

Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Target and Source Cultures

Gholam-Reza Abbasian^{*1}, Mojgan Kouhpayehzadeh², Gholamreza Asgharpour³

1. Imam Ali university and Department of English, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

2, 3. Department of English, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*Corresponding author: gabbasian@gmail.com

Received: 2016.2.19

Revisions received: 2016.4.28

Accepted: 2016.8.9

Abstract

Maintaining that language and culture are interwoven to the extent that learning the former is largely dependent on the latter, this study aimed to investigate the attitude of Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners of Tehran South Branch of Islamic Azad University (both undergraduates and postgraduates) towards the learning of the cultural aspects of language, both the target and source cultures, in their EFL classrooms. To this end, a quantitative approach was employed and a Likert scale questionnaire was designed. Fifty EFL learners were randomly invited to answer the questionnaire in relation to their attitude being exposed to the culture of target language. The findings of the chi-square test indicated that the Iranian undergraduate and postgraduate EFL learners consider culture as an important element in learning the target language. Both the culture of the source language and the culture of the target language were deemed important while learning a second language. The findings of this study also showed that postgraduate EFL learners have more intension to learn more about the culture of both source and target language than undergraduate EFL learners in Iran.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Target Culture, Source Culture

Introduction

English language is a widespread international language for communication all over the world today. As an international language, more and more varieties of English have formed and developed with numerous distinctive features (MacArthur, 2002). English is used as a medium of communication by people who do not speak the same first language (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The fact that English is universally recognized as a medium of communication has led to new insights into a variety of issues such as the discussion of standard English and English Imperialism (House, 2003). However, in today's globalized world the development of English seems inevitable, and it is probably futile to reject the trend. The spread and use of English is also prominent in Iran due to several reasons. A vast majority of Iranian learners choose English speaking universities to continue their studies, and thus they need to learn English as a foreign language. Also academic researchers learn English to expand their studies and present articles or papers to English speaking communities, and the trend has enormously increased in recent decades (Erfani, 2014). Furthermore, Iranian businessmen need to learn English in order to promote their activities and business. Most sources of books, journals, movies, and music are produced and published in the English language, and also most of the content in Internet is in English, so English language learning is very valuable for Iranian learners.

Additionally, languages are integral parts of cultures, and there is a close relationship between a language and the culture of the community it is spoken in; therefore, in teaching/learning a language, the culture must also be taught/learned. Language and culture are closely related to each other, as the process of language learning always involves learning cultural concepts (Erfani, 2014).

Culture has always been considered a significant part of any language teaching/learning situation (Akbari, 2008). Due to the importance of culture in any language teaching in general and English language teaching in particular, many researchers and professionals including Gray (2000) and Kramsch (1993) have been interested in this field of study during the recent decades. Such researches are focused on teaching English language culture.

The opponents of teaching English language culture maintain that it strengthens the cultural hegemony of English (Western) culture.

Gray (2000) suggested that topics of ELT textbooks are selected in such a way that target culture appears to offer values that are superior to those of the source culture. On the other hand, the proponents of teaching target culture maintain that in order to learn English for the purpose of communicating with the users of this language and in order to have a successful communication, it is a must for the learners to be familiar with the cultural norms of English speakers. A new trend has recently emerged emphasizing the teaching of intercultural competence. It is defined as “the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 13). Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate successfully with the people of other cultures. The proponents of this new trend believe that in order to understand the cultural concepts of perception, thinking, feeling, and acting, the learners should gain intercultural competence (Byram, 2000; Corbett, 2003; Fantini, 2009). This paper surveys the Iranian learners’ attitudes towards the source culture and target culture.

The issue of culture teaching has been the subject of interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction. Earlier models (Brooks, 1975; Nostrand, 1974) tended to view culture as a relatively invariable and static entity made up of accumulated, classifiable, observable, thus eminently teachable and learnable “facts.” This view focused on behavior at surface level, and did not see the underlying orientations of values, nor did it recognize the variability of behavior within the community of the target culture, the individual’s participative role in the creation of culture, or the interaction of language and culture in the making of meaning (Moore, 1991).

By contrast, the more recent models of Jorstad (1981), Seelye (1981, 1994), Crawford Lange and Lange (1984), Byram (1989), and Kramsch (1993), have all proposed for integrating culture and language teaching. These works share a common conceptual core and set of intricately related assumptions regarding the teaching and learning of culture. They see culture

as dynamic and variable, i.e., it is constantly changing, its members display a great range of behaviors and different levels of attention to the guiding value orientations, and meaning is continuously being constructed through human interaction and communication.

This major transformation in perspective has also been characterized by conceptual shifts from culture-specific to culture-general models of intercultural competence, cultural stereotypes to cultural generalizations, cultural absolutes to cultural variations (within and across cultures), and culture as distinct from language to culture as integral to language. Language in this process plays a fascinating and complex double role: it is a medium for as well as shaper of culture.

Language and culture cannot be taught separately (Alpetkin, 2002; Corbett, 2003) and there is a need for culture teaching in EFL classes (McKay, 2002). To define culture is not an easy task because this concept consists of many aspects. According to Moran (2001, p. 23) “culture is evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts”. Corbett (2003, p. 20) believes that “the culture of a group can be considered the relationship between its core beliefs and values, and the patterns of behavior, art and communication that the group produces, bearing in mind that these beliefs and values are constantly being negotiated within the group”, while Kramsch (1998, p.127) states culture as “membership in a discourse that share a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting”.

A lot of studies have been concerned with the importance of the relationship between culture and language in general and cultural and language teaching/learning in particular. They demonstrate that there is an indispensable relationship between culture and language teaching/learning (Byram, 1997; Erfani, 2014). Culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively.

In this newer perspective, the learning goals shift from the memorization of cultural facts (including sociolinguistic conventions for language use) to higher order learning outcomes including: the acquisition of “interactional competence” (a term suggested by Allen and Moore at the 1996 culture conference in Minneapolis) and learning how to learn about culture. According to Paige (1997), such learning would include:

- 1) Learning about the self as a cultural being,
- 2) Learning about culture and its impact on human communication, behavior, and identity,
- 3) culture-general learning, i.e., learning about universal, cross-cultural phenomena such as cultural adjustment,
- 4) culture-specific learning, i.e., learning about a particular culture, including its language, and,
- 5) Learning how to learn, i.e., becoming an effective language and culture learner.

Culture and language learning involve a dynamic relationship between the situation and the actors in which cultural context, prior experience, and other factors come into play (Street, 1993).

Putting culture at the core of language education means preparing learners to be the learners of culture. Thus, it is never enough to find and accept someone else’s static definitions of the culture. Words and their meaning are linked to a cultural context, and language and cultural patterns change over time and vary according to the situation. To become effective culture learners, learners must develop a variety of learning strategies ranging from reflective observation to active experimentation or what is often referred to as „experiential learning“ style. Most importantly it is knowing how to learn from the context while immersed in it, or what Hughes (1986) refers to as “learning how to learn.” The purpose of this study is that to show the Iranian learners’ attitude towards source culture and target culture and the position of teaching culture in the process of English language learning.

1. What are the Iranian EFL learners’ attitudes towards target culture?
2. What are the Iranian EFL learners’ attitudes towards source culture?

3. Is there any statistically significant difference between the learners' attitudes towards source and target cultures?
4. Is there any statistically significant difference in learners' attitudes towards source and target cultures in relation to the learners' language proficiency levels?

Method

Participants

In this study, the participants were chosen randomly from the learners of bachelor's program (undergraduate) and master's program (postgraduate) in the field of English language teaching, in Tehran South Branch of Islamic Azad University in Iran. The participants of this study were 50 female and male learners (table 1). The source culture of the participants is the Persian culture and the target culture of them is the English culture. In order to maintain the validity of the findings, age and educational background were controlled for minimum of potential interfering variables. A sample of 25 undergraduate and 25 postgraduate learners of English language teaching filled out the questionnaire, which revealed the details of their ideas about source culture and target culture.

Instrumentation

To examine the answers to research questions, a descriptive survey-based approach was adopted using a questionnaire submitted to a total number of 50 undergraduate and postgraduate Iranian learners majoring in the English language teaching in Tehran South Branch of Islamic Azad University.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed by the researchers to find out the attitudes of the learners towards source and target culture teaching in the EFL classes.

Procedure

In this stage, researchers asked the participants to give their opinions on eight questions of the questionnaire based on four-point Likert scale ranging from very much, much, a little, not at all. Before the actual administration of the questionnaire, it was carefully studied and revised. The researchers examined a number of questionnaires developed by other scholars (e.g.

Guilherme, 2002, Nault, 2006, Erfani, 2014) to adopt and modify the questionnaire items. The questionnaire had two main parts: the participants' personal demographic information, and their evaluation of source culture and target culture in ELT courses. To establish the content validity of the questionnaire, it was sent to a group of experts in applied linguistics to judge the relevance of the items to the source and target culture questionnaire. In order to prevent any misunderstandings, the questionnaire was translated into the participants' L1 (i.e., Persian). To check the reliability, the answers were analyzed with SPSS and by using Cronbach alpha, and alpha coefficient of 0.79 was gained. The questionnaire was finally prepared upon some modifications based on the feedbacks obtained.

Table 1
Demographic information of the EFL learners

Features	Number of Learners (50)	Percentage
Gender :		
Male	15	30%
Female	35	70%
Postgraduate Learners:		
Freshman	10	40%
Senior	15	60%
Undergraduate Learners:		
Freshman	15	60%
Senior	10	40%
Age:		
18-22	32	64%
22-30	11	22%
30-42	7	14%

Results

The responses of the participants to the questionnaires were gathered and analyzed. The questionnaire focused on four areas including: history and geography, the values and beliefs, target cultural expressions, and life style and customs.

Regarding the research question #1 (the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards target culture), the following results were achieved. A majority of

the learners (64%) do not agree with learning about history and geography of the target culture in their EFL classrooms while a little more than half of the learners (54%) like to learn about the values and beliefs in the target culture in their EFL classrooms. A large majority of the learners (72%) think that the English instructor must be concerned with providing target cultural expressions while 46% of the learners do not think they need to get information about life style and customs in the target culture. In general, more than half of the learners (54%) think that target culture learning is important in their EFL classrooms, and 46% of them do not consider it a significant factor in their EFL learning.

Table 2

Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Target Culture

Questions	Option	Total	
		count	percentage
Q1. How important do you think it is to learn about the history and geography of the target culture?	Very much	6	12%
	Much	12	24%
	A little	15	30%
	Not at all	17	34%
Q3. How much do you like to learn about values and beliefs in the target culture during the process of English learning?	Very much	11	22%
	Much	16	32%
	A little	11	22%
	Not at all	12	24%
Q5. To what extent should the English instructor be concerned with providing target cultural expressions such as literature, music, and movie?	Very much	15	30%
	Much	21	42%
	A little	8	16%
	Not at all	6	12%
Q7. How much do you think learners need to get information about life style and customs in the target culture?	Very much	13	26%
	Much	14	28%
	A little	11	22%
	Not at all	12	24%
Total Average	Very much	11.25	22.5%
	Much	15.75	31.5%
	A little	11.25	22.5%
	Not at all	11.75	23.5%

Regarding the research question #2 (the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards source culture), the following results were obtained. A majority of the learners (60%) do not agree with learning about history and geography of the source culture in their EFL classrooms while the same number of the learners (60%) like to learn about the values and beliefs in the source culture in their EFL classrooms. A large majority of the learners (66%) think that the English instructor must be concerned with providing source cultural expressions while 42% of the learners do not think they need to get information about life style and customs in the target culture. In general, more than half of the learners (56%) think that source culture learning is important in their EFL classrooms, and 44% of them do not consider it a significant factor in their EFL learning.



Table 3
 Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Source Culture

Questions	Option	Total	
		Count	Percentage
Q2. How important do you think is it to learn about the history and geography of the source culture?	Very much	10	20%
	Much	10	20%
	A little	15	30%
	Not at all	15	30%
Q4. How much do you like to learn about values and beliefs in the source culture during the process of English learning?	Very much	13	26%
	Much	17	34%
	A little	8	16%
	Not at all	12	24%
Q6. To what extent should the English instructor be concerned with providing source cultural expressions such as literature, music, and movie?	Very much	16	32%
	Much	17	34%
	A little	12	24%
	Not at all	5	10%
Q8. How much do you think learners need to get information about life style and customs in the source culture?	Very much	13	26%
	Much	16	32%
	A little	15	30%
	Not at all	6	12%
Total Average	Very much	13	26%
	Much	15	30%
	A little	12.5	25%
	Not at all	9.5	19%

As mentioned above, the four aspects of culture focused in the questionnaires filled out by the learners are: history and geography, values and beliefs, cultural expressions, and life style and customs. In respect with the research question #3 (the statistically significant difference between the learners' attitudes towards source and target culture), the following results were obtained from Table 3 below. The learners considered learning both the source and the target cultures important with a little weight on the source culture, i.e., 56% for source culture compared to 54% for the target culture. However, within each of the four aspects of the culture, there was a meaningful difference between target and source cultures. In all the four

aspects of culture, the Chi-square test result was $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ which shows a significant difference.

Table 4

Quantitative results for Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Target and Source Cultures

Cultural Aspects	Option	Target Culture		Source Culture		Sig. (Chi-square)
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	
History and geography	Very much	17	34%	15	30%	0.000
	Much	15	30%	15	30%	
	A little	12	24%	10	20%	
	Not at all	6	12%	10	20%	
Values & belief	Very much	12	24%	12	24%	0.000
	Much	11	22%	8	16%	
	A little	16	32%	17	34%	
	Not at all	11	22%	13	26%	
Cultural expressions	Very much	6	12%	5	10%	0.000
	Much	8	16%	12	24%	
	A little	21	42%	17	34%	
	Not at all	15	30%	16	32%	
Life style and customs	Very much	12	24%	6	12%	0.000
	Much	11	22%	15	30%	
	A little	14	28%	16	32%	
	Not at all	13	26%	13	26%	
Total Average	Very much	11.25	22.5%	13	26%	0.000
	Much	15.75	31.5%	15	30%	
	A little	11.25	22.5%	12.5	25%	
	Not at all	11.75	23.5%	9.5	19%	

Regarding the research question #4 (statistical difference in learners' attitudes towards source and target culture in relation to the learners' language proficiency levels), Table 4 summarizes undergraduate and postgraduate learners' attitudes towards the teaching of source culture and target culture in EFL classrooms.

According to Table 5 below, there is a significant difference between the undergraduate and the postgraduate learners' attitudes towards culture learning in their EFL classrooms. About three quarters of the postgraduate learners (72%) agreed with the importance of teaching culture in EFL courses while only 38% of the undergraduate learners believed so. Therefore, it can be concluded that the level of proficiency of the learners has a significant role in their attitudes towards culture learning in their EFL classes.

The detailed description of Table 5 is as follows.

Regarding the importance of learning about the history and geography of the target culture, none of the undergraduate learners thought learning about the history and geography of the target culture was very important, while 24% of postgraduate learners considered it very important.

Those postgraduate learners who considered learning about the history and geography of the target culture was of importance (36%) were three times more than the number of undergraduate learners who believed so (12%). However, a large majority of undergraduate learners (88%) and fewer than half of postgraduate learners (40%) did not think that learning about the history and geography of the target culture was important. Based on the chi-square test, there was a significant difference between undergraduate and postgraduate groups ($p = .004 < .05$).

In respect with learning about the history and geography of the source culture in ELT classrooms, the number of postgraduate learners who considered it very significant (28%) were more than twice as many as the undergraduate learners with same opinion (12%). The number of post and undergraduate learners was the same in believing that learning about the history and geography of the source culture was important (20%). Nearly two thirds of the undergraduate learners (68%) and around a half of the graduate learners (52%) did not consider learning about the history and geography of the source culture was important. The result of Chi-square test for Question #2 was $p = 0.519$ which indicated that there was no meaningful difference between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

Regarding the learners' attitudes towards learning about the values and beliefs of target culture, the undergraduate learners who liked to learn about values and beliefs of the target culture were more than three quarters of the

postgraduate learners (76%) while nearly a quarter of the postgraduate learners (24%) did not like to learn about the values and beliefs of the target culture which is almost one third of the number of undergraduate learners with the same attitude (68%). According to Chi-square test, it is clear that there was a significant difference ($p = .02 < .05$) between undergraduate and postgraduate learners regarding their attitude towards learning values and beliefs of target culture during the process of learning English.

The results of the data gathered from the questionnaires regarding the attitudes of the learners towards the learning of values and beliefs of the source culture show a great difference between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners, namely 40% vs. 80%. On the contrary, the number of the undergraduate learners who did not like to learn about the values and beliefs of the source culture (60%) was three times more than the postgraduate learners with the same attitude (20%). The result of the Chi-square test revealed a meaningful difference ($p = .026 < .05$) in this regard between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

Undergraduate learners who considered learning the target cultural expressions such as literature, music and movie in the classroom very important (36%) were more than graduate learners with the same opinion (24%); while for 56% of the graduate learners it was important to learn the target cultural expressions such as literature, music and movie in the classroom whereas 28% of the undergraduate learners had the same attitude. The number of postgraduate learners who did not consider learning the target cultural expressions such as literature, music and movie in the classroom important were half the number of the undergraduate learners with the same opinion. The result of the Chi-square test revealed a meaningful difference ($p = .044 < .05$) in this regard between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

Regarding the attitude of the learners towards learning the source cultural expressions such as literature, music and movie in the ELT classroom, about half of the undergraduate learners (48%) and more than four fifths of the postgraduate learners (88%) approved it while only 16% of the postgraduate learners and a little more than half of the undergraduate learners disapproved it. The result of the Chi-square test revealed a meaningful

difference ($p = .047 < .05$) in this regard between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

In response to the question of the learning of the learners about life style and customs in the target culture, about one third of the undergraduate learners (32%) believed that it was important while nearly three fourths of the postgraduate learners (76%) believed so. The result of the Chi-square test revealed a meaningful difference ($p = .017 < .05$) in this regard between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

In response to the question of the learning of the learners about life style and customs in the source culture, more than half of the undergraduate learners (56%) believed that it was not important while a great majority of the postgraduate learners (72%) believed on the contrary. The result of the Chi-square test revealed a meaningful difference ($p = .017 < .05$) in this regard between the undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

Table 5

Quantitative results for the questionnaire items of EFL in respect with undergraduate and postgraduate learners

Question	Option	Undergraduate (%)	Postgraduate (%)	Chi-square test
1. How important do you think is it to learn about the history and geography of the target culture?	Very much	0	24	$p = 0.004 < 0.05$
	Much	12	36	
	A little	40	20	
	Not at all	48	20	
2. How important do you think is it to learn about the history and geography of the source culture?	Very much	12	28	$p = 0.519 > 0.05$
	Much	20	20	
	A little	32	28	
	Not at all	36	24	
3. How much do you like to learn about values and beliefs in the target culture during the process of English learning?	Very much	12	32	$p = 0.020 < 0.05$
	Much	20	44	
	A little	32	12	
	Not at all	36	12	
4. How much do you like to learn about values and beliefs in the source culture during the process of English learning?	Very much	16	36	$p = 0.026 < 0.05$
	Much	24	44	
	A little	20	12	
	Not at all	40	8	

5.To what extent should the English instructor be concerned with providing target cultural expressions such as literature, music, and movie?	Very much	36	24	$p= 0.044<0.05$
	Much	28	56	
	A little	28	4	
	Not at all	8	16	
6. To what extent should the English instructor be concerned with providing source cultural expressions such as literature, music, and movie?	Very much	28	36	$p= 0.047<0.05$
	Much	20	48	
	A little	36	12	
	Not at all	16	4	
7. How much do you think learners need to get information about life style and customs in the target culture?	Very much	12	40	$p= 0.017<0.05$
	Much	20	36	
	A little	32	12	
	Not at all	36	12	
8. How much do you think learners need to get information about life style and customs in the source culture?	Very much	28	24	$p= 0.017<0.05$
	Much	16	48	
	A little	48	12	
	Not at all	8	16	
Total average	Very much	18%	30.5	$p= 0. <0.05$
	Much	20%	41.5	
	A little	33.5%	14	
	Not at all	28.5%	14	

Discussion

The issue of teaching and learning culture has been the subject of interest to some researchers in the field of sociolinguistics (e.g. Jorstad, 1981; Crawford Lange and Lange, 1984; Byram, 1989; Seelye, 1994). This study considered four categories of cultural learning while learning a language. These categories included (i) history and geography, (ii) values and beliefs, (iii) cultural expressions such as in literature, music and movie, and (iv) life style and customs.

The findings of the quantitative data indicated that more than 54 percent of EFL learners think that culture learning (target language) is essential in learning English. 56 percent of the learners considered learning the culture of source language important in learning English. Therefore, the participants

of this study considered the source culture (56%) more important than the target culture (54%) in second language learning. Postgraduate EFL learners, among the four categories, considered learning about literature, music and movie (84%) more important than learning about history and geography of the source culture in their classrooms (48%). Among the undergraduate EFL learners, again the most important aspect of cultural learning was the learning of target cultural expressions such as in literature, music and movie (64%) while the least important cultural aspect for these learners was the learning about the history and geography of the target culture in their ELT classrooms (12%).

In general, the findings of this study recommended that Iranian EFL learners consider this important to know about the source and target culture of a language. It deemed essential, for EFL learners, to understand the relationship between language and culture. The results from questionnaire showed that learning to communicate in a second/foreign language involves developing knowledge about the culture of source and target language. The findings of recent studies in the field (e.g. Erfani, 2014) discussed about the relationship between culture and language learning. *The results showed that although some teachers favored both source and target values in language teaching, most of them emphasized the intercultural view to language teaching and the importance of training interculturally competent learners to be able to understand the cultural concepts of perception, thinking, feeling, and acting.* Intercultural aspects, in particular, are of importance in English language teaching and learning as well (Alpetkin, 2002; Corbett, 2003). It is, therefore, suggested that language learning should include learning about culture of both source and target language.

There are also some limitations to the results of this study. The findings of this study do not consider all the sub-divisions of culture learning; for instance, customs, ethics, science, and social issues are not taken into account in this study. The number of participants was limited to 50 EFL learners and the results, therefore, could only reflect the attitude of these learners.

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Biodata

Gholam-Reza Abbasian, born in Ahar, East Azerbaijan, is an assistant professor of TEFL at Imam Ali & IA (South Tehran) universities, has presented at (inter) national conferences. He is the author & translator of about 15 books, publisher of scholarly articles. Dr. Abbasian offers psycholinguistics, language testing, & research methods at MA and PhD levels. Nominated as top scholar and teacher for

seven consecutive years, he is the internal manager of JOMM, reviewer of Sage, FLA and GJER journals and a member of editorial board of JSSIR.

Mojgan Kouhpayehzadeh has received her MA in TEFL and she is a faculty member at IAU and now a Ph.D. candidate at Islamic Azad University (South Tehran Branch). Her areas of research are methodology, metalinguistic awareness, and SLA.

Gholamreza Asgharpour Masouleh has received his MA in Translation Studies from University of Isfahan and has been involved in teaching for some years at University of Applied Science and Technology (UAST). He is now a Ph.D. candidate at Islamic Azad University (South Tehran Branch). His areas of research include teaching methodology and translation studies.

