

‘CULTURE’ IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS: WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK?¹

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, English is the most widely spoken language in the world. Due to its spread, starting with the colonization period and continuing with the economic and political power of the U.S.A., it has been used for different purposes around the world such as education, commerce, tourism, and science. People all around the world continue to learn English to reach their different aims. A critical question arises in terms of English language teaching at this point, that is, whether to teach ‘culture’ along with English or not. The question of teaching ‘culture’ along with English has been discussed by some scholars from the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics for nearly two decades.

There are four views regarding the issue. The first one states that ‘target language culture’ should be taught along with English to acculturate language learners into the cultures of English speaking countries (Byram, 1990; Byram & Flemming, 1998). The second view states that there should not be any teaching of the ‘target language culture’ together with English in the countries where English is an institutionalized variety (Kachru, 1985, 1986; Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Canagarajah, 1999). Other two views also reject the idea of teaching ‘target language culture’ along with English. However, while one of the views supports the teaching of ‘local culture’ in English language teaching (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003), the other view holds the position that English has become a lingua franca and it should be taught in a culture-free context (Alptekin, 2005; Jenkins, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2001). In order to explore the role of ‘culture’ in English language teaching, several empirical studies were conducted. However, most of the studies focus on English language teachers.

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The present study aims to investigate the opinions of the Turkish English language learners on the role of culture in teaching English as foreign language. The study consists of two parts. The first part of the study aims to develop an instrument exploring the opinions of senior Anatolian High School students on the role of 'culture' in teaching English as a foreign language. The second part of the study explores whether there are similarities and differences regarding the opinions of high school students from three different parts of Turkey on 'culture' teaching along with English.

A questionnaire developed by the researcher was applied to three hundred and eighty five senior Anatolian High School students in five different schools in Edirne, Istanbul, and Diyarbakir during the academic year of 2005-2006 and Kachru's (1985, 1992) three concentric circles were used to establish the theoretical basis of the study.

METHODOLOGY

The Likert technique was used in the construction of the instrument as it provides the interval level of measurement.

In order to generate items for the questionnaire, twenty students were interviewed in Turkish by researchers based on semi-structured questions deducted from the related literature (McKay, 2003). Each interview took 30 minutes on average and was recorded. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and the responses were coded in terms of their categories and each response from the students was tallied under related categories. Eventually the questionnaire was sent to the judges in order to obtain expert opinion regarding the wording and appropriateness of the items in written format.

The final questionnaire consisted of six sections. The first section was about the 'reasons why the students are learning English', the second section was about the 'content of English learning classes', the third section was related to the 'characteristics of language teachers', the fourth section was about the 'language teaching textbooks', the fifth section was about the 'cultural elements'. The first five sections of the questionnaire aimed at investigating the preferences of the students on a five point scale (1=strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree) except two sub-sections where the students were supposed to rank their preferences. There was also an open ended question to explore students' opinions

whether target language culture should be taught along with English. Finally, the last section was devoted to obtain demographic information from the participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 11.5 version. First, the data were coded and computerized. Then, the whole dataset was subjected to a Principal Component Analysis in order to explore the internal structure of the instrument. The items that loaded on different components and items that had negative values were deleted from the PCA analysis. Thus, the PCA was conducted five times in order to come up with the most comprehensible picture.

Following the PCA analyses, the reliability analysis was conducted to explore the internal consistency of each component.

To explore the differences across parts on each component factor scores were obtained, and One-way mixed ANOVA using the General Linear Model was conducted using the factor scores.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of Students' Responses to the Questionnaire

Among the reasons for learning English, learning English for instrumental purposes such as finding work after graduation from university, using the internet and being able to speak to foreigners were the most important reasons for the participants. As for language teachers, the participants preferred English teachers from the U.K. the most, followed by the U.S.A., and agreed that native English speaking English language teachers teach English better than Turkish teachers. However, they highlighted that English language teachers should be able to speak Turkish and be familiar with Turkish culture. The participants were also asked about their opinions on the inclusion of various topics in English language learning/teaching textbooks. The inclusion of life and culture in the U.S.A. and the U.K., Turkey, and in other countries where English is the native language was also important. The participants associated English with the British culture the most followed by the American culture. They indicated that learning about the similarities and differences between English speaking countries and Turkish culture was the most interesting topic for the students.

Principal Component Analysis

In order to reduce the number of variables for further analyses, the whole data set was submitted to Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation. According to the last PCA, thirteen components were extracted

Comparison across Parts

Following the last PCA, factor scores for each component were obtained by using Anderson-Rubin method. A 3 x 13 mixed design ANOVA with part as between-subjects variable and component as within-subjects variable was conducted. Homogeneity of variance and sphericity assumptions of the ANOVA were sustained.

The results did not reveal a main effect for part and component. However, the interaction between the part and component was significant, $F(24, 4584) = 4.480$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .144$, at .05. This suggests that differences regarding parts existed on some of the components.

Univariate ANOVAs revealed that the interaction between part as between-subjects variable and component as within-subjects variable was due to the differences among parts on component 4, 'characteristics of Turkish English language teachers'; component 8, 'the inclusion of international topics in English language learning textbooks' and component 10, 'learning English to get education in foreign countries'.

Results of the Open-Ended Question in the Questionnaire

The participants were also asked an open ended question at the end of the questionnaire. They were asked whether the target language culture should be taught together with the English language. The participants agreed, disagreed, and partially agreed on the question.

Overall, the majority of the respondents showed agreement (46.8 %). However, there was a considerable number of responses that were either negative or partially positive (28.5%). Moreover, almost a quarter of the respondents did not answer the question.

The common reasons provided by the participants for their agreement on target language teaching along with English language teaching were as follows:

- a. language and culture cannot be separated from each other,
- b. learning about target language culture is essential to have enough information about native English speaking countries and compare it with Turkish culture, and
- c. interest and motivation towards learning English might increase by learning about the target language culture.

As for the reasons why the participants disagreed on the teaching of the target language culture, the students stated ‘cultural imperialism’ and the importance of preserving their own identity and culture as the major reasons for their disagreement. Some of the students said that:

Some of the participants partially agreed on the teaching of target language culture along with English language teaching. Their common reasons were; target language culture should be taught generally without going into details without imposing it and influencing the students’ own cultural values.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The most important reasons for learning English were instrumental purposes: finding work after graduation after university and using the internet for the participants. Following these, communication with foreigners was the second important reason. These findings coincide with the theoretical underpinnings of Kachru (1990) and Strevens (1992), as they emphasized the communicational and instrumental purposes in learning English as crucial motives for English language learners.

The findings for the characteristics of English language teachers suggested that the participants preferred English language teachers from the U.K. in the first place followed by language teachers from the U.S.A. These findings were similar to the results of Prodromou’s (1992) study, as the Greek English language learners preferred firstly British English followed by American English as a model for English. Moreover, the participants were asked to rank English language teachers according to their characteristics and nationality. Native English

speaking teachers who can also speak Turkish were ranked at top, followed by Turkish English language teachers who have lived in native English speaking countries. As for the characteristics of language teachers, the participants agreed that English language teachers should be able to speak Turkish and be familiar with Turkish culture. These findings supported the idea of the importance of ‘non-native speakers’ (Cook, 1999; Llurda, 2004; Rajagopalan, 2004) and the necessity of inclusion of the local culture in English language learning process (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003).

The last section of the questionnaire was devoted to cultural elements. The most important cultural elements to be included in English language learning/teaching textbooks were international topics. These findings bolster the importance of the inclusion of ‘international contexts’ (Alptekin, 2002) and ‘global culture’ (Modiano, 2001) in English language learning and teaching.

The responses given to the open-ended question complement the quantitative findings regarding the section about cultural elements. As for teaching the target language culture, the participants emphasized the necessity of target language culture, supporting the ideas of Byram (1991) and Byram and Flemming (1998) in terms of the inclusion of ‘target language culture’ in English language learning/teaching process. On the other hand, the responses from a considerable number of students who disagreed or partially agreed on the teaching of target language culture support the views that exclude the target language culture from the language learning/teaching process (McKay, 2003; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996; Alptekin, 2002, 2005; Jenkins, 1996, 2000, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001).

Comparisons across different parts of Turkey revealed that differences among the parts existed with regard to the characteristics of Turkish English language teachers, the inclusion of international topics in English language learning textbooks, and learning English to get education in foreign countries. The findings suggest that the social and cultural characteristics of the students from the three parts were different from each other on three components as mentioned above.

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