

Language Learners' Attitudes towards the Incorporation of Target Language Culture into Foreign Language Instructions

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Abstract

The significance of familiarity with and interest in the cultural features of the target language society has been highly recognized. The present study investigated the attitude of Iranian language learners towards the incorporation of cultural components of the target language community into their classroom instructions from affective, cognitive, and behavioral viewpoints. The data were collected through the completion of a 12-item Likert scale attitude

questionnaire by 47 Iranian adult intermediate-level learners of English as a foreign language at a language institute in Iran, following a semester-long cultural instructions. The findings suggested that Iranian language learners have overall positive attitudes towards learning about the target language culture and this positive attitude is evident within affective, behavioral, and more significantly cognitive domains. The pedagogical implications of the study suggested integration of target language cultural components into every language classroom instruction.

Keywords: Attitude, Culture, Instruction

1. Introduction

The significance of developing familiarity with and awareness of the cultural features of the target language society in fostering foreign language learning has been emphasized by a large body of scholars in the area of sociolinguistics in the past three decades. These scholars believe that language and culture complement each other and lack of knowledge of one results in failure to understand the other.

This issue has been clearly referred to by Brown (1994) who states “a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language; except for specialized, instrumental acquisition; is also the acquisition of a second culture” (p. 165).

This issue has been also referred to by various schools of thoughts through some metaphorical definitions. According to a philosophical perspective, language and culture create a living organism in which language is flesh and culture is blood. According to a communicative perspective, communication is swimming in which language is swimming skill and culture is water. According to a pragmatic perspective, communication is transportation in which language is the vehicle and culture is traffic light (Jiang, 2000).

It is now widely accepted that culture is an integral part of language. However, the issue which needs to be investigated is whether it should be included as part of foreign language classrooms and whether language learners tend to accept the allocation of part of the classroom instructions to discussions regarding the differences between their own culture and the culture of the target language society.

In this respect, McKay (2003) declares language teaching is influenced by culture in two distinct ways: linguistically and pedagogically. In linguistic way, culture affects the pragmatic, discourse, and semantic levels of the language. In pedagogical way, culture affects the choice of language materials because when determining language materials their cultural content and the cultural basis of the teaching method are taken into account. For instance, some textbooks include materials related to the cultural features of the target language society while some other textbooks include materials related to the cultural features of the source language society.

2. Literature Review

Culture has been incorporated into foreign language instructions as early as the grammar translation method era when students were assigned some literary texts carrying the cultural perspectives of the target language community as a medium of language learning up to Audio-lingual Method era when the importance of cultural familiarity and awareness shifted from literature to language learning which was then replaced by the Communicative Language Teaching Method which is claimed to integrate language and culture more naturally than a grammar-based approach (Thanasoulas, 2001).

However, raising the issue of whether language learners tend to learn the culture of target

language society or are prejudice about their own cultural beliefs made scholars in the field of sociolinguistics to conduct studies on language learners' attitudes towards learning target culture. This has been of crucial importance as optimal learning can be attained only when the learners are interested in instructional materials. The studies conducted so far have had contradictory results. While some studies indicated language learners' interests towards cultural instructions, some others indicated language learners' negative attitudes towards integration of cultural components into their instructional materials.

In a study, Albirini (2009) explored language learners' attitudes towards the incorporation of cultural components of the target language community into their Arabic language course. Participants were 32 college students attending an Arabic as a Foreign Language course at the intermediate level at one of the universities in the United States. Cultural materials introduced in the course included videos, short stories, live TV news, songs, and guest speakers. The data were collected through a 21-item Likert scale questionnaire measuring students' affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes towards target language culture. The findings suggested that the participants had positive attitudes towards the cultural components of the target language community in their Arabic language course. The positive attitude was evident within the affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains.

Similar findings were obtained in another study by Saricoban and Caliskan (2011). In their study, Saricoban and Caliskan (2011) investigated language learners' positive or negative attitudes towards learning the cultural features of the target language community. The participants in their study consisted of 95 students of English as a Foreign Language studying at a university in Turkey with an intermediate level of language proficiency. The data for the study were collected through a 13-item multiple choice questionnaire in which students' thoughts on the inclusion or exclusion of the cultural elements of the target language community in their language classrooms were examined. The findings of the study revealed the positive attitudes of language learners towards learning the cultural elements of the target language community.

Contrary to the findings obtained from the above studies; in the study conducted by Jabeen and Shah (2011), language learners expressed prejudicial attitudes towards their own culture and resisted learning the target culture. In their study, Jabeen and Shah (2011) explored the attitude of university students towards the teaching of cultural features of the target language community in their language classrooms. The participants were 94 Pakistani students from different departments at a university in Pakistan. The data were collected through a Likert scale questionnaire consisting of different aspects pertaining to students' responses to cultural beliefs, customs, social organizations, speech acts, gestures, notions of personal space, and arts. The findings indicated that students had strongly negative attitudes towards the teaching of cultural features of the target language community in their language classrooms.

3. The Present Study

Bearing in mind the significance of familiarity with the cultural perspectives of the target language community for foreign language learners on one hand and the language learners' acceptance or rejection of the target cultural components into the pedagogical syllabus of

their language courses on the other hand; this study investigated Iranian English as a Foreign Language learners' affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes towards incorporating cultural features of the United States into their English instructions.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The participants of the study consisted of Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language studying communicative language at a language institute in Tehran, Iran. Forty-seven intermediate level language learners from 3 intact classes were selected for the study. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling. Their age ranged from 17 to 34. Twenty-nine of them were females and the remaining 18 were males. They were all taught *Top Notch 2* which is an English teaching book designed for language learners at an intermediate level of language proficiency.

At the language institute, each semester lasts for 2 months. The classes within each semester are held 3 times a week, each lasting for 2 hours. The instructional materials in the language institute are *Top Notch* book series including *Top Notch Fundamentals*, *Top Notch 1*, *Top Notch 2*, and *Top Notch 3*. The books cover a wide range of cultural perspectives of the United States including holidays, festivals, landmarks, traditions, customs, politeness, and body language. The books are also supplemented by videos depicting these cultural features.

4.2 Instrument

Instrument for the study was an attitude questionnaire which was adopted from a study previously conducted by Albirini (2009) and was modified according to the purpose of the current study. The modified version of the questionnaire consisted of 12 items about participants' attitudes towards the cultural parts of the course. All items were based on a 5-point Likert scale, with scales ranging from 1(strongly disagree), 2(disagree), 3(neutral), 4(agree) to 5(strongly agree).

The questionnaire consisted of 3 subscales: affective (4 items), cognitive (4 items), and behavioral (4 items). These 3 constructs referred respectively to language learners' emotional reaction to the cultural components of the course, their fact-based thoughts regarding the cultural components of the course, and their overt behavior directed towards the cultural components of the course (Zimbardo et al., 1977).

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed through piloting the questionnaire on 30 non-participant Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language at another language institute in Tehran, Iran. The reliability coefficient assessed through Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.85 for the overall attitude and 0.83, 0.81, and 0.87 for affective, cognitive, and behavioral sub-scales, respectively.

4.3 Instructional Materials

Materials for the study consisted of some articles and videos downloaded from internet in which detailed information about the cultural features presented in the language learners'

course book had been introduced. The articles and videos introduced the history and detailed information about landmarks, traditional activities for holidays and festivals, as well as various aspects of cultural behaviors including greetings, apologizing, thanking, and so on which are typical of the United States.

The instructional materials considered for the current study were merely used as a more comprehensive elaboration on the cultural elements present in each lesson within *Top Notch 2*. These instructional materials supplemented each lesson within *Top Notch 2* without allocation of a specific part of classroom instruction time to present them and without interfering with the regular stream of classroom instructions.

4.4 Procedure

At the beginning of the last session of the semester, after semester-long presentation of all cultural features of the United States selected for the study, 47 copies of the attitude questionnaire were distributed among all participants in all 3 classes to present their reflections regarding the cultural content of the course by putting a check mark next to one of the 5 scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), for each item on the questionnaire. They were given ample time to reflect well on their attitudes regarding each situation and return the questionnaire at the end of the 2-hour class time. At the end of the session, all the questionnaires were collected for data analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20. Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the properties of the data collected from the participants. Descriptive statistics consisted mainly of mean and frequency percentages. The attitude towards the cultural features was represented by a mean score on a 5-point scale, where 1 (strongly disagree) represented the minimum score on the scale and 5 (strongly agree) represented the maximum score on the scale. A mean of 3 (neutral) was determined as the borderline between positive and negative attitudes, however.

In this respect, means of above 3 represented positive attitudes whereas means of below 3 represented negative attitudes. Therefore; means of around 1 were considered highly negative attitudes, means of around 2 were considered negative attitudes, means of around 3 were considered neutral attitudes, means of around 4 were considered positive attitudes, and means of around 5 were considered highly positive attitudes towards cultural instructions. Analyzed data were then presented in tabular form.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Findings

Table 1 illustrates the mean and frequency percentages for language learners' overall attitudes towards cultural instructions. It also illustrates the mean and frequency percentages for language learners' affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes towards cultural instructions. Considering overall attitudes, language learners' responses to the 12-item Likert scale attitude questionnaire fell on the positive realm. The overall mean calculated for

language learners' responses to the attitude questionnaire was 3.92 which is, as presumed in the data analysis, into the positive domain.

Table 1: Distribution of Mean Scores on the Attitude Scale

Scale	Percent (%)					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
Affective	0	0	17.5	43.6	38.8	3.71	0.65
Cognitive	1.6	3.7	12.2	25	57.4	4.35	0.58
Behavioral	0.5	3.7	19.6	51	25	3.71	0.70
Overall	0.7	2.4	16.4	39.8	40.3	3.92	0.64

Attitude

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree

Among all 47 participants in the study, 80.1 percent expressed a positive (39.8 percent) or highly positive (40.3 percent) attitude towards integration of cultural materials into their classroom instructions whereas only 3.1 percent expressed a negative (2.4 percent) or highly negative (0.7 percent) attitude towards integration of cultural materials into their classroom instructions. The remaining 16.8 expressed a neutral attitude towards integration of cultural materials into their classroom instructions, however.

Considering specific attitudes, participants' positive attitudes were evident within affective, behavioral, and more significantly cognitive domains. The mean scores calculated for language learners' responses to the items referring to their affective, cognitive and behavioral attitudes towards integration of cultural materials into their classroom instructions were respectively 3.71, 4.35, and 3.71 which are, as presumed in the data analysis, all into the positive domain.

Within the affective domain, 82.4 percent Of the participants agreed (43.6%) or strongly agreed (38.8%) that they enjoyed the cultural parts of the course (item 1), the cultural part of the course did not make their life in the class very difficult (item 2), they were interested in knowing some cultural facts about Americans (item 3), and they preferred courses that include cultural elements (item 4).

In a similar vein, within the cognitive domain, 82.4 percent of the participants agreed (25%) or strongly agreed (57.4%) that the cultural elements were useful learning experiences (item 5), the cultural information has provided them with a better understanding of the American culture (item 6), the course has had a positive impact on their attitudes toward American culture (item 7), and knowing target culture helped them better understand the context of the target language (item 8).

Also, within the behavioral domain, 76 percent of the participants agreed (51%) or strongly agreed (25%) that some cultural elements should be part of every language classroom (item 9), they tend to take classes that have cultural components (item 10), they would like to see cultural components in their future language classes (item 11), and the class has encouraged them to take future classes about American Culture (item 12).

5.2 Discussion

The present study shed some light on language learners' attitudes towards the incorporation of cultural features of the target language community into their classroom instructions. Findings of the study suggested that the participants had an overall positive attitude towards the cultural elements in their English course. The participants' positive attitudes were evident within affective, behavioral, and more significantly cognitive domains. This finding supports the findings obtained by Albirini (2009) and Saricoban and Caliskan (2011) who reported language learners' positive attitudes towards learning about the cultural perspectives of the target language community.

Participants' positive responses for the items referring to their affective attitudes towards cultural elements (mean: 3.71) clearly confirm their interests towards cultural features presented in the classroom. Furthermore, the positive responses for the items referring to their behavioral attitudes towards cultural elements (mean: 3.71) shows they had a strong tendency to learn more about the cultural perspectives of the target language community. Therefore, we can obviously conclude that the participants in the current study not only enjoyed the integration of cultural materials into their classroom instructions but also wanted this trend to be continued for their subsequent courses.

Furthermore; besides expressing interest in the cultural components of the class, the participants found cultural instructions a useful experience. Participants' high positive responses for the items referring to their cognitive attitudes towards cultural elements (mean: 4.35) shows language learners gained some knowledge of the cultural norms of the people and the country whose language is being learned. This is of great significance since culture not only indicates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication progresses, but helps people to decide in what way to encode messages, meanings they derive from messages, and situations in which messages might or might not be noticed or interpreted (Samouvar et al., 1981).

6. Conclusion

The study found that language learners had an overall positive attitude towards the incorporation of cultural components of the target language society into their foreign language classroom instructions. This positive attitude was evident within language learners' all specific types of attitudes including their affective, behavioral, and more significantly cognitive attitudes towards the incorporation of cultural components into their classroom instructions. These findings imply that cultural materials featuring target language people and country should be an integral part of every foreign language classroom instructions, at least in Iran's context where the study found positive outcomes.

Therefore; bearing in mind the significance of familiarity with and awareness of the cultural perspectives of the target language community in fostering foreign language learning on one hand and language learners' tendency to learn about target language cultural features on the other hand, language teachers should allocate part of the instructions in every lesson to relevant cultural materials referred to in textbooks (Rafieyan et al., 2013a; 2013b).

Furthermore, course book designers are advised to allocate part of language learning materials to elaboration on popular cultural features of the target language community in an interesting and comprehensive way (Rafieyan et al., 2013b).

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