become more knowledgeable and competent in this area, they will be better equipped to integrate cultural practices into their teaching and meet the learners' needs. This study underscores the importance of teaching culture to students in EFL contexts.

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Citation: Zahedi Moghaddam S, Moosavi SF. The Importance of Cultural Education in English Language Teaching: Perspectives from Iranian Teachers. KURMANJ, 2024; 6(1): 1-6.

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